



**Submission to the *Inquiry into the Educational
Achievement Gap in the ACT***

September 2009

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 Educational Achievement Gap in the ACT'*

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Prepared by Youth Coalition staff member Jamie Glasscock. Thank you to the Youth Coalition staff team for their support.

Director: Emma Robertson

Youth Coalition of the ACT
PO Box 5232, Lyneham, ACT, 2602
Phone (02) 6247 3540
Facsimile (02) 6249 1675
info@youthcoalition.net
www.youthcoalition.net

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1. Introduction

Section 1 of this submission provides contextual information about Youth Coalition of the ACT (Youth Coalition). It also outlines the process by which this paper was developed and describes the format of 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 75 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 for Developing and Format of this Submission

The Youth Coalition welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the *Inquiry into the Educational Achievement Gap in the ACT (the Inquiry)*.

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 results of the *Youth Coalition 2008 Budget Stakeholder Survey*;
- The issues raised at consultations on the 2009/10 ACT Government Budget;
- *The Youth Coalition of the ACT Submission to the ACT Budget 2009 – 2010*;
- *The Youth Coalition of the ACT Submission to the ACT Young people's Plan 2009 - 2014 Discussion Paper*;
- *The Youth Coalition of the ACT Submission to the ACT Disability Framework 2009 - 2014*
- Consultations conducted with youth services and education providers;
- One-on-one consultations with member services and organisations; and,
- Current and topical research on youth affairs.

This submission has been divided into 7 sections, which include the following:

1. Introduction (this section)
2. Summary of Recommendations
3. The Education Gap
4. Principles of Best Practice
5. Current Good Practice
6. Conclusion
7. 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.

2. Recommendations

Section 2 of this submission outlines the Youth Coalition's recommendations to the inquiry.

The Youth Coalition makes the following recommendations:

Recommendation 1

That the ACT Government ensure that ACT Government schools, non-government schools and alternative education settings are able to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students adequately by ensuring:

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staffing;
- Cultural awareness for all staff;
- Increased capacity of numeracy and literacy support and “catch up”; and
- Increased school capacity and utilisation of Aboriginal support workers.

Recommendation 2

That the ACT Government support strategies in ACT Government schools, non-government schools and alternative education settings that promote increased curriculum flexibility and absenteeism flexibility to enable young people (including young carers, those experiencing housing stress or involvement in the justice system) to deal with life challenges and continue to engage with education.

Recommendation 3

That the ACT Government increase recognition and resourcing of alternative education settings, including:

- Funding of numeracy and literacy catch up programs in a wide variety of settings including Gudan Gulwan Youth Aboriginal Corporation;
- Reduction in waiting lists in alternative education settings to ensure timely transition to appropriate education or reengagement in education;
- Closer links between schools and alternative education programs;
- Increased funding for key teachers or workers in alternative settings;
- Ensuring alternative education settings are adequately staffed, well equipped and have the resources to offer a range of activities; and
- Strong links to community based services for support and community education.

Recommendation 4

That the ACT Government support the development and implementation of early intervention and prevention mechanisms, including:

- School focus on early and positive identification of students;
- Strengthening of student services and student wellbeing/ pastoral care teams;
- Increased work with students on educational aspirations and goal setting;
- Better access to and resourcing of numeracy and literacy catch up;
- Increased support and meaningful choices for students with refugee backgrounds and/or disability;
- Expansion and development of individual learning plans; and,

- Increased resourcing and support of Learning Support Advisors.

Recommendation 5

That the ACT Government, in recognition of the evidence and challenges facing low socio-economic schools, support reducing the education gap by:

- Investing in whole of school community development approaches to support low socio-economic schools;
- Investing in workforce development planning to develop and maintain quality teaching and pastoral care staff in low socio-economic schools; and,
- Ensuring demographic modelling is included when planning new communities and new schools or considering school feeder zones for schools.

3. The Education Gap

Section 3 of this submission outlines the education gap and the young people most at risk to poor educational access and attainment.

3.1 The Gap

School students from low socio-economic status homes are at an increased disadvantage in schools; and low socio-economic status schools are generally lower-performing¹. The most significant factor in the educational attainment gap is the socio economic status of schools². For this paper, the socio-economic status of a school will refer to the relative concentration of students from a high or low socio-economic status household attending the school.

Evidence suggests disadvantaged young people are 10% more likely to either finish school late or drop out and up to 20% less likely to obtain a tertiary entrance rank³.

The Education Foundation of Australia identifies the negative relationship between an individual's socio-economic status and educational attainment highlighting an array of descriptive factors including:

- Individuals are less likely to have educationally supportive social and physical infrastructure at home;
- Individuals are twice as likely to under-perform in literacy and numeracy;
- Individuals are more likely to have negative attitudes to school, truant, be suspended or expelled and leave school early;
- Individuals are more likely to struggle with the transition from school to work; and
- Individuals are less likely to enter university or succeed in further education.⁴

Evidence highlights that the aspirations of young people in regard to education are strongly impacted by socio-economic status⁵. Foundation numeracy and literacy skills of young people are significant factors affecting the education gap⁶.

In addition to these factors the Youth Coalition recognises there are specific groups that need targeted support to reduce the education gap including:

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people;
- Young people with a refugee background;
- Young Carers;
- Young people with disability; and,
- Young people at risk of disengaging from education or who experience barriers to reengaging in education.

More information on each of these groups is provided below.

3.2 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Young People

For some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people, participation in education is affected by economic disadvantage and social marginalisation⁷. While almost all non-Indigenous students complete their junior secondary education, one Indigenous student in seven nationally will leave school before completing Year 10. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students have, on average, lower retention and completion rates than their non-Indigenous counterparts. Although the gap between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander

and non-Indigenous students is decreasing in the apparent retention rates from Year 7 to Year 12, the gap remains ⁸.

It is important to acknowledge challenges generated by school culture that contribute to poor educational outcomes. The ACT Government highlighted the following contributing factors:

- The lack of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staffing in schools;
- The lack of cultural awareness development for all staff;
- Limited numeracy and literacy support resources ⁹

From an ACT perspective, young people account for almost 40% of Canberra's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population ¹⁰. Youth Coalition consultations with stakeholders emphasised the challenge for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people to engage and attain in educational settings once:

- They have fallen behind numeracy and literacy benchmarks;
- Are experiencing challenging situations outside the school environment.

Services identified often schools did not have enough flexibility to cope with the different learning capabilities, behavioural issues and life issues of students from an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander background.

3.3 Young People with Refugee Backgrounds

Many refugees and asylum seekers have faced overwhelming hardship and trauma before arriving in the ACT community and the Youth Coalition believes that all possible measures should be taken to ensure that they are supported and feel connected to local communities. The issues faced by refugee and asylum seeker young people are often interwoven, and may include lower levels of English proficiency, insecure accommodation, poverty and poor physical and mental health as a result of experiencing trauma.

As refugee and asylum seeking young people may also have reduced levels of support from or contact with their original families and communities, these young people face a significantly higher risk of becoming isolated and becoming homeless. A survey of almost 1,300 refugee students found that 16% were either homeless or housed in unsafe, unhygienic or overcrowded accommodation ¹¹.

The Youth Coalition consultation with stakeholders identified the following challenges experienced by young people with refugee backgrounds engaging in education in the ACT including:

- English as a second language and related supports;
- Gaps in primary school education;
- Numeracy and literacy catch up – particularly literacy;
- Stereotyping, prejudice and social exclusion; and,
- Cultural communication challenges between teachers and students from different backgrounds.

The Youth Coalition of the ACT recognises there are several emerging communities of young people with varying experiences and needs.

Services working with young people with refugee backgrounds identified positive actions to support educational engagement and attainment including:

- Individual learning plans;
- Numeracy and literacy catch up;
- Supporting family understanding the school system; and,
- Mentoring and identifying and developing aspirations and goals.

However, services highlighted best practice required a holistic approach to the wellbeing of young people with a refugee background that is dependent on those who work with such young people to be adequately trained, informed and resourced on such issues. There is also a need for well resourced counselling and mental health support services¹².

3.4 Young Carers

Young carers are children and young people who care for or help care within a family affected by illness, disability, alcohol and other drug and/ or mental health issues of one or more of its members. Estimates of young carers in the ACT range from 4%¹³ to 10%¹⁴ of young people in the ACT. Young carers can often be highly marginalised from mainstream processes and support networks. Young carers live in families of financial hardship, and often do not identify times without care responsibilities. Young carers may also experience negative impacts of caring including fatigue, injury, greater level of stress and anxiety, financial insecurity, family breakdown and limited social and recreational opportunities¹⁵. Hence, young carers often have a range of factors that lead to difficulty maintaining attendance, education or poor educational outcomes.

The Youth Coalition's consultations with ACT stakeholders identified young carers as a priority group requiring support to close the education gap.

3.5 Young People with Disability

Disabilities refers to a broad range of circumstances in which someone has any limitation, restriction or impairment, which has lasted, or is likely to last, for at least six months and restricts everyday activities. The occurrence of disabilities in young people is high with almost 10% of young people experiencing a disability¹⁶. In respect to the education gap, the Youth Coalition emphasises the financial barriers to young people with disability and education providers engaging and maintaining accessible programs for young people with disability. Young people with disability from low socio-economic households and schools are more vulnerable to financial barriers.

In general, disability services emphasise the challenges for young people with disability finding continuity of meaningful opportunities and a full range of choices in the education sector. Young people with disabilities face significant barriers to accessing services, programs and opportunities available for young people without disabilities. This can occur for a range of reasons that may include inadequate or inappropriate buildings and infrastructure, financial cost, discrimination or a general lack of support and belief in young people with disabilities.

Equitable access for young people with disabilities requires not only financial commitments towards upgrading infrastructure and providing additional support, but also a community

willingness, capacity to be inclusive and a mindset that seeks to engage young people with disabilities.

Public transport is a considerable barrier to young people with disabilities being able to access services. Transport is a key determinant of the capacity for young people with disabilities to participate in a range of social, educational and work related opportunities, there must be safe, reliable, regular and affordable transport for those with disabilities.

Young people with disabilities can easily become socially isolated, particularly in times of transition. Consultation with service providers across the ACT identified transitions as a high priority issue. Stakeholders stated there is a lack of exit points for program participants and highlighted the need for planning for transition points for clients up to six or seven years in advance of entering the program and an associated lack of appropriate pathways / options for young adults to explore work options and education. ACT services highlighted inequitable opportunities for young people with disability in the education sector including:

- Decreased choice in education providers;
- Increased costs to access education;
- Difficult transitions between school levels and to work; and,
- Social exclusion.

Many young people experiencing the challenges associated with learning disabilities like dyslexia often require extra support and alternative ways of learning, as well as counselling and guidance that may not be provided in mainstream schooling. The Youth Coalition recognises the inequitable and limiting predicament that students from a low socio-economic household or school may experience as they are unlikely to be able to access the necessary guidance and support to enable the attainment of their full potential, due to limited resources.

3.6 Young People at Risk of Disengaging from Education or who Experience Barriers to Re-engaging in Education

Stakeholders report that young people from low socio-economic status backgrounds are more likely to experience:

- Homelessness and housing instability;
- Involvement in the justice system;
- Health issues; and,
- Alcohol and other drug issues.

The Youth Coalition recognises young people experiencing a wide array of challenges may be at risk of disengaging from education or facing increased barriers to reengaging in education.

The Youth Coalition highlights the need to approach education from a holistic perspective in order to support young people through the wide array of challenges that may limit educational attainment.

Youth Coalition consultations with stakeholders across the ACT identified a range of barriers to young people accessing support which exacerbated the challenges experienced by young people at risk. These included:

- Waiting lists for education programs;

- Costs to engage in education support programs and alternative education;
- Inflexible enrolment processes/ start dates and curriculums; and,
- Numeracy and literacy “catch up” challenges.

The scope of this enquiry is on schools attainment. However, it must also be noted school outcomes have long-term implications in qualification attainment, employment and health outcomes. For instance, people from backgrounds of low socio-economic status are significantly under-represented in Australian higher education¹⁷.

4. Principles of Best Practice

Acknowledging the impact low socio-economic status has on all the identified groups and on low socio-economic schools, section 4 outlines three principles as a foundation to minimise the gap in educational attainment:

- Rights Based;
- Equity; and,
- Early Intervention and Prevention.

4.1 Rights Based

Human rights are universal and inalienable; indivisible; interdependent and interrelated¹⁸.

The Youth Coalition commends the ACT Government for taking leadership in Australia in being one of only two jurisdictions with its own Human Rights Act; incorporating provisions of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) into ACT law, which the ACT Legislative Assembly adopted in 2004.

The Youth Coalition believes that in accordance with Article 13 of the ICCPR, accessible, affordable and high quality education is a right to be enjoyed by all members of Australian society¹⁹.

Education should foster respect for young people's own cultural identity, language and values, and for the cultural background and values of others.

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.

Young peoples access to schools significantly impacts on their lives and the lives of their families. Access and reengagement to appropriate education should not be limited by waiting lists.

The Youth Coalition believes if mainstream education is not appropriate or able to support a young person, the young person still has a right to education in another setting.

4.2 Equity

Equity is the allocation of resources to ensure that all people have supports to access and seek equal outcomes. Many young people experience disadvantage due to a range of structural and systemic issues; and may require specific supports to access equal opportunities.

Young people who are most vulnerable and at risk should not be excluded from appropriate education due to waiting lists and course costs.

The Youth Coalition has identified the following groups of young people who may require extra support to engage and achieve in the education system:

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people;
- Young people with a refugee background;

- Young people with disability;
- Young Carers; and,
- Young People experiencing homelessness, housing stress, mental health issues, alcohol and other drug issues, and/ or involvement in the justice system.

The Youth Coalition highlights that low socio-economic schools require targeted support to ensure more equitable opportunities and outcomes for their students.

4.3 Early Intervention and Prevention

Early intervention and prevention is ‘a strategy that enables individuals to gain assistance before the situation becomes chronic and denies them access to those possibilities the community takes for granted’ ²⁰.

In the 2005/06 ACT Government Budget, the ACT Government states: “[Early intervention and prevention] provides important building blocks that develop resilience to, or skills to avoid, challenges that may be faced, particularly at key turning points and transitions in people’s lives ²¹.” The Youth Coalition recognises the importance of early intervention and prevention strategies for young people in education particularly when acknowledging the years 12 – 25 are a key developmental period for young people when most of the individual’s biological, cognitive, psychological and social characteristics are changing. Secondly, education providers have the opportunity to engage young people consistently, holistically and positively and may provide stability, development opportunities and protective factors for young people that may promote resilience, better links to support and information.

5. Current Good practice in the ACT

The Youth Coalition recognises that best practice in closing the education gap includes targeting low socio-economic schools and school wide projects as well as supporting individuals. Section 5 outlines good current practice in the ACT.

Through consultation with stakeholders in the ACT, the Youth Coalition identified many educational settings implementing engaging education and holistic support for young people. Effective initiatives included:

- Curriculum and time flexibility;
- Early intervention and prevention; and
- Meaningful choices.

5.1 Curriculum and Time Flexibility

A number of existing education settings in the ACT provide more flexible curriculums and attendance/ enrolment. Many programs ensure flexibility by linking with Access 10 and CIT programs. Flexible curriculums often enable young people to work at their own pace and self-direct learning through developing an individualised timetable and commitments.

One important characteristic of accessible education is the ability to commence/ enrol at anytime during the year.

Alternative education settings often provide more flexible programs through smaller class sizes, more personal development through access to youth workers and a more flexible curriculum. Anecdotally the best results have occurred when curriculums have been flexible enough to include personal growth goals, a relaxed environment and approachable staff.

One alternative education setting is Gudan Gulwan Youth Aboriginal Corporation, a 2 day a week alternative setting for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people still enrolled at school. The program is able to support 10 young people and has funding to employ one teacher. Flexibility and low student to teacher ratios provide engaging and supportive education. However, the program is at capacity and has a waiting list of 9 young people.

There are many other good practice alternative education settings and programs to support young people maintain engagement in education including schools that link with development and mentoring programs like SPICE or Young Carers Programs. For more information please see the Big Red Book which is an outline and contact list of youth service providers in the ACT²².

5.2 Early Intervention and prevention in Schools and Alternative Settings

Increased investment in numeracy and literacy support was identified by every service consulted and is supported by the body of evidence on the education gap²³.

The Youth Coalition recognises the good outcomes generated by and also recognises the opportunity to expand the practice of:

- Numeracy and literacy support;
- Individual learning plans;
- Learning support advisors;
- Pastoral care, youth workers and student wellbeing in schools; and
- Identifying and developing the aspirations and goals of students.

Indigenous education services have placed Aboriginal Education Workers in schools. Services consulted reported Aboriginal Education Workers are generating positive outcomes when able to focus on attendance and support in class.

However, difficulties arise when Aboriginal Education Workers are expected to do too much, including behaviour management outside of class. The role and scope of Aboriginal Education Workers varies from school to school and is controlled by individual school principals.

Services working with young people with refugee backgrounds identified positive actions to support educational engagement and attainment including:

- Individual learning plans;
- Numeracy and literacy catch up;
- Supporting family understanding the school system; and
- Mentoring and identifying and developing aspirations and goals.

However, services highlighted best practice required a holistic approach to the wellbeing of young people with a refugee background that is dependent on those who work with such young people to be adequately trained, informed and resourced on such issues. There is also a need for well resourced counselling and mental health support services^{24, 1}.

Best practice early intervention and prevention includes supported and planned transitioning to and from alternative education. Planned transitioning may include:

- More flexibility for students around absenteeism, behaviour and returning to school to enable young people with issues outside of school to remain engaged in education; and
- More access to case management to support young people around homelessness, alcohol and other drugs, family breakdown and numeracy and literacy catch up.

Current programs in ACT education settings provide holistic support for students at risk. Early intervention and prevention may include brokerage of resources to ensure a young person is supported and socially included and also ensure a young person's basic needs are met. One such program is the Galilee program that provides breakfast and lunch to students in their "drop everything to read" program.

5.3 Meaningful Choices

The creation of engaging education requires a range of choices to programs and activities. A range of education settings may allow for increased appropriateness to student's skills, interests and aspirations without limitation due to background, socio-economic status, disability or need for numeracy and literacy support.

Many alternative education settings consulted by the Youth Coalition were limited by waiting lists hence limiting timely support and choice.

Vocational education and training provides a wider range of choices for students to engage in education. The National Centre for Vocational Education Research highlights an over-representation of students from low socio-economic areas in the Australian vocational education and training (VET) sector and that VET students from lower socio-economic areas complete qualifications at a better-than-average rate²⁵. However, the same study notes that people from low socio-economic areas tend to undertake lower-level qualifications.

The Youth Coalition recognises the role vocational education plays in closing the education gap but also emphasises the need for the education sector to support and develop students educational aspirations and goals to ensure students from low socio-economic status homes and schools can access pathways to a range of qualification outcomes.

The Youth Coalition recognises the essential nature of a range of alternative education settings and highlights the need for programs to have capacity for new enrolments.

The Youth Coalition acknowledges there are many good practice providers of alternative education settings in the ACT, that recognise and respond to student's diverse strengths, backgrounds, learning styles and individual needs, including but not exclusive to:

- Canberra College Cares;
- Canberra Institute of Technology Vocational College;
- Connect 10;
- Galilee Education Service;
- Gugan Gulwan Youth Aboriginal Corporation;
- YARDS; and,
- Youth Education Program, Anglicare

6. Conclusion

A best practice education sector needs 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. A range of accessible education options with varied settings, skill attainment, cultural practice, student to staff ratios, numeracy and literacy levels, language support and support for disability is required if the education sector is to provide a more engaging education capable of closing the gap by acknowledging the skills and experiences of a young person.

Furthermore, the education sector must take a holistic approach to support young people by ensuring the rights of individuals are maintained and that communities are invested in through whole of school approaches to support low socio-economic schools.

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