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Australian Capital Territory

Standing Committee on Social Policy

Submission cover sheet

Inquiry into E-PET-078-25 and PET-041-26: Make career guidance a right for every ACT Year 7–10 public school student

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CarersACT



**Carers ACT Submission into the
Inquiry on E-PET-078-25 and
PET-041-26- Make career
guidance a right for every ACT
Year 7-10 public school student**

October 2026



Acknowledgement of Country

Carers ACT operates on Ngunnawal. We acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land and recognise any other people or families with connection to them. We acknowledge and respect their continuing culture and the contribution they make to the life of this city and region in which we work and care.

About Carers ACT

Carers ACT is the leading body representing carers in the ACT. We work to improve outcomes for carers in health, wellbeing, social connection and financial security, and to ensure caring is recognised as a shared responsibility of families, communities and government.

Our purpose is to support, connect and empower carers to sustain their caring responsibilities while maintaining their own wellbeing. Through our programs, tailored support, direct engagement, consultation and advocacy, we have developed deep, practical knowledge of the diverse experiences, needs and aspirations of young carers, including the barriers they face in education, wellbeing, social participation and transitions to further study or employment. This work is guided by the *Carers Recognition Act 2021* (ACT), which recognises the value of carers and sets out how they should be considered in policy and service delivery.

In the ACT, more than 58,000 people provide care as family members, friends, relatives, siblings or neighbours, making a substantial contribution to community wellbeing and the sustainability of health and social systems.

The *Carers Recognition Act 2021* (ACT) defines a carer as a person in a care relationship who provides care to someone with disability, mental illness, an ongoing medical condition, or who is aged and frail, or who is a kinship or foster carer for a child or young person.¹

A carer's role may include personal care, medication support, transport, meals, health care coordination, literacy support and emotional support.

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Executive Summary

Carers ACT welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback to the Inquiry into E-PET-078-25 and PET-041-26: *Making Career Guidance a Right for Every ACT Year 7–10 Public School Student*. We support equitable access to career guidance and encourage specific consideration of the barriers experienced by young carers.

This is a rights-based issue. Article 28 of the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* recognises every child's right to education on the basis of equal opportunity. It specifically requires educational and vocational information and guidance to be available and accessible to all children, alongside measures to encourage regular attendance and reduce school dropout.² For students who face additional barriers to participation, achieving these rights may require targeted support. Young carers are one such cohort. They often balance their education with substantial, unpredictable and sometimes intensive caring responsibilities, which can affect their ability to engage fully in schooling and career development opportunities.

Australian research shows that caring can restrict attendance, concentration, study time, academic progress, social participation and a young person's sense of belonging at school. Young carers may also have lower Year 9 results and be less likely to complete Year 12 or higher education than their non-caring peers.³

International systematic review evidence similarly identifies higher absenteeism, limited study time and reduced participation in school activities, particularly for young people with intensive or multiple caring roles.⁴

For many young carers, career guidance will therefore be effective only if it is accompanied by early identification, flexibility, trusted support and practical assistance to act on career advice.

Carers ACT identifies three priorities for government consideration:

1. **Recognition and early identification** of young carers as a priority cohort.
2. **Co-design and accessible delivery**, informed by young carers and specialist carer organisations.
3. **Mentoring and supported transitions**, linking career guidance with practical help to remain engaged in education and progress to training or employment.

These priorities are consistent with the *Carers Recognition Act 2021* (ACT), which provides that the effect of caring on participation in education and employment should be recognised and considered in decision-making. The Act also provides that a child or young person who is a carer should be supported to reach their full potential and receive support appropriate to their specific needs.⁵

They also support the *ACT Carers Strategy 2018–2028*, including its focus on recognition, inclusion, education, access to support and enabling carers to participate in work and education. The Strategy's implementation experience indicates that future action needs to be more targeted, intentional and informed by meaningful engagement with carers.⁶

Carers ACT invites the ACT Government to incorporate these three priorities into the design, implementation and evaluation of the initiative, and to explore a partnership with Carers ACT to develop a practical pathway from identification and career guidance to mentoring and supported transition.

Three priority areas for Government consideration

Priority 1: Recognise young carers as a priority cohort

Young carers are people aged 12 to 25 who provide unpaid care to a family member or another person with disability, mental illness, an ongoing medical condition, substance dependency or age-related frailty. Their caring may include personal care, household responsibilities, emotional support, medication assistance, appointment coordination, sibling care and responding to crises⁷. In the ACT, one in eleven young people have caring responsibilities, including an estimated 560 young carers attending public schools.⁸

For many young carers, education and caring are competing demands on limited time, energy and attention, rather than responsibilities that can be managed independently. The extent of this tension varies. Evidence indicates that educational risk may be greater for young carers with high-intensity responsibilities, those caring for more than one person, those caring for a person with mental illness or substance-use issues, and those experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage or limited family support.⁹

Australian longitudinal research found that young carers tend to have lower Year 9 academic results and are less likely to complete Year 12 or undertake higher education. Caring can leave less time for homework, study, friendships and extracurricular activities, while stress, fatigue,

financial hardship and concern about the person receiving care can affect concentration and attendance.¹⁰

These findings reinforce the need to identify young carers early. Many young people do not use the term “carer” to describe themselves, may regard their responsibilities as normal family life, or may avoid disclosure because of stigma, privacy concerns or fear of family separation.¹¹ Identification processes should therefore be supportive and non-stigmatising, with clear information about why data is collected, how it will be used, consent, confidentiality, referral options and follow-up.

One practical way of strengthening this approach is through the effective implementation of the existing young carer identifier within school enrolment processes.¹² This would support early identification, strengthen data collection, and enable schools to provide timely and targeted support to young carers. Carers ACT has long advocated for the effective implementation of this initiative, recognising its potential to improve outcomes through early intervention, coordinated support and better evidence to inform service delivery.

Evidence suggests that when young carers are supported, their school outcomes improve including school attendance, engagement and education attainment and are better positioned to continue with further education and subsequently training and employment opportunities.¹³

This approach gives practical effect to the *Carers Recognition Act 2021* (ACT), particularly the principles that carers should be recognised as individuals with their own needs, have the impact of caring on education and employment considered, receive timely and accessible support and, where they are children or young people be supported to reach their full potential.

Further, this should be supported by embedding a young carer-informed approach within career guidance services. This includes building career practitioners' understanding of who young carers are, the diverse and complex caring responsibilities some young carers undertake, and the ways these responsibilities can affect their educational participation and future career pathways.

Young carers are not a homogenous group. The nature and intensity of their caring roles can vary significantly, with some providing complex supports, including mental health, alcohol and other drug-related support, or caring for multiple family members. Research indicates that while educational outcomes are poorer for young carers overall, those undertaking high-intensity caring roles often experience greater disadvantage. These impacts can be further compounded for young carers who also live with disability.¹⁴

Carers ACT recommends that the Government consider the following measures as part of the design and implementation of the initiative:

- Explicitly identify young carers as a priority cohort within the initiative.
- Effectively implement the existing school enrolment identifier through clear data, consent, referral and follow-up protocols.
- Provide career practitioners and relevant school staff with young-carer awareness and referral training.
- Establish a nominated contact within each school or network to coordinate flexible, individualised support.
- Monitor access, participation and outcomes for young carers while protecting privacy.

Priority 2: Co-design accessible and responsive support

Young carers should be involved in the design, implementation and evaluation of career guidance that affects them. Article 12 of the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* ¹⁵ supports children expressing their views in matters affecting them, with those views given due weight according to age and maturity.¹⁶

Co-design should extend beyond one-off consultation. Young carers should have opportunities to test service information, appointment formats, referral pathways, digital access, privacy settings, evaluation measures and the practical feasibility of recommendations. Participation should be safe, appropriately supported and remunerated where suitable.

This approach is also consistent with the *Carers Recognition Act 2021* (ACT)¹⁷, under which carers' views should be considered in the assessment, planning, delivery, management and review of relevant support services, programs and policies. ACT Government guidance also identifies consultation with carers and representative organisations such as Carers ACT as an important part of program development and review.

An accessible model should recognise that young carers may have limited time, unpredictable availability and concerns about disclosure. Career guidance should therefore offer:

- Flexible appointment times and delivery modes.
- Opportunities for follow-up rather than relying on a single appointment.
- Confidential and age-appropriate information.
- Supported referrals rather than requiring the young person to navigate services alone;
- Culturally safe and inclusive practice.

- Practical help with applications, subject choices, work experience, training pathways, scholarships and financial supports.
- Coordination with wellbeing, disability, mental health and family-support services where the young person consents.

Carers ACT recommends that the Government consider the following measures as part of the design, implementation and ongoing evaluation of the initiative:

- Establish a structured co-design and advisory mechanism involving young carers, Carers ACT and relevant education stakeholders.
- Ensure young carers and carer organisations have ongoing opportunities to contribute lived experience and specialist expertise throughout the life of the initiative.
- Support meaningful participation by young carers through accessible and flexible engagement approaches.
- Monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of co-design processes to ensure young carers' perspectives are reflected in decision-making and outcomes.

Priority 3: Partner to deliver coordinated support for young carers

Career advice alone may not enable a young carer to pursue education, training or employment. A young carer may understand available pathways but remain unable to act because of caring demands, low confidence, financial pressure, limited networks, transport barriers, disrupted attendance or concern about leaving the person they support.¹⁸¹⁹

Program evaluation evidence indicates that young-carer services can improve self-awareness, wellbeing, family relationships and school engagement. It also shows that some young carers have significant unmet basic needs that must be addressed before they can participate fully in educational or developmental opportunities.²⁰

A mentoring model could complement school career guidance by providing a consistent trusted adult, goal setting, navigation assistance, practical problem-solving, connection to peer support and supported transitions. It could also help young carers recognise the transferable skills developed through caring including communication, organisation, advocacy, problem-solving, responsibility and empathy without normalising excessive or inappropriate caring responsibilities.

The career guidance initiative aligns closely with the ACT Government's 2024 election commitment to explore models for a structured, government-sponsored Young Carer Mentoring Program, an initiative that Carers ACT strongly advocated for.²¹ The program recognises the importance of supporting young carers to continue their education, access employment opportunities and build financial security while meeting their caring responsibilities.²²

Carers ACT is therefore committed to supporting the development and implementation of this initiative, drawing on its expertise in supporting young carers and the work already undertaken through the proposed Young Carer Mentoring Program. Through its specialist knowledge, established relationships with young carers, and experience designing targeted supports, Carers ACT is well placed to partner with the ACT Government and Education Directorate to strengthen educational, career and wellbeing outcomes for young carers.

We recommend that the Government consider engaging Carers ACT in exploring an implementation pathway linking career guidance with mentoring and transition support. The exploration could address:

- Eligibility and referral arrangements
- The role of schools and Carers ACT
- Appropriate data collection, consent and information-sharing arrangements that promote psychological safety, confidentiality and trust
- Mentor recruitment, screening, training and supervision
- Safeguarding and information-sharing requirements
- Culturally responsive and inclusive delivery
- Integration with existing education and carer-support services;
- Sustainable resourcing and
- Outcome and evaluation measures

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