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**Four Years of Research into Practice:
Targeted methods for improving education results
for children and young people
in foster care.**

Presented by

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Four Years of Research into Practice: Targeted methods for improving education results for children and young people in foster care.

Background

UnitingCare Burnside (Burnside) is a child and family social welfare agency of the NSW Uniting Church Synod. We aim to work in such a way so as to reduce disadvantage and achieve a more equitable and just society.

Burnside was established in 1911 to provide innovative institutional care to disadvantaged children in New South Wales, and currently provides a range of early intervention child and family support programs as well as a range of out of home care options. Burnside operates from a strengths perspective and values education as an important tool for change.

UnitingCare Burnside has had a long-term commitment to the educational success of our children in out of home care. In Western Sydney, there has been a position of Education Manager since the early 70s, and this position has grown to an agency wide focus as the agency has expanded its out of home care capacity.

In 2004 UnitingCare Burnside commissioned a research paper on the educational outcomes of our children in Foster Care, Western Sydney. The report, 'New Directions: Education in out of home care', was produced by C. Quinn Consultancy.

In 1996 Burnside's Foster Care Program had undergone a full independent evaluation by the same consultancy. Part of that evaluation involved a detailed review of the case files of children and young people who were in foster care with Burnside at the time. The 2004 project built on that file review.

The purpose of the 2004 project was:

- To examine the educational performance of this sample group of children and young people involved in Burnside's Foster Care Program (eg school attendance, formal and informal educational achievements).
- To identify what factors and strategies were employed to improve educational performance.
- To assess how Burnside's practice aligns with the literature on educational outcomes for children and young people in out-of-home care.
- To provide a guide for improvement of the educational support given to children and young people in Burnside's Foster Care Program.

The methodology involved:

- Thirty-six comprehensive file reviews
- Interviews with Burnside Caseworkers who had worked with the thirty-six children and young people
- Case study interviews with five young people who made significant educational achievements despite barriers to success

Burnside came out well in the research in terms of placement and school stability, participation in extra-curricular activities, very low after care parenthood rates, high levels of commitment to educational goals and a culture of celebrating successes in this area, adequate study facilities, appropriate supports for most, and had educational issues addressed in their case plans.

Despite this 38.46% of those old enough in the cohort to have achieved an HSC had completed Year 12. This compared with the NSW statistics that 80% of those living with their own families complete Year 12 compared to 35.6% of those in care. While Burnside achieved slightly above the average for children in out of home care it was still well below the average for children living with their birth families.

We had to ask: why is this so?

In reviewing the notes of the case planning meetings it emerged that much of the discussion and focus was upon maintaining school placement stability, behaviour management issues and peer relationship issues. While these are very important considerations there was little focus upon specific academic skill development and attainment. Jackson (1987)¹ reported that approaches often mistakenly focus only on school attendance and behaviour management rather than academic potential. She concluded that there is an over-emphasis on emotional and social adjustment rather than cognitive needs of children in care, but all these aspects need to be addressed. We needed to strengthen this focus and track the results.

Learning Challenges

Research has shown the significance of educational obstacles for the educational outcomes of children and young people in care. Results from the Casey National Alumni Study (Pecora et al, 2003)² found that school related diagnoses including learning disability and ADHD were significant predictors for high school completion with such a diagnosis meaning the young person was sixty times less likely to complete high school.

¹ Jackson, S. (1987) The Education of Children in Care. In Bristol Papers in *Applied Social Studies No. 1* Oxford University Computing Service, pp. 1-50.

² Pecora, P., Williams, J., Kessler, R., Downs, A., O'Brien, K., Hiripi, E., & Morello, S. (2003) *Assessing the effects of foster care: Early Results from the Casey national alumni study*. Seattle, WA: Casey Family programs.

Gilligan (2000:38)³ in his discussion of adversity, resilience and young people, argues that *'children may be able to cope with one or two fairly serious adversities in their lives, but as the adversities rise to three, four or beyond, youngsters may begin to buckle under the strain. It seems that if intervention can reduce the number of problems and build the number of strengths then it may have a positive effect'*. In Foster Care WS in 2007 37% of the children had at least one learning challenge, and 17% had a high number. These included ADHD, cognitive delay, significant lack of schooling, information processing problems, autism, visual impairments, speech and coordination problems, brain injury. We must anticipate that there will be academic learning problems when working with these children and young people.

The Process

I became Manager, Education in 2005 and a working group was then set up with the Manager and Coordinators from Foster Care Western Sydney and the Western Sydney Director to address the recommendations of the report methodically and assess the impacts on the educational outcomes of the children in care. In 2004 an internal file review of the tutoring program had also been conducted and this highlighted another recommendation of the New Directions Report – that educational tracking was inconsistent across files.

The New Directions Report had eight recommendations concerning: record keeping, carer support for educational achievement, provision of tutoring and other external supports, provision of adult mentors, provision of skilled career planning from Year 9 on, an educational focus in carer assessment and training, and further tracking of the educational attainment of children in care in Western Sydney foster care.

The working group to address these recommendations met on a six monthly basis over the following three years, reporting on progress with the recommendations and developing new strategies. Actions and outcomes were formally tracked in the minutes and monitored by the Manager, Education program. In 2006 an 'education census' sheet was developed to support caseworkers to focus on educational outcomes (see Attachment 1). The sheet is completed each October by the caseworkers on each child and young person they are working with. It provides a tool for discussion and planning with casework coordinators, identifies where records may not be up to date, and focuses the Manager and Coordinators on systems that need reinforcement within casework supervision or within carer support. This census data is analysed by me and a user-friendly report generated for presentation back to the caseworkers for discussion at their team meeting. Any recommendations for improvement within systems or practices are monitored by the Manager Education and the Manager and Coordinators for the Foster Care team over the following 12 months.

³ Gilligan, R. (2000) Adversity, resilience and young people: the protective value of positive school and spare time experiences. *Children & Society* 14: 37-47.

We have now implemented two education census collections, and have completed our working group focus on the recommendations of the New Directions Report. The process has been a long one but the resultant strategies and outcomes are looking good. These include:

- Retention to Year 12 is up to 93-100%, way above the State average.
- All children and young people with learning challenges are promptly linked in with educational assessments and supports
- Young people who are doing OK are encouraged to have tutoring support so as to do even better, especially towards the HSC
- In 2007, 80% of young people who had left school the year before were engaged in further learning – TAFE, university or trade courses.
- Offers of vocational counselling were made to 50% of young people 14 years and older
- All preschool children in the program were attending quality early childhood services at least 2 days per week for the 2 years prior to formal school attendance.
- In 2007 84% of the children and young people of school age in care were able to identify educational goals, and one employed young person was aiming to maintain full-time employment. Many goals related to achieving their SC/HSC mostly with stated career goals. Others were more specific regarding improvement in maths and literacy and even social skills.

We also use our own resource, an educationally-focused DVD called 'Opening the Door' and booklets in carer training, and provide training using our internally developed workshop called 'Helping your Child in Primary School'. Resourcing and focusing carers is an important part of success. The agency also allocates a small amount of money through the After Care worker to help young people who may be transitioning to tertiary studies at TAFE, University or other colleges.

What did we learn?

Throughout this process we learnt:

- The benefit of starting with a piece of external research and building on this using a focus on recommendations and within a team that includes a high level Director to keep it on track and as a high priority.
- The need to address learning supports flexibly to meet each child's individual needs. Some children do need 1:1 tutoring, but many also benefit from in-school aide hours or even support to access external hobbies and sporting interests. It is just as important to provide extra support for young people who excel in an area so that they can do better as to provide support when gaps are identified.
- The importance of career counselling and focus. I have subscribed to Careers Central (www.careercentral.edu.au), a career advisor website that carries a lot of current information in relation to career guidance, potential courses, leaving school etc. The caseworkers are encouraged to start talking to young people and their carers about career

counselling from Year 9 so that they can make informed choices about courses and directions over the next few years. This focus feeds in to the need for academic and life goals to guide young people through the difficult years of High School.

- The importance of keeping birth parents in the loop and educating them to support positive academic outcomes. This may not be normally within their family culture, and caseworkers need to be mindful of raising it as an issue during contact and including birth parents in celebrations where possible.
- The importance of tracking every piece of information available from schools – encouraging carers to support attendance at National Testing events, keeping records of all reports and significant tests and assessments. All these indicate what extra support is needed and when.
- The importance of involving the whole foster care team on a regular basis for reflection on what we have achieved and what needs to be addressed over the next 12 months.
- The need for education wrap around funding for each child and young person in care, flexibly delivered so that changing needs can be met quickly and appropriately.
- The benefit of utilising additional support to help young people transition into tertiary studies. We recycle old agency laptops to these young people and have a separate bucket of money to support them in related expenses from trade tools to university books. In doing this we are building on the learning from recent work in the UK on transition to tertiary learning for young people in out of home care.

Raising the bar in Western Sydney Foster Care has taken a refocus from mainly social and behavioural issues to educational success being at the same level of importance. It has meant embedding a time in the busy annual cycle of casework events to focus on education for the previous 12 months and plan actions for the next 12 months. With the ongoing supervision focus on educational outcomes, outcomes are currently high and we plan to keep them there.

Annual Tracking Data regarding Educational Outcomes

1. Name: _____ Age: _____ Current School Year: _____

2. Current academic or Vocational Status: Please tick.

- Primary School
- High School
- TAFE
- Apprentice
- University
- Other Tertiary

Name _____

Work:

- Full time Part time Casual Position held: _____

3. Assessments Conducted: Please tick.

- Physical
- Psychological
- Educational
- Behavioural
- Other Name assessments _____

4. Learning challenges: Please tick.

- ADHD/ADD
- Dyslexia
- Mental delay/ Disability
- Lack of formal schooling
- Information processing problems
- Other Further information _____

5. Academic support provided: Please tick.

- Classroom support (aid)
- Extra school tuition/ programs
- External tuition eg. Master Coaching
- Burnside tuition
- Other Name _____

6. Statewide assessments:

Ella/ Basic Skills (Years 3, 5, 7 and 8)

Year of test _____

English Result: Please tick

- Below average at average above average

Math Result: Please tick

- Below average at average above average

7. Last school report on file? Yes/no

Strengths? Please state _____

Areas of Improvement? Please state _____

Areas of concern? Please tick.

- Literacy Numeracy Attendance Behaviour Other (Name) _____

8. Vocational counseling provided? (Years 9 -12 usually) Please Tick Yes No

9. Child's goals: Enter statement by Caseworker or child _____

Caseworkers Signature: _____ Date: _____