

Policy Paper**SOCIAL JUSTICE UNIT**

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Addressing high rates of school suspension

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CONTENTS

<u>1. Introduction</u>	<u>1</u>
<u>What is happening?</u>	<u>3</u>
<u>Which students are most affected by school suspension?</u>	<u>4</u>
Children and young people in out-of-home care	4
Aboriginal students	5
Students with disabilities	5
<u>How does suspension affect vulnerable children and young people?</u>	<u>6</u>
Suspension intensifies academic difficulties and impairs employment prospects	6
Suspension places strain on students' relationships with their parents or carers	7
Suspension increases the risk of students becoming involved in the juvenile justice system	7
<u>The policy context</u>	<u>8</u>
Limited recognition of the adverse impacts of school suspension	8
Lessons from international policy developments	9
<u>The way forward</u>	<u>10</u>
Action area one: improving school suspension policies and procedures	10
Action area two: building a culture in school to support engagement of vulnerable students	12
Action area three: professional development to equip teachers to implement positive behaviour management strategies	14
Action area four: increased investment in school welfare staff	16
<u>Conclusion</u>	<u>19</u>
<u>Further resources</u>	<u>19</u>
<u>Appendix A</u>	<u>20</u>

1. Introduction

UnitingCare Children, Young People and Families (UnitingCare CYPF) provides a range of services, across the continuum of care, to children, young people and families in disadvantaged communities in NSW.

UnitingCare CYPF is strongly committed to the importance of education as a pathway out of disadvantage and has a long history of supporting service users to engage with education.

The right to education is enshrined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.¹ This includes taking measures to encourage regular attendance at schools and to reduce school drop-out rates.

However, a key issue that has emerged in our practice is that many vulnerable children and young people are missing out on educational opportunities due to the impact of school suspension.

Over many years, we have received reports from our staff about increasing numbers of students being suspended from school including children in Kindergarten and the early years of primary school. Our practitioners report that there is a growing tendency for schools to use suspension not only as a way of managing violent or aggressive behaviour, but other less severe behaviours. This includes, for example, behaviours such as truanting, talking back to teachers, swearing or using mobile phones in class.

We are particularly concerned about the cumulative effects of school suspension on the education and wellbeing of our most vulnerable children and young people. This includes children in care, Aboriginal children and children with disabilities. These students often experience a repeated pattern of suspensions, which intensifies academic difficulties and disengagement from learning.

Over the past two years the UCYPF Social Justice Unit has undertaken a body of research and policy work on the issue of school suspension. Our four major pieces of work are:

- Literature review – *Understanding school responses to students' challenging behaviour*²

- Fact sheet which analyses trends in long suspension in NSW which is updated annually in line with the release of DEC data – *UnitingCare Burnside Suspension in NSW Schools, Fact Sheet December 2011*³
- *Audit of policies and programs relevant to increasing engagement of disadvantaged students*⁴
- World-first, small-scale ethnographic study which gained the views of children and young people in the middle years (aged 12-14 years) about school suspension.⁵

This policy paper sets out the key learnings from our research and policy work. It aims to build awareness of the adverse effects of school suspension on vulnerable children and young people and to promote discussion about alternative approaches to managing students' challenging behaviour.

The policy paper will identify four key areas where action is required to build learning environments that are inclusive of our most vulnerable children and young people and to turn around the high rates of school suspension.

What is happening?

The NSW Department of Education and Communities (DEC) suspension policy enables the school principal to temporarily remove a student from school for up to four days (a 'short suspension'), or in instances of serious or sustained misbehaviour for between five and twenty school days (a 'long suspension').

NSW Department of Education and Communities (DEC) data confirms the trend to higher rates of school suspension. Between 2006 and 2011, the total number of long suspensions increased by 36% from 12,326 to 16,814.⁶

In 2011, the average length of long suspension was 12.6 school days. Further, 27.5% of all students who received a long suspension had more than one long suspension in that year. This means that some individual students were suspended for more than two and a half weeks out of a 40-41 week school year.

Suspension affects students across all school grades. In 2011, 15% of students in NSW who received a long suspension were in Kindergarten through to Year 6.

But the rate of suspension escalates for students in the middle years. In 2011, students in Years 7 to 10 accounted for 77 per cent of all long suspensions. Six per cent of all students enrolled in Years 7 to 10 received a long suspension. This is concerning as research shows that if students do not have a positive experience of learning in the middle years they are at risk of becoming disinterested in school and learning in general.⁷

It is important to note that NSW is not alone in this trend to increasing use of suspension. While there is limited publicly available data, anecdotally, there are reports of increasing use of suspension across most Australian states and territories. However, it is notable that the South Australian statistics show that in the last year there was a marked fall in suspensions rates, with the number of suspensions dropping by 18% (reversing a trend to increased suspensions each previous year since 2007).⁸

Which students are most affected by school suspension?

Often, the students suspended from school are those who can least afford to be absent from the classroom. Indeed, certain groups of students, including children and young people in out-of-home care (OOHC), Aboriginal students and children with disabilities are suspended at disproportionate rates. These students face significant challenges in their education and are often already at risk for poor academic outcomes. Being suspended from school just intensifies disconnection from learning and academic difficulties.

For many of these students, school suspension is not a one-off or isolated incident. Many of the young people who participated in our study on students' views about suspension had experienced multiple suspensions within the one school year.⁹ Indeed one student had been suspended 10 times, another 30 times, and another student had lost count of the number of times he had been suspended.

Children and young people in out-of-home care

Young people growing up in OOHC are at-risk of poor educational outcomes and are over-represented in the NSW statistics on early school leaving.

Children and young people in OOHC, enter care as a result of abuse and neglect. This has a profound impact on their ability to learn and interact in socially appropriate ways. Early trauma reduces their capacity to regulate strong emotions, often resulting in conflict with students and teachers. It can also cause language delays, which impact significantly on a child's ability to learn and socialise.

Children and young people who have been in OOHC are likely to have had a disrupted educational experience due to relocation and exclusion. Many children and young people in OOHC are not regularly attending school because they have been suspended or expelled.

Lost educational opportunities have a cumulative effect on children in care as they move through the various stages of education.¹⁰ A recent study of

educational outcomes of students in OOHC in NSW found high rates of suspension of the children in the study. Many of the students had been suspended on multiple occasions across both primary and high school.¹¹ This is consistent with the findings of other Australian research which has examined issues relating to exclusion of students in care.¹²

Aboriginal students

In 2011, 23 per cent of the students suspended in NSW for more than four days were Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islanders.¹³ 2,480 (5.8%) of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander students received long suspensions. This was an increase of 4.4% compared to 2010 data.

The continued over-representation of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander students in school suspension data is of particular concern in the context of government commitments to 'Closing the Gap'¹⁴. A Western Australian study on Aboriginal education found that the number of days a student is absent from school and suspension are both significant predictors of low academic performance.¹⁵

Students with disabilities

The NSW Department of Education and Communities does not publish data relating to the number of children with disabilities who are suspended from school. However, anecdotally, reports from our practitioners and from parents suggest that there are very high rates of suspension of students with disabilities, particularly students with autism.

How does suspension affect vulnerable children and young people?

Research evidence indicates that suspension is not effective in changing students' behaviour because it does not address the underlying issues that lead to challenging behaviour. A child's disruptive behaviour often results from their disengagement from and lack of interest in what they are being taught at school, or how they are being taught. It may also be due to family conflict, bullying, disability, learning difficulties or a combination of these and other issues.

In our study of students' views about their experience of suspension, students identified three main reasons why suspension doesn't change their behaviour:

- students referred to suspension as a response that was over used for behaviours that were not serious, even '*like saying things at the floor.*'¹⁶
- suspension doesn't address the root cause of disruptive behaviours
- students are being taken away from their learning.

One student commented,

I reckon it's just a little holiday, you just get to have some fun at home. They reckon you're going to think about what happened at school but it just doesn't happen.¹⁷

Suspension intensifies academic difficulties and impairs employment prospects

School suspension has serious unintended negative consequences for the suspended student. Vulnerable children and young people are already facing significant academic hurdles. Multiple incidents of suspension intensify academic difficulties and disengagement from learning.

When students are repeatedly suspended, they are at substantially greater risk of early school leaving.¹⁸ A recent longitudinal study of school completion of Australian young people found that there is a strong negative association between a history of suspensions in secondary

school and school completion. Those who were ever suspended from school were 19 percentage points less likely to have completed school.¹⁹

Young people who do not complete Year 12 or who have poor academic outcomes are more likely to experience multiple periods outside the workforce and are less likely to engage in further education or training after leaving school.²⁰

Suspension places strain on students' relationships with their parents or carers

Our practitioners report that when a student is suspended from school, it also places increased pressure on their relationships with their parents or carers and other family members. It is notable that in our study on students' views of suspension, of the ten students we interviewed, eight talked about how school suspension impacted negatively on their family relationships.

As a major provider of OOHC services in NSW, our experience is that school suspension or exclusion creates significant strains on the care placement and may lead to placement breakdown. In turn, multiple changes in care placements and schools can generate feelings of instability and have a marked effect on children's capacity to learn. This can result in a cycle of suspensions, placement stress and placement breakdown.²¹

Suspension increases the risk of students becoming involved in the juvenile justice system

Several Australian studies have shown that school suspension may also increase the likelihood of the student engaging in antisocial and violent behaviour and becoming involved in the criminal justice system. The studies controlled for other risk factors such as previous violent behaviour or spending time with violent peers.²²

The policy context

Currently in Australia, there is a strong policy focus on improving educational outcomes for disadvantaged children and young people.

Under the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) *National Education Agreement*, governments have committed to work towards a number of key outcomes, including:

- all children are engaged in and benefiting from school
- young people make a successful transition from school to work and further study
- schooling promotes social inclusion and reduces the educational disadvantage of children, especially Indigenous children.²³

The *Review of Funding for Schools*, headed by David Gonski, presented its final report to the Federal Government in late 2011. The report includes a focus on how funding arrangements can address barriers to educational achievement for disadvantaged groups. Full implementation of the recommendations of the Gonski report is critical to address resource issues in schools and increase the capacity of disadvantaged schools to implement innovative approaches to address the needs of their students.

Limited recognition of the adverse impacts of school suspension

At the policy level, there has been limited recognition of the impacts that school suspension has on vulnerable students in intensifying academic difficulties and exacerbating disengagement from learning. Or that suspension runs counter to the current education policy environment which emphasises the importance of keeping students in school longer and connected to further study or training for employment.

One exception is a report by the NSW Ombudsman on *Addressing Aboriginal Disadvantage: the need to do things differently*. The report identifies the high rates of school suspension as one of the key things that needs to change to improve educational outcomes for Aboriginal students in NSW:

Suspensions which simply exclude students from school for a period of time are also seen by many community leaders and educators as negative in that they remove the protective factor offered by school, placing vulnerable young people at risk of either engaging in, or becoming the victims of, criminal behaviour.²⁴

Lessons from international policy developments

Currently, there are several policy developments occurring in other countries which can provide valuable lessons for Australia on the impacts of school suspension and alternative approaches in managing students' challenging behaviours.

United States

Education departments in a number of states across the United States are putting an end to 'zero-tolerance' policies in schools because they have proved ineffective at improving school safety or student behaviour and have significant negative impacts on student outcomes.

The Michigan State Board of Education, for example, has called for a review of disciplinary procedures by all school districts and has urged schools to,

Implement or expand the use of proven alternative behavior management strategies like **restorative practices, positive behavior supports, and peer mediation**, which allow educators to address disciplinary matters correctively, rather than punitively, reducing suspensions. School staff need effective **pre-service and professional development opportunities** to garner the skills and knowledge necessary to implement these alternative behavior management strategies. (emphasis added)²⁵

New Zealand

The New Zealand Ministry for Education is currently implementing a major shift in the management of disruptive behaviour in schools. It is built on the foundation that positive behaviour can be learnt and difficult and disruptive behaviour can be unlearned. It moves away from seeing individual students

as a 'problem', and towards proactively changing the environment around them to support positive behaviour.

Positive Behaviour for Learning (PBL) supports the national application of a small number of evidence-based programmes that vary in intensity from universal approaches directed at all students, to highly intensive programs targeted at children showing severe and persistent conduct difficulties.

The Ministry for Education has developed a five year action plan to guide implementation of *Positive Behaviour for Learning*.²⁶ Notably, the PBL framework explicitly recognises that '*punitive and exclusionary approaches to discipline do not bring about long-term and sustainable changes in behaviour*'.²⁷ The Action Plan includes a review of legislation and practice to reduce suspensions and ensure appropriate support is provided to schools to complement changes in legislation.

The Plan includes a range of activities to support effective implementation of PBL. Regional Implementation Teams have been established to provide training to schools in the PBL approaches.

The way forward

From our research and policy work and consultations with our staff, UnitingCare CYPF has identified four key action areas that need to be addressed to promote inclusion of vulnerable children and young people and to turn around the high rates of school suspension:

1. Improving school suspension policies and practices
2. Building a culture in schools to support engagement of vulnerable students in learning
3. Professional development to equip teachers to implement positive behaviour management strategies
4. Increased investment in school welfare staff

Action area one: improving school suspension policies and procedures

Reducing rates of school suspension will require leadership from government for broad changes to school suspension policies and procedures including:

- changes to suspension policies with a focus on reducing the incidence and duration of suspension
- proactive support to schools with high rates of suspension to assist them to implement alternative approaches to managing students' challenging behaviours
- encouraging schools to consider the use of in-school suspension, with increased support such as counselling where suspension is deemed necessary (see discussion below)
- strengthening collection, monitoring and public reporting on school suspension and expulsion data. This includes, for example, publishing data on suspension at the local level and on the number of students with a disability who are suspended.

Increasing options for in-school suspension

In our study on students' views on suspension, the young people interviewed suggested that in-school suspension may be a more appropriate and effective response to students' challenging behaviours.²⁸

This is consistent with research evidence which indicates that in-school suspensions that have a learning component attached are an effective alternative to out-of-school suspension, particularly when combined with increased support such as counselling.²⁹ Under this approach, students are not relieved of the consequences of their behaviour, but remain at school where they are supervised, stay current with academic work, and receive support to address the behavioural and emotional problems that led to the suspension. In-school suspensions are more widely used in this way in the United States.

In his report on addressing Aboriginal disadvantage in NSW, the Ombudsman comments that a number of principals and regional education directors have indicated their preference for more systematic use of 'in-school' suspensions.³⁰

What is required?

- changes to the NSW school suspension policy with a focus on reducing the incidence and duration of suspension
- proactive support to schools with high rates of suspension to implement alternative approaches to managing students' challenging behaviour
- encouraging schools to consider the use of in-school suspension with increased support such as counselling
- strengthening collection, monitoring and public reporting on school suspension and expulsion data

Action area two: building a culture in school to support engagement of vulnerable students

Building a culture in schools to support engagement of vulnerable students in learning is a critical first step to address the high rates of school suspension.

Our review of research evidence³¹ and policy approaches used in Australia and overseas highlights the importance of a sustained and comprehensive approach to building student engagement, which is tailored to the needs and circumstances of individual students. The key elements of effective approaches include:

- A **multi-level approach**, including: whole-school approaches; early intervention; and individual support for students with intensive needs. Early intervention needs to include processes to identify children who are experiencing learning difficulties and ensuring that they receive extra support to address those difficulties.
- **Building strong relationships with students** – students who have solid rapport with their teachers and other staff at the school, such as counsellors and Aboriginal support staff, have increased opportunities to discuss their behaviour, participate in decisions around how to address their problems and are encouraged to take responsibility for their actions

- Recognising that **student wellbeing goes hand in hand with student learning and performance** and educators can make a positive contribution to learner wellbeing – students can't learn if they don't feel safe or if health problems create barriers to learning
- **Strong coordination and collaboration** across government agencies and with the non-government sector – the case study at Appendix A illustrates the benefits of strong multi-agency and cross-disciplinary collaboration in achieving good outcomes for vulnerable children
- Increasing the capacity of schools to provide **flexible curricula** which are responsive to individual learning needs
- Fostering high levels of involvement and **engagement with families.**

While there are many examples of schools that are using some of these approaches, what is missing, is a systematic process for monitoring and evaluating programs aimed at improving educational outcomes for disadvantaged and vulnerable students.

In its recent report on the Schools Workforce, the Productivity Commission emphasises the need for improved rigour and transparency of evaluation of policy initiatives to address educational disadvantage.³² As the report notes, where programs to address educational disadvantage have been evaluated there is a lack of transparent public information on the findings and how these have been applied.

Similarly, the Audit Office of NSW recently conducted a performance audit which focused on the Department of Education and Communities processes to remove the barriers to learning encountered by Aboriginal students and improve literacy. The audit found that the Department does not routinely evaluate the efficiency and effectiveness of its programs and measures to improve the literacy of Aboriginal students.³³

This highlights the need to improve evaluation, monitoring and public reporting on programs aimed at improving educational outcomes for disadvantaged and vulnerable students. Program evaluation findings and data on progress measures should be made publicly available to provide transparency and accountability and sharing of evidence on what works.

What is required?

- The Federal and NSW Government review and strengthen processes for evaluation, review and public reporting of programs directed at improving educational outcomes for disadvantaged students, in line with the recommendations of the Productivity Commission and the Audit Office of NSW

Action area three: professional development to equip teachers to implement positive behaviour management strategies

There is a strong body of research evidence which indicates that positive behaviour management strategies are effective in influencing student behaviour in positive ways.³⁴

However, there needs to be stronger focus on professional development to build the capacity of teachers to implement positive behaviour management strategies.

Professional development on positive behaviour management is most effective when it is delivered at the whole-school level with strong support from the school leadership team. As the Grattan Institute comments *'...Behavioural and cultural change requires continuous support within schools and classrooms'*.³⁵ Ongoing coaching is also important to support implementation of new teaching approaches.

Professional development on positive behaviour management also needs to be incorporated into initial teacher training as is currently occurring in New Zealand.

A recent study by researchers at Macquarie University examined the content covered on classroom behaviour management in 35 primary schools across Australia. The study found that fewer than half the courses provided mandatory stand-alone subjects on classroom behaviour management. The findings support previous research that suggests that when embedded within other units, classroom behaviour management content may be limited to just a few hours of instruction. As the researchers observe, there is *'not much time spent on an issue that may be addressed by teachers, in some way, every single day of their teaching lives'*.³⁶

Further, the researchers found that *evidence-based practices* such as the school-wide positive behaviour support model (PBS) were seldom part of classroom behaviour management content. Theoretical models of management of classroom behaviour predominate over information that provides knowledge, skills, and strategies based on evidence-based practices such as PBS.

UnitingCare CYPF is aware that the Department of Education and Communities is implementing the *Positive Behaviour for Learning* (PBL) program in some schools. PBL is based on the School-wide Positive Behaviour Support program, which originated in the United States and has been positively evaluated. This is a good start. However, to be effective, the School-wide Positive Behaviour Support model needs to be fully implemented using a multi-tiered approach that includes school-wide, targeted and intensive intervention levels. This also needs to include on-the-job coaching and support to ensure that positive behaviour management strategies are implemented in a consistent way.

Teachers also need to be effectively resourced to deal with the challenging issues that contribute to behavioural concerns such as family breakdown, bullying, disability and learning difficulties. Educators are often well-placed to recognise when children and young people may need additional supports, including early identification of emerging problems that require involvement of specialist services. It is important that school staff have the knowledge and skills to recognise and support students experiencing difficulties, including how to access support and make appropriate referrals.

What is required?

- All teacher training courses include increased content on positive behaviour management strategies. The way that this is delivered should include mandatory stand-alone subjects.
- The NSW Department of Education and Communities continue to implement the Positive Behaviour for Learning program across all schools in NSW. The Department should ensure that the School-wide Positive Behaviour model is fully implemented using a multi-tiered approach that includes school-wide, targeted and intensive intervention levels. The way this is implemented should also ensure that teachers receive ongoing coaching and support to implement positive behaviour management strategies in a consistent way.

Action area four: increased investment in school welfare staff

School welfare personnel have a critical role in providing ongoing support to students and their families to address the underlying emotional and behavioural issues that lead to suspension. They also play a vital role in linking students to other support services including, youth services, family support and disability services.

School counsellors

But we know that counsellors are over-stretched and have very limited availability to provide this crucial support. In NSW, typically, counsellors provide services to the feeder primary schools of the high schools in which they are based and may only be spending one or two days at each school. The Wood Commission of Inquiry into Child Protection noted that Bourke High School has the services of a school counsellor one day a week, with that same counsellor servicing Bourke Public School and the schools in Cobar, Nyngan and Brewarrina, hundreds of kilometres apart.³⁷

The number of school counsellors in NSW public schools has stayed static at 790.8 since 2008 (or even earlier) despite the substantial increase in the student population.³⁸ The NSW Commission for Children and Young

People has recommended that the counsellor/student ratio be improved to 1:500.³⁹ At present the ratio is closer to one counsellor to 1000 students.

In 2012, the NSW Government is trialling the appointment of 50 student support officers to address bullying in schools. UnitingCare CYPF welcomes this initiative as a positive step in the right direction. However, the new student support officers have a very specific role and should not be seen as a substitute for improving the school counsellors to student ratio.

Home School Liaison Officers and Aboriginal School Liaison Officers

The Home School Liaison Program aims to *‘provide a supportive link between families and schools where compulsory school attendance issues have not been resolved by the regular school-parent partnership.’*⁴⁰ There are 110 Home School Liaison Officers and 26 Aboriginal Student Liaison Officers employed across the State.⁴¹

The NSW Ombudsman notes a number of concerns relating to the role of Aboriginal Student Liaison Officers and Home School Liaison Officers in addressing non-attendance, including:

- not becoming involved in a matter until a student’s non-attendance is well entrenched and school based strategies have been exhausted
- having a very large number of schools that individual officers are required to service, particularly in regional and remote areas
- difficulties in building solid relationships with families, often because of the large area they cover.⁴²

These issues point to the need to increase funding for Home School Liaison Officers and Aboriginal Student Liaison Officers in high need communities. The role of the Home School Liaison Officer and Aboriginal Student Liaison Officers should include working with families where schools have concerns about a student’s behaviour and suspension is being considered.

Out-of-home Care Coordinators and teachers

Schools require increased resources and training in order to understand and support children and young people in out-of-home care. In NSW, the employment of OOHC Coordinators in each education region under Keep Them Safe initiatives has been a good start, but this program continues to require additional resources. Our experience is that the regional OOHC Coordinators are very stretched because of the large areas they cover.

The NSW Department of Education and Communities also employs OOHC teachers who have a more 'hands on' role in working with schools to support children and young people in OOHC. Our experience is that in some areas, the OOHC teachers do play a critical role, for example, in assisting in transition planning and participating in school suspension meetings. However, this is variable, in part because of the limited number of OOHC teachers across the State. For example, in the Mid North Coast area, one OOHC teacher covers the Port Macquarie, Taree and Kempsey areas including both primary and high schools. As the OOHC teachers cover such a large area, their work focuses mainly on crisis intervention, rather than building the capacity of teachers and school staff to understand and support children and young people in care.

What is required?

- Increase NSW Government investment in school counsellors to improve the counsellor/student ratio to 1:500
- Increase the numbers of Home School Liaison Officers and Aboriginal Student Liaison Officers in NSW so that they are able to take a more proactive approach and address behavioural issues that lead to suspension
- Increase the numbers of Out-of-home Care Coordinators and teachers in NSW to take their capacity beyond crisis response and into teacher support and training

Conclusion

School suspension is increasing at an alarming rate in most Australian states and territories. The use of suspension impacts disproportionately on our most vulnerable children and young people – this includes children in care, Aboriginal children and children with disabilities.

These children often experience a repeated pattern of suspension throughout their school life, which intensifies academic difficulties and disengagement from learning. When students are repeatedly suspended, they are at substantially greater risk of early school leaving.

There is little evidence that suspension promotes safer schools or improved student behaviour. Indeed, studies suggest that a history of suspension and expulsion may increase the likelihood of later antisocial and violent behaviour.

This is an issue which cannot be ignored if we are serious about addressing the gap in educational outcomes and employment prospects of our most vulnerable students. Turning around the high rates of school suspension in our schools will require leadership by governments on all of the four key action areas identified in this policy paper.

UnitingCare CYPF looks forward to working with our colleagues in the education and social welfare sectors to promote consideration of alternative approaches to managing students' challenging behaviours.

Further resources

For more information about the UnitingCare CYPF Social Justice Unit's work on improving engagement of disadvantaged students in education and reducing the use of suspension, you can visit the *Because Children Matter* website at: <http://www.becausechildrenmatter.org.au/facts-and-figures3/>.

Appendix A

The following case study illustrates how our *Brighter Futures* programs work with schools to support children with additional or complex needs and their families in the transition to school. It highlights the importance of strong multi-agency and cross-disciplinary collaboration in achieving good outcomes for vulnerable children. It also illustrates the importance of intervening early to address learning difficulties and behavioural problems.

The *Brighter Futures* program is funded by the NSW Department of Family and Community Services to provide targeted support to meet the needs of vulnerable families and prevent escalation of emerging child protection issues. The program is for families with children from birth to eight years or who are expecting a child. Eligibility for *Brighter Futures* is dependent on the identification of risk factors for child protection such as domestic violence, parental drug and alcohol misuse, and mental health issues. The children also often have undiagnosed disabilities or mental health issues.

Case study

The Burnside *Brighter Futures* service was working with a young boy, Joshua*, who is in Year one. Although Joshua did not have a diagnosis, he has an obvious language delay and poor expressive communication skills.

Joshua was suspended as a result of an incident where he hit his teacher. This incident occurred because he was frustrated that he could not explain to his teacher what he wanted. As it involved physical violence, (under Department of Education and Communities policies), this would result in an automatic suspension, and as it was the second suspension it would generally be for 18 or 20 days.

Joshua's mother, Ella was reluctant to have any contact with the school because she was concerned about what the school would think of her and that they would judge her as a 'bad mother'. The *Brighter Futures* Early Childhood Facilitator gained Ella's permission to call the school; the school was pleased that *Brighter Futures* was involved as they had been trying to contact the mother and talk to her about how they could support the child's needs. Ella agreed to go with the Early Childhood Facilitator to a meeting

at the school. The school was very supportive of getting Joshua back into school as soon as possible and developed an individual behaviour program.

The Early Childhood Facilitator then made a 'social story' for Joshua around what he would do when he went back to school. Social stories visually depict processes involved in transitioning to school in a way that is meaningful to the child (they are often used for children with Autism Spectrum Disorders and help to prepare children for school and relieve anxiety).

Joshua ended up having a week's suspension while everything was organised. He then went back to school the following week with a behavioural card that showed how his behaviour had been that day. Ella was encouraged to reward each smiley face and ignore when there wasn't one. Previously, she would have wanted to punish the child for not having a smiley face, but she was now starting to see that the reward for positive behaviour was encouraging her child to behave more positively at school.

The school also praised Ella for her support of her children's education, for example, the children being at school on time and in uniform. This helped her to feel good about her parenting and to be more comfortable in having contact with the school. Through the collaborative support of the school and *Brighter Futures*, Joshua managed to get through the rest of the term without further suspension.

* Names have been changed.

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