



Blueprint for Early Childhood Development and School Reform: School Reform Discussion Paper

Introduction to Doxa Youth Foundation

Doxa Youth Foundation, (Doxa) was established in 1992 to assist disadvantaged young people to achieve their potential.

Doxa's mission is to create opportunities for disadvantaged young people by investing in education related programs that help them achieve their potential and meaningfully participate in the community.

Major programs that Doxa provides include:

Doxa School West Melbourne and Doxa School Bendigo – unique, leading edge schools providing 2 terms of intensive educational support with 12 months follow up to disadvantaged young people at risk of becoming disengaged from education with the aim of assisting them to continue their education.

Doxa Cadetship Program - gives talented young people from disadvantaged backgrounds the opportunity to pursue a university education and gain graduate employment.

Doxa Malmsbury Camp and Doxa City Camp – giving urban children the opportunity for an affordable school camp and rural children the opportunity for an affordable city experience.

Doxa believes that its experience in the areas of alternative education and education of disadvantaged young people give it a highly valuable perspective on the current school education system and some of the changes required to meet the needs of disadvantaged young people.

System development and reform – creating a culture of excellence

Doxa Youth Foundation believes in the need for system development and reform but believes that there is a significant gap in the focus. It is heartening to see increased support going to Koorie students and those students who have a disability but disappointing to see that students who are at risk of leaving school early because they are difficult to engage at school or at risk of becoming difficult to engage are not included in the focus.

There is clear evidence that the longer young people stay at school the better the outcomes are likely to be in terms of going on to further education or employment. In its report on How young people are faring 2007 (Dusseldorp

Skills Forum (2007) highlighted that in May 2006, 20% of school leavers who had completed Year 12 were not fully engaged in study or work compared with 45% of Year 11 completers and 50% of Year 10 or below completers. The report also showed that 14% of 15-19 year-olds are neither in full time study or full time work. This statistic has barely shifted over the past decade, despite a 30 year low in the unemployment rate. (National Industry Skills Committee 2007)

In addition, early school leaving and lower levels of education cost Australia an estimated \$2.6 billion a year in higher social welfare, health and crime prevention costs and lower tax revenue, productivity and Gross Domestic Product. (Dusseldorp Skills Forum 2004) It has been estimated that for every dollar that government invests in retaining early school leavers, the expected return is as much as 3.2 times more. (Department of Premier and Cabinet 2005) **

Alternative Models of Education

Doxa believes that there is a cohort of students, who for a variety of reasons, are not able to be catered for in mainstream education. For these students, a range of programs in alternative settings have developed in an attempt to increase their engagement in the education system. Generally the programs offer content and experiences related to the following areas:

- Literacy and numeracy development
- Employability skills
- Information technology competencies
- Living skills
- Personal awareness and self-esteem
- Communication skills

However, the lack of a state-wide policy and strategic framework for the operation of alternative settings and programs in Victoria has resulted in an adhoc approach to the provision of alternative settings. They do not form part of an on-going, well resourced and appropriately recognized service. Often, alternative settings have no core funding (unlike mainstream schools), and are reliant on program specific, short-term grants with no guarantee of continuity.

Doxa Youth Foundation believes that this needs to be addressed to ensure those students at greatest risk of becoming disengaged are being adequately supported to increase their likelihood of staying connected to education.

Doxa Schools

Doxa Youth Foundation funds Doxa School West Melbourne and Doxa School Bendigo, both alternative schools that work with children at risk of becoming disengaged.

The Doxa Schools provide an alternative time-limited education program for 11-14 year olds who face various forms of disadvantage that make staying at school challenging for them.

The Doxa Schools provides six months (two terms) in an alternative school setting where intensive educational and personal development support is available. After the student returns to mainstream schooling a further 12 month's follow up support is provided by the Doxa School.

In 2006, Doxa commissioned Australian Youth Research Centre, Faculty of Education at The University of Melbourne to evaluate Doxa School West

Melbourne which has been in operation since 2000. (Formerly operating as Marist Transition School)

Key research findings showed that:

- The Doxa School provides an excellent program consistent in most respects with principles for good practice in alternative education settings derived from the literature.
- Given the level of disadvantage experienced by young people referred to The Doxa School, it is remarkable that the majority of students stay at school for at least another two years after attending the program.
- Of the 98 graduates tracked through this research, 71 (72%) were either found to be still at school or were still in school on last contact with the school (usually at least 12 months after attending the school). Twelve students (12%) were working (eight in apprenticeships in building and construction).
- Only eight of 98 graduates about whom we were able to access information were known to be looking for work.
- Some barriers to school retention (for instance severe family conflict, learning difficulty or economic disadvantage) are not amenable to change within a six month placement in an alternative setting. The experience of many graduates was that while they greatly enjoyed their time at The Doxa School and had remained within the education system, they still disliked mainstream school and thought they were under-performing.
- Aspects of the program which were most appreciated by research participants include the mentoring program providing 12 months support to graduates after attending the Doxa School, and intensive and caring support provided by volunteers and staff. The opportunity for young people to connect and feel supported by a number of significant adults was seen as critical in The Doxa School's success.
- Participants were clear that what The Doxa School does particularly well is to work on the students' barriers to education. These include monitoring their behaviour in an educational setting, conflict and anger management.
- The research literature highlights a concern that aggregating 'at risk' young people in a common setting may function to compound behavioural problems, thus placing young people further at risk. Nonetheless this risk is well managed by the Doxa School staff and program structure and participants report positive outcomes from the program.
- The program is highly regarded by graduates, parents and staff of other schools. It is significant that among a group of young people all of whom had difficulty maintaining school engagement, almost all survey respondents identified enjoying their time at The Doxa School and could identify achievements they felt proud of as a result of the intervention. (Full research paper, Doxa School West Melbourne: Outcomes for Students 2000–2006 Attachment A)

Doxa believes that alternative settings similar to Doxa School West Melbourne and Doxa School Bendigo should be fully funded throughout Victoria to provide a short term intervention and long term support for students who are at risk of leaving school early.

A Flexible Curriculum

Doxa also believes that within the mainstream setting, the curriculum has an important role to play in engaging young people in education, particularly through the greater breadth of curriculum choice, the instructional environment for the curriculum and better co-operation between school and other education agencies to provide alternatives to young people. (Lamb et. al. 2004)

Hattie's research on 'Teachers make a Difference' (2003) suggests that up to 60% of the variation in student learning outcomes is attributable to what takes place in the school or classroom. The Victorian Middle Years Research and Development Project found classroom teaching and learning practices are the most critical factor in the achievement and engagement of students during the middle years. (Russell et. al. 2003) Similarly, Butler et. al. (2005) found that factors which promote engagement relate directly to curriculum and the catering for a diversity of learning styles, creating opportunity for co-operative learning and providing content that is meaningful, significant and part of the real life of young people.

Fullarton (2002) found that if teachers believed that their school was broadly successful it was found to be a significant predictor of student engagement. It relates to teachers assessment on the success of their school in providing a curriculum that caters for all students. It would seem that a strong feeling among teachers that the school is inclusive and successful is a positive influence on student engagement.

Given that irrelevant curricula is often cited as a reason for young people leaving school early (Cole 2004) it is particularly important that greater attention is directed towards ensuring that school curriculum adequately caters for different learning needs and styles.

2. Workforce reform – the best people doing the right things

A critical factor in keeping young people engaged in education is the quality of the teacher/student relationship, reflected by a sense of belonging and being valued, and a friendly and mutually respectful relationship. Whilst in contrast, a poor relationship, conflict with teachers and the student going unnoticed contributes to disengagement. (Butler et. al. 2005) Failure to provide and build satisfactory teaching relationships removes the possibility of successful learning which is the most important intrinsic motive for the young person to stay on at school. (Lamb et. al. 2004)

Yet building such relationships with students at risk of disengagement requires a level of expertise, experience and commitment which is often lacking in teachers in mainstream education.

Student teachers are given little formal training on supporting at risk students. Many feel ill-prepared to teach and support these students, and there is a worrying drift out of teaching during the early years of a teacher's career. A 2003 Victorian Department of Education and Training report found that in the United States a third of teachers leave the profession within three years almost half within five years. In Britain, a 2003 survey by the University of Buckingham found that 30% of teachers who left teaching that year had been in the profession less than five years. A recent Australian Education Union survey showed that 47% of beginning teachers did not see themselves teaching in 10 years. (Education Age 2007)

It is essential that tertiary institutions provide student teachers with greater support to prepare to teach students at risk of disengagement. Subjects on this topic should be mandatory during teacher training, rather than an optional extra. Also, there is a significant amount of research which highlights the importance of effective mentoring and induction of new teachers in terms of improving professional practice and addressing high attrition rates. (Johnson et. al. 2005; Boyer et. al. 2004) This also requires additional attention.

Doxa believes that subjects on the topic of teaching students at risk of disengagement should be mandatory during teacher training.

Schools also need to identify and facilitate the training and professional development necessary for teaching staff to respond to research on how to more successfully engage children in the later years of primary and early years of secondary schooling. Such support can be through professional development which focuses on building their capacity to learn from each other and their students, and professional teams within schools to assist staff to reflect on progress and problems. (Butler et. al. 2005)

Such is its concern regarding these issues that Doxa Youth Foundation partnered with the Catholic Education Office to develop *Making Adjustments*, a professional development course aimed at enhancing teachers' knowledge and skills in supporting difficult to engage students. The Pilot Program of Making Adjustments is currently underway.

Doxa believes that professional development programs such as *Making Adjustments* should be readily available to teachers in mainstream schools.

Resourcing Teachers in Alternative Settings

A critical factor in the success of alternative settings is the teachers. A report by James et al (2001) highlighted that helpful, patient, fair, friendly and empathetic teachers with a commitment to building trusting and respectful relationships with students is one of the cornerstones of effective alternative settings. Such teachers are able to relate to young people at risk – they are flexible, able to treat young people as adults, willing to negotiate but be clear about the non-negotiables, and clear about the responsibilities as well as the rights of all involved in the program.

To attract such teachers can be difficult because of the demands of the job, and retaining them can also be difficult, as not only do they have a challenging role, but also often the alternative setting is under-resourced so the staff are unable to access the support they require or participate in professional development. (Cole 2004)

Given the quality of the personnel and the relationship developed between staff and students is pivotal to the success of alternative settings, it is vital that their role is recognized and that adequate funding is providing to ensure that appropriate recruitment and retention can be undertaken.

Doxa believes that adequately resourcing teachers in alternative settings is essential. Many students attend these

settings as a last resort and the challenges for teachers are significant.

3. Partnerships with parents and communities – partnerships for learning

Doxa Youth Foundation is pleased to see the Victorian government recognise the importance of building partnerships between schools, families and communities to enhance student outcomes.

Doxa believes that partnerships that enhance student outcomes should include local government, health, welfare and community services, vocational education networks, social and sporting clubs, businesses and industry, which all have the capacity to provide extra support to schools, particularly for those students with additional needs.

Traditionally schools have generally been poor in building and maintaining relationships with networks in the broader community. However, for students at risk of disengagement, such community resources are often vital in terms of support and providing pathways to further training or employment. An increased emphasis on the active development of sustainable relationships with a broader range of networks by schools will be most welcomed.

A key aspect in the success of Doxa School West Melbourne and Doxa School Bendigo can be attributed to their partnerships with local schools, local community organisations and providers of alternative pathways to further education.

References and Bibliography

- Australian Industry Group & Dusseldorp Skills Forum (2007) *It's crunch time. Raising Youth Engagement and Attainment. A Discussion Paper.*
- Black R (2007) *Crossing the bridge: Overcoming entrenched disadvantage through student-centred learning* Education Foundation Melbourne
- Boyer I, Maney B, with Kamler B & Comer B (2004) "Reciprocal mentoring across generations: Sustaining professional development for English teachers" *English Teaching: Practice and Critique* 3:2, pp 139-150
- Bryce J, Frigo T, Anderson M & McKenzie P (2007) *Australian Young People, their families and post-school plans: a research review* Australian Council for Educational Research
- Butler H, Bond L, Drew S, Krelle A & Seal I (2005) *Doing it differently: Improving young people's engagement with school* Brotherhood of St Lawrence Melbourne
- Cole P (2004) "Learning in alternative settings: What makes a sustainable program" *Paper presented at the Learning for Choices Expo Sydney*
- Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (2008) *Blueprint for Early Childhood Development and School Reform: School reform discussion paper* Victoria
- Department of Premier and Cabinet (2005) *Better Outcomes for Disengaged Young People: Initial Scoping, Analysis and Policy Review* Victoria
- Dusseldorp Skills Forum (2004) *How young people are faring. Key Indicators 2004.* Dusseldorp Skills Forum New South Wales
- Dusseldorp Skills Forum (2007) *How young people are faring. Key indicators 2007* Dusseldorp Skills Forum New South Wales
- Education Age "Classroom burnout triggers teacher opt-out" *The Age* 26 February 2007
- Fullarton S (2002) "Student engagement with school: Individual and school level influences. Longitudinal surveys of Australian youth" *Research Report No. 27.* Australian Council for Education Research

Harris A & Goodall J (2007) *Engaging parents in raising achievement: Do parents know they matter* University of Warwick United Kingdom

Hattie J (2003) "Teachers make a difference: What is the research evidence?" *Paper presented at Australian Council for Educational Research Conference* Melbourne 19-21 October

Hill P & Russell J (1999) "Systemic whole school reform of the middle years of schooling" *Paper presented at National Middle Years of schooling conference*, Melbourne

James P, St Ledger P, & Ward K (2001) *Making connections: The evaluation of the Victorian Full Service Schools Program* Department of Education, Employment and Training, Victoria

Johnson SM, Berg JH & Donaldson M (2005) *Who stays in teaching and why: A review of the literature on teacher retention. The Project on the Next Generation of Teachers* Harvard Graduate School of Education

Lamb S, Waltab A, Teese R, Vickers M & Rumberger R (2004) *Staying on at school: Improving student retention in Australia* Centre for Post Compulsory Education and Lifelong Learning, Queensland Department of Education and The Arts

National Industry Skills Committee (2007) "Getting young people work ready: Positive pathways to the future. A strategic issues paper" *Paper prepared for the Ministerial Council for Vocational and Technical Education*

Productivity Commission (2007) *Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage: Key Indicators 2007 Indigenous report* Australian Government

Russell J, Mackay T & Jane G (2003) *Messages from MYRAD: Improving the middle years of schooling*. Melbourne

Whiston SC & Keller BK (2005) "Family influences on career development: A North American perspective" cited in Paper presented by R A Young "The construction of career in families" at *Invited symposium conducted at the meeting of the International Association for Educational and Vocational Guidance* Lisbon Portugal.