

Protecting Victoria's Vulnerable Children Inquiry. (K Haddock)

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21 March 2011

Protecting Victoria's Vulnerable Children Inquiry.

Re: Terms of Reference 2.1.1

Professional Practitioner's Submission.

Social Work Background.

I have had extensive experience in both Government and non Government welfare agencies including the Children's Protection Society.

My latest employment before I retired in 1997 was with the Juvenile Justice Section of the Department of Human Services – Eastern Region.

Problem of School Non-attendance.

“The Department of Education and Early Childhood Development's focus on improved attendance rates reflects the findings of international research that demonstrates a strong correlation between students learning, longer-term life outcomes, attendance at school and appropriate participation in education programs.

It is crucial that children and students develop habits of regular attendance at an early age, even from the time they are enrolled in pre-school.

Poor patterns of attendance place students at risk of not achieving their educational, social and psychological potential and are disadvantaged in the quality of choices that they are able to make in later life situations.”

(Quotation from Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Services School Attendance Policy)

Social Worker with the Juvenile Justice Section (1994 -97)

For the time that I worked in the Juvenile Justice system I supervised young persons who were on Youth Supervision Orders from the Criminal Division of the Children's Court for a range of offences including drug and alcohol misuse and assaults and affray. In some cases the young person was also the subject of a Child Protection Order. During this time I became acutely aware that many young offenders were disengaged from the education programs in the main stream schools.

Observations.

I make the following observations:

- Nearly all of the offenders I supervised had experienced serious problems with regard to their schooling and as a result had opted out of school by year 9 or in some cases even earlier. It was an exception for young offenders to have completed year 10 level.
- Almost without exception the young offenders had attended government schools possibly indicating a lower socio-economic status of the family.
- Dysfunctional home life or family break-up and consequent lack of adequate parental supervision were contributing factors to the non attendance at school.
- The inability on the part of many parents to employ suitable strategies to counter the acting-out adolescent behaviour and consequently their reduced capacity to insist on their child's school attendance.

- The failure on the part of the school to engage the young person in a suitable learning program that would interest and encourage the young person to want to attend school.

Comment.

Although the above observations refer back to my experience of some years past I believe that they would still be applicable even today. I know that this was the situation as far back as 1966 when I first started as a Social Worker with responsibility for the supervision of State Wards in the care of the Social Welfare Department.

The question must be asked, what if anything has changed.

Because of the lack of a school program or suitable alternative for disaffected youth they are left to roam the streets and associate with other disaffected youth and school absenters.

The Education Department in the Outer Eastern Region attempted to address this problem with a program for Years 7 – 10 which had smaller size classes and specialist staff. This program successfully catered for the slow learners and others who were “problem students” in the main stream schools.

Unfortunately students who were referred to this special education program were limited to only three months at the end of which time they returned to the main stream school from which they had been previously referred. I noticed in some cases the advancement made by students in the short time and their positive change of attitude towards school and learning. Unfortunately this positive change of attitude was not continued when the student returned to the main stream school after so short a time.

I am not aware whether this specialized educational program still exists in the Outer Eastern Region but I believe that this kind of specialized education program caters for the needs of children who have difficulty with main stream schools.

I do not know how closely the Department of Human Service's Child Protection Unit monitors school attendance and progress of children under its supervision and care. Closer liaison between the Department of Education and Early Childhood Services and Children's Protection Services, if this does not already exist, would provide the opportunity for early intervention with families considered to be at risk and possibly avoid costly and protracted court proceedings.

Recommendations.

1. Consideration should be given to setting up a special liaison unit within the Child Protection Services Unit the purpose being to intervene at an early stage and to assist families with their children's non-attendance at school. The provision of extra resources and support services should be made available to socially disadvantaged families.
2. If not already in existence The Department of Human Services should consider the establishment of parent support and education programs. This could be done in conjunction with the Community Health Centres which are located in most regions.
3. Community Health Centres have a multi-disciplinary staff of professionals who are able to respond to the different physical and social health needs of the community. The Centres have flexibility to develop programs that would address the needs of different sections of the community which they serve. A close liaison between these Centres and the Child Protection Services Unit of the Department of Human Services would help utilize these community resources for the benefit of the families and children who are in need of greater support. I believe this is a resource that has been under utilized by the Child Protection Unit of the Department of Human Services.

4. The Ardoch Youth Support Foundation is an education support program with a proven track record and which already exists in the south eastern Region. It would seem to me to be highly desirable to have this resource available in all regions. The establishment of this kind of program would certainly help to address the educational disadvantage that presently exists with a great number of children in our community.
5. Youth Connect which is an organization that helps parents help their children get access to vocational education and training (VET). Like Ardoch Youth Support Foundation the Youth Connect also serves the south eastern metropolitan area. These services should be a resource that is available to all regions of the State.

A close connection and co-ordination with these programs and their introduction into all regions of the State would be to the benefit of the clients of the Child Protection Services

6. The Department of Human Services should commission research to be conducted by the Social Work Departments of the Universities to assess the resources that are available in the different regions with a view to determining their effectiveness and whether the resources are fully utilized by the Child Protection Services.

Useful Websites:

Ardoch Youth Foundation – www.ardoch.asn.au

Youth Connect – www.youthconnect.com.au

TAFE – www.tafe-australia.org

Department of Education and Early Childhood Development Services -
www.education.vic.gov.au