

Submission

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Submission to the
Productivity
Commission on the
Schools Workforce

We would like to thank UnitingCare Children, Young People and Families staff who participated in consultations and made other contributions as part of the preparation of this submission.



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About UnitingCare Children, Young People and Families

UnitingCare Children, Young People and Families is a service group of UnitingCare NSW.ACT and part of the Uniting Church in Australia. Our concern for social justice and the needs of children, young people and families who are disadvantaged informs the way we serve and represent people and communities. The Service Group is comprised of:

- UnitingCare Burnside
- UnitingCare Unifam Counselling and Mediation
- UnitingCare Children's Services
- UnitingCare Disability
- The Institute of Family Practice, a registered training organisation.

Together these organisations form one of the largest providers of services to support children and families in NSW. In 2009/2010 UnitingCare Children, Young People and Families provided services to over 30,000 children, young people and their families.

This submission draws on the experience of UnitingCare Burnside.

About UnitingCare Burnside

UnitingCare Burnside (Burnside) is a leading child and family organisation in New South Wales, with over 80 programs across metropolitan, regional and rural communities. Our purpose is to provide innovative and quality programs and advocacy to break the cycle of disadvantage that affects vulnerable children, young people and families.

We provide services across the continuum, ranging from preventative programs such as supported playgroups; early intervention programs such as Brighter Futures; intensive family support programs; out-of-homecare programs and aftercare programs.

Burnside's experience as a child and family service provider gives us insight into the factors that often lead to poor educational outcomes for disadvantaged children and young people and effective strategies in building student engagement.

Executive Summary

UnitingCare Children Young People and Families (UCCYFP) 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.

Education, training and supporting schools leadership and workforce is a critical part of creating an education system that is effective for disadvantaged students.

Research on strategies to build student engagement consistently identifies the importance of ongoing professional development to equip teachers to implement positive behaviour management strategies. This is most effective when it is implemented at the whole-school level (as opposed to one-off attendance of a training workshop by one or two staff members). Professional development on positive behaviour management also needs to be incorporated into initial teacher training, as is occurring in New Zealand.

The approach taken by the leadership team is critical is determining the culture of the school and the extent to which it is inclusive of vulnerable children and young people. Current Australian policy directions to give greater autonomy to school principals could entrench disparities in the extent to which schools are inclusive of, and work to engage, disadvantaged students. Schools will determine individual goals and approaches which may or may not include engagement of disadvantaged students as a priority. In Victoria, student engagement and wellbeing is one of the three key student outcomes that schools are accountable for under the *School and Network Accountability and Improvement* framework. This approach has merit as it recognises that student engagement and wellbeing goes hand in hand with student learning and performance.

Currently, in Australia there is considerable investment at national and state/territory levels in initiatives aimed at improving educational initiatives for disadvantaged students. However, many of the approaches being implemented in Australia have not been evaluated or evaluation results are not publically available. This highlights the need to improve review, evaluation, and public transparency of programs designed to reduce educational disadvantage, including workforce-related initiatives.

Summary of Recommendations

1. That in considering issues relating to increasing school autonomy, the Productivity Commission pays particular attention to strengthening the accountability of schools for student engagement and wellbeing.
2. The Productivity Commission should provide advice to the Council of Australian Governments on strengthening processes for the review, evaluation, continuous improvement, and public transparency of initiatives designed to improve outcomes for disadvantaged students.
3. That the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) develops agreed national standards for the provision of welfare in schools.
4. The Productivity Commission should provide advice to COAG on addressing gaps in the collection and dissemination of information/data on:
 - the availability and distribution of school welfare personnel and Aboriginal support staff
 - monitoring and evaluation of programs designed to improve outcomes for disadvantaged students
 - school suspension and exclusion
 - student attendance and retention.
5. That in considering workforce training and professional development issues, the Productivity Commission pay particular attention to the need to build the capacity of teachers and support staff to implement positive behaviour management strategies, within both:
 - pre-service training
 - ongoing professional development.

1. Background

UnitingCare Children Young People and Families (UCCYFP) welcomes the Productivity Commission's study on workforce issues for schools. UCCYFP 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.

UCCYFP is concerned about increasing levels of school suspension and exclusion and the growing trend of children being suspended at a young age, including the early primary years (see data sheet on NSW school suspensions at Appendix A). We are particularly concerned that the use of school suspension impacts disproportionately on children and young people from disadvantaged backgrounds, with a disability, and those in out-of-home care. These students often experience a repeated pattern of school suspension, which intensifies academic difficulties and disengagement from school, and paves the way to early school drop-out.

Training, professional development and supporting the schools workforce is a critical part of creating an education system that is effective for disadvantaged students.

Research on strategies to build student engagement consistently identifies the importance of ongoing professional development to equip teachers to implement positive behaviour management strategies. This submission outlines several examples of successful approaches in providing professional development on positive behaviour management approaches.

The submission also comments on issues relating to:

- school leadership and autonomy
- monitoring, evaluation and accountability of programs for disadvantaged students
- effective approaches for reducing educational disadvantage
- availability of school welfare personnel
- information and data gaps.

2. School Leadership and autonomy

The Productivity Commission's Issues Paper seeks feedback on whether sufficient policy attention has been paid to school leadership and its contribution to education outcomes. The Paper also invites comment on the impact of increasing autonomy for schools and the governance and regulatory arrangements needed to support greater school autonomy.

UCCYPF works with a wide range of primary and high schools across disadvantaged areas of NSW. Our experience is that the approach taken by the leadership team is critical in determining the culture of the school and the extent to which it is inclusive of vulnerable children and young people.

The attitudes and approach taken by the Principal and Deputy Principal are a key factor in shaping, for example:

- the level of parental involvement in the school
- the extent to which the school has developed collaborative relationships with community agencies
- the extent to which the school provides support to students and families through key transitions, including starting school and the transition from primary to high school.

Research on school reform in the United States confirms the importance of school leadership in driving change. A Chicago study of low-performing elementary schools concluded that five essential supports work together as a system to transform low-performing schools. They found that leadership is the first support and the driver of four other essential supports: (1) instructional guidance; (2) teacher professional capacity; (3) school climate; and (4) parent and community ties.¹

Current Australian policy directions to give greater autonomy to school principals could entrench disparities in the extent to which schools are inclusive of, and work to engage, disadvantaged students. School will determine

¹ Bryk et al, 2009, cited in Weiss, H, Lopez, E. and Rosenberg, H., 2010, *Beyond Random Acts: Family School and Community Engagement as an Integral Part of Educational Reform*, Harvard Family Research Project.

individual goals and approaches which may or may not include engagement of disadvantaged students as a priority.

In Victoria, student engagement and wellbeing is one of the three key student outcomes that schools and regions are accountable for under the *School and Network Accountability and Improvement* framework (alongside student learning and student pathways and transitions).² Measures of student engagement and wellbeing include, for example, students' ratings of their connectedness to school and parents' perceptions of school climate. This approach has merit as it recognises that student engagement and wellbeing goes hand in hand with student learning and performance.

Recommendation 1

In considering issues relating to increasing school autonomy, the Productivity Commission pays particular attention to strengthening the accountability of schools for student engagement and wellbeing.

3. Monitoring, evaluation and accountability of programs for disadvantaged students

The Issues Paper seeks feedback on whether there is adequate focus on the review and evaluation of programs, including the dissemination of evaluation results.

UCCYPF has recently conducted a review of policies and programs approaches being implemented in Australia and overseas relevant to improving engagement of disadvantaged students. Currently, in Australia there is considerable investment at both national and state/territory levels in initiatives aimed at improving educational initiatives for disadvantaged students. However, many of the approaches have not been evaluated or evaluation results are not publically available.³

² Department of Education and Childhood Development, *Accountability and Improvement Framework for Victorian Government Schools 2011*
http://www.eduweb.vic.gov.au/edulibrary/public/account/operate/saif2011/Accountability_and_Improvement_Framework_Guidelines_2011_FINAL.pdf

³ Although in South Australia and Victoria there does appear to be a strong focus on ongoing monitoring, evaluation and continuous improvement (including dissemination of findings)

In NSW, for example, the *Priority Schools Program* (incorporating Priority Schools and Priority Action Schools funding) is the NSW Government's key measure to improve educational outcomes for students in disadvantaged schools. In addition to the resources provided to all Priority Schools, 101 Priority Schools that are most affected by the impact of high densities of low socio-economic status receive *Priority Action Schools* (PAS) Program resources. All NSW schools that receive funds through PAS also receive funding through the COAG Low Socio-Economic School Communities National Partnership. PAS schools work to improve teaching and learning, developing specialised teaching programs and new approaches to staffing and resource allocation.

However, there is limited publically available information on how the *Priority Schools Program* is implemented or outcomes achieved, or the extent to which the approaches have been adjusted in implementation of the Low Socio-Economic Schools Partnership. For example, the *Priority Schools Program* objectives include strengthening partnerships between schools, parents/ caregivers and community agencies, but it is unclear how much attention is paid to this area in practice.

Dare to Lead is an example of a school leadership initiative that has been evaluated, but evaluation results have not been publically disseminated. *Dare to Lead* is a Commonwealth funded national project with a focus on improving educational outcomes for Indigenous students. *Dare to Lead* began in 2000 and involves the four peak principals associations. Currently over 53% of all Australian schools are signed on as *Dare to Lead* members.

Each member school is connected to a cluster of others schools in the same region. The clusters of schools are led by experienced school principals who identify the professional development needs of their colleagues. State coordinators support the work of school clusters.

Dare to Lead schools report on two Indigenous specific education outcomes – Year 5 literacy and Year 12 completion. Schools also report on activity in a range of areas such as consultation with the Indigenous community and inclusion of Indigenous curriculum perspectives. The Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations commissioned a formal evaluation of *Dare to Lead* in 2007 but there is no publically available report of the findings.

The examples outlined above highlight the need to improve the review, evaluation, and public transparency of educational programs designed to reduce educational disadvantage.

Recommendation 2

The Productivity Commission should provide advice to the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) on strengthening processes for review, evaluation, continuous improvement, and public transparency of initiatives designed to improve outcomes for disadvantaged students.

4. School welfare personnel

Limited data is publicly available to enable comparison of state/territory arrangements for funding and delivery of school welfare support. For example, in NSW there is no publically available data on the number or distribution of Aboriginal Support Officers and Home School Liaison Officers.

Also, there is considerable variation in how the student welfare system is organised across state and territory jurisdictions. In NSW, the minimum qualifications for a school counsellor are that they be a teacher who has a degree in psychology and post-graduate qualifications in school counselling. Generally, counsellors work across a cluster of schools.

In some other states such as Victoria, the student welfare coordinator is more likely to be a teacher who has elected to do student support work (usually a full-time or near full-time position).⁴ The student support team might include a school nurse, youth worker, and chaplain; a guidance officer, psychologist and/or social worker also work across a cluster of schools.

The experience of our practitioners is that, in NSW, school counsellors are very stretched, have limited time at each school, and often students have to wait for a considerable period to see a counsellor. In 2008, there were 790.8 full time equivalent school counsellor positions established in NSW public schools.⁵ The

⁴Chamberlain, C. and Mackenzie, D., 2004, Youth Homelessness: Four Policy Proposals, AHURI Final Report No 69, [RMIT-NATSEM Research Centre for the Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute, www.ahuri.edu.au/publications](http://www.ahuri.edu.au/publications)

⁵ Children and Young People Aged 9-14 Years in NSW: The Missing years, NSW Government Response, [http://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/Prod/parliament/committee.nsf/0/854a280c28be00a8ca25762600226dae/\\$FILE/Government%20response%20Middle%20Years%20Inquiry%20050310.pdf](http://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/Prod/parliament/committee.nsf/0/854a280c28be00a8ca25762600226dae/$FILE/Government%20response%20Middle%20Years%20Inquiry%20050310.pdf)

response to a question in parliament in 2008 indicated that the allocation would remain the same for 2009 and 2010.⁶ Further, information contained in a report on youth homelessness indicates that the number of school counsellors in NSW government schools has remained static at 790 since (at least) 2004 despite substantial increases in the student population and the extension of the school leaving age.⁷

It is notable that in the 2008-2009 State Budget, the Victorian Government allocated \$33.2 million (over four years) to expand and enhance the Student Support Services Program to ensure that services are targeted to areas of highest need.⁸

Also, in South Australia, the allocation of school counsellors to primary schools is determined by an 'Index of Educational Disadvantage' as well as the number of student enrolments. Schools ranked as level 1 on the Index of Educational Disadvantage (the highest level) with an enrolment of 135 or more students are allocated a full time counsellor.⁹

Chamberlain and Mackenzie argue that all schools require an experienced welfare team to provide ongoing support and counselling for students at risk.¹⁰ The welfare team must have the capacity to engage parents/carers as well as students (for example through home visits) and the capacity to support some students and their families for an extended period. They highlight the need for national standards for student welfare in schools with agreement by state and territory education ministers around national goals for the provision of welfare in schools.

Recommendation 3

That COAG develops agreed national standards for the provision of welfare in schools.

⁶

<http://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/prod/lc/qalc.nsf/962613d55d0cee2aca257146008027f7/635bc2a9de6394fdca25750c001f666b?OpenDocument>

⁷ Chamberlain, C. and Mackenzie, D., op cit.

⁸ Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2010, *Strengthening networks and school communities, Guidelines for student support staff*, Victoria, p 4 ,

www.education.vic.gov.au/healthwellbeing/support/ssso.htm

⁹ <http://www.decs.sa.gov.au/hrstaff/default.asp?id=40974&navgrp=4036>

¹⁰ Ibid

5. Information and data gaps

The previous discussion has identified several gaps in dissemination of information:

- limited publically available information on state/territory funding and delivery of school welfare support
- poor dissemination of information on implementation and evaluation of programs designed to improve educational outcomes for disadvantaged students.

UCCPYF is also concerned that there is limited publicly available data relating to trends in school suspension and exclusion. For example, the NSW Department of Education and Communities only publishes data on long suspensions (five or more days).¹¹ There is no publically available data on:

- the number of students suspended for four or less days
- patterns of repeat suspension
- the incidence of suspension for specific groups such as students with special needs.

There is also limited publically available data on suspension and exclusion in other states/territories. Indeed, South Australia is the only other state/territory that publishes some data on exclusions on its website.¹²

In contrast, in the United Kingdom, the Department for Education publishes comprehensive data relating to both 'fixed term' and permanent exclusions, including analysis relating to: age; gender; ethnicity; special needs students; and trends in exclusions over time.¹³

There are also deficiencies in the collection of data on school attendance. The House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs has recently published the '*Doing Time-Time for Doing*' report on Indigenous youth in the criminal justice system.¹⁴ The report recognises the

¹¹ See https://www.det.nsw.edu.au/detresources/suspexpul2009_oEuDLGhsYu.pdf

¹² See

<http://www.sa.gov.au/upload/franchise/Education.%20skills%20and%20learning/2010DECSBehaviourManagement.pdf>

¹³ See <http://www.education.gov.uk/rsgateway/DB/SFR/s001016/sfr17-2011.pdf>

¹⁴ House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs, *Doing Time – Time for Doing: Indigenous youth in the criminal justice system*, Canberra.

strong link between involvement of Indigenous people in the criminal justice system and low levels of educational attainment. The Committee recommends that the Commonwealth Minister for Education review how school attendance rates are measured to ensure that data collected can accurately inform strategies to increase attendance and retention rates and monitor progress in these areas.

Recommendation 4

The Productivity Commission should provide advice to COAG on addressing gaps in the collection and dissemination of information/data on:

- the availability and distribution of school welfare personnel and Aboriginal support staff
- monitoring and evaluation of programs designed to improve outcomes for disadvantaged students
- school suspension and exclusion
- student attendance and retention.

6. Professional development

This section of our submission outlines examples of successful approaches to professional development on positive behaviour management strategies.

Research indicates that professional development is most effective when it is implemented at the whole-school level (as opposed to one-off attendance of a training workshop by one or two staff members).¹⁵ Collective participation, which involves professional development designed for groups of teachers from the same school, tends to create more active learning and is more likely to be applied in the workplace. Professional development is also more likely to be effective if it is sustained over time.

Professional development on positive behaviour management also needs to be incorporated into initial teacher training, as is occurring in New Zealand (see below).

¹⁵ American Educational Research Association, 2005, *Teaching Teachers: Professional Development To Improve Student Achievement*, Research points, Volume 3, Issue 1,

6.1 School-wide Positive Behaviour Interventions and Supports

School-wide Positive Behaviour Interventions and Supports (SWPBIS) is 'an organised and tailored system of strategies that support social and learning outcomes for students, whilst preventing problem behaviour'.¹⁶ To address issues of sustainability, SWPBIS promotes an explicit, structured, team-based, problem-solving process for developing schools' capacities to assess and address behaviour issues.

SWPBIS was established by the United States (US) Department of Education and has been running in Oregon for 16 years. In 2008, nearly 8,000 schools in the US were in varying stages of adopting SWPBIS.¹⁷ SWPBIS is also now being implemented in more than 200 schools in Queensland, as well as many schools in Tasmania, Victoria and the Northern Territory. NSW has implemented an adapted version of SWPBS in the Western Sydney and South West Sydney regions (called *Positive Behaviour for Learning*).

SWPBIS emphasises the establishment of organisational supports that give school personnel capacity to use effective positive behaviour management interventions in a consistent way. These supports include:

- a committed school leadership team comprised of staff, parents and community representatives
- a trained SWPBS coach to assist the school in implementation
- the school principal as an active participant.

SWPBIS uses a multi-tiered approach that includes school-wide, targeted, and intensive intervention levels. The school team starts with the implementation of a primary or universal prevention level of support and builds the remaining intervention levels over a three to five year period until a full continuum of student support needs are addressed.

The universal element of SWPBIS is a proactive approach to behaviour management which aims to prevent problem behaviour in all areas of the school so that the need for reactive responding is greatly reduced. This involves systematic teaching of appropriate social behaviour – defining core social expectations (for example, be respectful, be responsible, be safe) and explicitly teaching the behaviours and skills needed to meet these expectations

¹⁶ www.pbis.org/school/what_is_swpbs.aspx

¹⁷ SWPBIS has also been implemented in Canada, Iceland, Norway and New Zealand.

Several randomised control studies of SWPBIS in the United States have shown not only a sustained drop in disciplinary referrals and suspensions but also corresponding improvements in student literacy and numeracy.¹⁸ The evaluation of the adapted version of SWPBIS in Western Sydney found that the program has made significant positive changes to the capacity of schools to respond effectively to students' behaviour.¹⁹

6.2 New Zealand Positive Behaviour for Learning Action Plan

The New Zealand Ministry for Education is currently implementing a major shift in the management of disruptive behaviour in schools. *Positive Behaviour for Learning* provides an umbrella for a number of evidence-based programs that vary in intensity from universal programs directed at all students, to highly intensive programs targeted at children showing severe and persistent conduct difficulties. The New Zealand *Positive Behaviour for Learning* initiative is based on the *School-wide Positive Behaviour Interventions and Support Program* (outlined in section 6.1).

The Ministry for Education has developed a five year action plan to guide implementation of *Positive Behaviour for Learning*.²⁰ The Plan includes a strong focus on professional development to build the capacity of teachers to implement positive behaviour management strategies. This includes:

- inclusion of positive behaviour management in initial teacher education
- establishment of regional Implementation Teams to provide training in schools in the Positive Behaviour for Learning approach.

6.3 Positive Partnerships

The Positive Partnerships: supporting school aged students on the autism spectrum project delivers two components of the Helping Children with Autism package funded by the Commonwealth Department of Education, Employment

¹⁸ Nelson, J., 1996, cited in Ministry of Education, 2009, *Conduct Problems Effective Programs for 3- 7 year olds*, Wellington, [www.moh.govt.nz/moh.nsf/pagesmh/9995/\\$File/conduct-problems-effective-programmes-for-3-7-year-olds.pdf](http://www.moh.govt.nz/moh.nsf/pagesmh/9995/$File/conduct-problems-effective-programmes-for-3-7-year-olds.pdf)

¹⁹ Mooney, M. Dobia, B., Barker, K., Power, A., Watson, K., and Yeung, S., 2008, *Positive Behaviour for Learning: Investigating the transfer of a United States system into the New South Wales Department of Education and Training Western Sydney Region schools Report*, Centre for Educational Research The University of Western Sydney.

²⁰ www.minedu.govt.nz/~media/MinEdu/Files/TheMinistry/PositiveBehaviourForLearning/PositiveBehaviourForLearningActionPlan.pdf

and Workplace Relations.²¹ The aim of both components is to improve educational outcomes for school aged children with autism spectrum disorders (ASD). The two components are:

- professional development for teachers and other school staff who are working with students with ASD, and
- workshops and information sessions for parents and carers of school aged children with ASD.

Positive Partnerships is delivered by the Australian Autism and Training Consortium, comprising Autism Spectrum Australia, University of Canberra, Autism Association of South Australia and the Western Australian Department of Education and Training. The initiative commenced in 2008 and the current funding arrangement will finish at the end of 2011.

The program's approach to professional development has a focus on building schools' capacity and sustaining learning following the training. Participants establish a professional network and have access to local expertise following the training course.

An independent evaluation of *Positive Partnerships* found that it is an appropriately designed program which is evidence based and reflects good practice.²² The evaluation found that the program is making significant progress in developing a national pool of teachers and other school staff with knowledge of working with children with ASD.

The evaluation found that *Positive Partnerships* has had some success in fostering an 'autism friendly culture' in schools. This was most likely to occur where there is a whole-school approach, including engagement of the school principal. The evaluators note that implementation of Positive Partnerships has been beneficial for students with disabilities other than ASD as many of the tools and strategies are broadly applicable. Specific examples included improved communication with parents/carers, transition planning, and a commitment to maintaining individual education plans.

²¹ www.autismtraining.com.au/public/index.cfm?returnTo=%2Findex.cfm

²² www.deewr.gov.au/Schooling/Programs/Documents/PositivePartnerships.pdf

The evaluators comment that there is growing need for *Positive Partnerships*, based on:

- the increasing number of children being diagnosed with ASD
- the current deficit in knowledge about providing a learning environment that supports good educational outcomes for children with ASD
- the educational benefits to children with ASD from a nationally consistent approach to professional development and parent/carer workshops and content management.

To achieve broad coverage of the program, the evaluators recommend changes to the delivery model including: train-the-trainer local delivery; increasing online delivery; whole school delivery; and module-base delivery. They recommend that the program be provided nationally with Australian Government funding.

Recommendation 5

That in considering workforce training and professional development issues, the Productivity Commission pay particular attention to the need to build the capacity of teachers and support staff to implement positive behaviour management strategies, within both:

- pre-service training
- ongoing professional development.

Appendix 1

Suspensions in NSW Schools

The NSW Department of Education and Training (DET) enables the school principal or relieving principal to temporarily remove a student from school for up to 4 school days (a “short suspension”) or in instances of serious or sustained misbehaviour for between 5 and 20 school days (a “long suspension”). A summary of long suspension data only is published by DET on an annual basis.

Between 2005 and 2009, total long suspensions for NSW students across all grades (K to 12) have increased by 32.7% from 11,216 to 14,887. Physical violence and persistent misbehaviour have accounted for between 83 and 87 percent of long suspensions issued over the four year period. In 2009 the average length of long suspension was 12.6 school days.

Table 1: NSW DET long suspensions in year bands - 2009

Year	No. students receiving long suspensions	% of total long suspensions*	Long suspensions as a % of student enrolments
K-6	2,043	20%	0.7%
7-10	8,139	75%	4.9%
11-12	688	5%	0.9%
All grades	10,878		1.5%

Source: NSW DET (2010) Long Suspension and Expulsion Summary 2009.

* Total long suspensions include students placed on long suspension on more than one occasion.

Disaggregated long suspension data for 2009 highlights a number of issues of concern:

- As shown in Table 1, 2,043 primary school students (K-6) in NSW received suspensions ranging from 5 to 20 school days.
- In 2009, 26.6% of all students (K-12) long suspended (2,894 students) received more than one long suspension in a single year raising concerns about the efficacy of interventions.
- There are sharp variations in the number of students receiving long suspensions as a percentage of school enrolments across DET regions.

For example, in Northern Sydney 0.4% of students were long suspended in 2009 compared with 2.7% in Western NSW, 2.6% in New England and 2.1% in the Hunter Central Coast region.

- Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander students are significantly overrepresented in suspensions data. They are 3 ½ times more likely to be suspended than non-indigenous students and account for 22% of total long suspensions issued. In 2009, 2,286 or 5.6% of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander students received long suspensions.

The continued overrepresentation of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander students in school suspension data is of particular concern to UnitingCare Children, Young People and Families in the context of government commitments to 'Closing the Gap'. In 2006, an issues paper produced by the NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group (AECG) for the NSW Government drawing on 2003 data showed that for Aboriginal males in Years 7-10 there were 629 short suspensions for every 1,000 males compared with 188 suspensions per 1,000 non-Aboriginal males.

The AECG Paper pointed to worrying increases in the use of both short and long suspensions in the early years of school. In the years from Kindergarten to Year 2, the rate of suspension for Aboriginal females is 9 times higher for short suspensions and 6 times higher for long suspensions than for non-Aboriginal females. Aboriginal males in years K to 2 receive four times as many short suspensions and twice as many long suspensions as their non-Aboriginal male counterparts.