Preventing Student Homelessness and Early School Leaving: Putting into Practice School and Community Collaboration

The Youth Support Coordinator Initiative Evaluation Report

Youth Program

Department of Families, Youth and Community Care
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Acknowledgments

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Table of Contents

Glossary of Terms ........................................................................................................ iv

1.0 Executive Summary .............................................................................................. 1
  1.1 Some key findings ................................................................................................. 1
  1.2 Recommendations ................................................................................................. 2

2.0 Introduction ........................................................................................................... 5
  2.1 Background to the Youth Support Coordinator Initiative ..................................... 5
  2.2 YSC Purpose and Aims ........................................................................................ 7
  2.3 The Projects .......................................................................................................... 7
  2.4 This Report ........................................................................................................... 8

3.0 Evaluation of the YSC Initiative .......................................................................... 9
  3.1 Background .......................................................................................................... 9
  3.2 Evaluation Committee .......................................................................................... 9
  3.3 YSC Network ........................................................................................................ 9
  3.4 Evaluation Aims ................................................................................................... 9
  3.5 Evaluation Methodology ....................................................................................... 10

4.0 What are the identified issues surrounding early school leaving and student homelessness? ........................................................................................................ 12

5.0 To what extent has the Initiative assisted young people to remain at school and to maintain a safe, supportive environment? ................................................. 14
  5.1 Impact of the Initiative ......................................................................................... 14
  5.2 Limitations of the YSC Initiative ........................................................................ 17

6.0 How effective has the Initiative been in delivering key outputs? ...... 21
  6.1 Key Output 1: Identifying Young People in the Target Group ............................ 21
  6.2 Key Output 2: Establishment of Protocols .......................................................... 23
  6.3 Key Output 3: Referrals and Referral Networks .................................................. 25
  6.4 Key Output 4: Dissemination of Information ...................................................... 27
  6.5 Key Output 5: Linking Schools, Community Services and the Wider Community 28

7.0 What factors contribute to the success of projects in delivering key outputs? ................................................................................................................. 31
  7.1 The Active Support of the School Leadership ..................................................... 31
  7.2 Collaborative Approaches to Working with Schools ........................................ 32
  7.3 Community Agency Operating in Schools ......................................................... 33
  7.4 The Ability to Work With Families ..................................................................... 35
  7.5 Working Outside of the Physical Boundaries of the School and School Hours ... 35
  7.6 Flexible, Holistic Client Driven Service Delivery ................................................. 36
  7.7 Coordinated Service Delivery ............................................................................ 36
  7.8 Skills and Knowledge ......................................................................................... 37

8.0 What issues are there in relation to the future development of the Initiative? ................................................................................................................. 38
  8.1 Purpose and Aims ............................................................................................... 38
  8.2 Targeting ............................................................................................................. 39
  8.3 Inter-Departmental Coordination and Collaboration ........................................ 41
  8.4 DFYCC Program Management and Development ........................................... 42
8.5 Management of YSC Services ........................................................................................................ 44
8.6 Indigenous Young People ........................................................................................................... 45
8.7 Resourcing, Support and Funding ........................................................................................... 46

9.0 Conclusion .................................................................................................................................. 51
Glossary of Terms

The definitions of a number of key concepts employed throughout this report are the subject of considerable academic debate. For the purposes of this evaluation the following definitions apply:

**Youth Homelessness**
The term ‘youth homelessness’ draws upon the Chamberlain and Mackenzie (1998) operational definition and refers to young people who share one or more of the following characteristics:

- are without conventional accommodation (eg living on the streets, sleeping in parks, squatting in derelict buildings, or using cars or railway carriages for temporary shelter); and/or
- move around frequently from one form of temporary shelter to another, including: young people using emergency accommodation including youth refuges and medium term housing;
- are residing temporarily with friends or relatives; and those using boarding houses on an occasional or intermittent basis; and
- are living in single boarding rooms on a medium to long term basis or in caravan parks where there is no security of tenure provided by a lease.

**At Risk of Homelessness**
The term ‘at risk of homelessness’ draws upon the Supported Accommodation Assistance Act 1994 and a definition discussed by Chamberlain and Mackenzie (1998) and refers to young people who are in situations where there is a risk of becoming homeless. This would include circumstances that threaten or adversely affect the adequacy, safety and security of a young person’s housing. Where adequacy refers to adequate personal amenities and the economic and social support that a home normally affords (Supported Accommodation Assistance Act 1994). This would specifically include frequent family conflict, domestic violence and housing which is affected or threatened by physical, sexual and emotional abuse.

**Homelessness Early Intervention and Prevention**
Homelessness is best understood as a ‘career’ process with critical transition and potential exit points marked by the first break from home followed by a permanent break with home and then entry into chronic homelessness (Chamberlain and Mackenzie, 1998: 53-59). Early intervention refers to strategies to help young people as soon as possible after they first become homeless. Prevention refers to strategies aimed at preventing homelessness including strategies aimed at young people who are perceptibly at risk of homelessness; whole-of-school strategies aimed at all students; and strategies targeting groups with higher likelihood of becoming homeless (Chamberlain and Mackenzie, 1998: 115).

**Early School Leaving**
The definitions of concepts used throughout the report relating to early school leaving, including ‘early school leaving’, ‘at risk of early school leaving’ and ‘early intervention and prevention of early school leaving’, draw principally upon the work of Margaret Batten and Jean Russell (1995) and Michael Brooks et al (1997). The term ‘early school leaving’ refers to young people in both compulsory and non-compulsory secondary education who have become permanently disconnected from school or other formal education as a result of personal or family difficulties.
These difficulties may be the result of individual, family, school or socio-economic factors either separately or in combination.

**At Risk of Early School Leaving**

The term 'at risk of early school leaving' refers to young people who are in situations where there is a significant risk that they will become permanently disconnected from school or other formal education as a result of personal and family difficulties. This would include all individual, family, school and socio-economic circumstances that threaten or adversely affect a young person’s connection to school or other formal education.

**Early Intervention of Early School Leaving**

Early intervention of early school leaving refers to all measures to support young people immediately following the development of problems or student behaviours that threaten the connection with school or other formal education.

**Prevention of Early School Leaving**

Prevention refers to strategies aimed at preventing the development of personal and family difficulties that threaten the connection with school or other formal education. Prevention addresses the underlying causes of early school leaving and may include community, parent and whole-of-school strategies.
1.0 Executive Summary

The Youth Support Coordinator Initiative was established in July 1997 as a pilot program in response to a growing body of evidence, which indicated the need for collaboration between schools and community services in addressing issues of student homelessness and early school leaving.

In developing and designing the Initiative, the Office of Youth Affairs drew upon the recommendations of a number of national inquires as well as key influential work in the subject area by Mackenzie and Chamberlain (1995) and Crane and Brannock (1996).

A budget of $1.9M over three years was approved in 1996/97 and allocated to 13 services around the State, with a target of 35 participating schools. Whilst it is difficult to measure with certainty the extent of the target population in the 35 schools, it is possible to arrive at a conservative figure based on existing research. It is estimated that there are around 350 homeless students in the 35 target schools in any one week with between 3,250 to 4,600 students at risk of homelessness at any one time, including 1,300 to 1,950 who are seriously at risk. There are likely to be between 200 to 800 under-age school leavers with an estimated 2000 12 and 14 year old students who are at risk of leaving early.

The evaluation of the Initiative was conducted at a point in time where most services had been operating for up to twenty months. Funded services have consistently been informed it is likely that funding under the Initiative will continue, provided the evaluation demonstrates the Initiative is operating effectively and it remains a state and regional priority.

This report provides information on the effectiveness of the Initiative in assisting young people to remain at school and to maintain or develop safe, supportive home environments. It examines the effectiveness of the program in developing key outputs, and the critical factors that contributed to the success of projects in achieving these outputs.

The evaluation concluded, quite clearly, that the Initiative has been successful and should be maintained as a key program for the prevention of, and early intervention in, early school leaving and student homelessness.

1.1 Some key findings

- The Youth Support Coordinator (YSC) Initiative is viewed as having been highly successful in assisting young people who are identified as being at risk of early school leaving and student homelessness. Principals, school contacts, DFYCC regional offices and Youth Support Coordinators were resoundingly positive in declaring the Initiative as significantly successful. This was also evidenced through data collection systems.

- The model of partnership between schools and community based agencies that form the basis of the Initiative has been a key success factor. YSC’s are able to utilise the benefits of being part of the ‘first to know’ position of schools as well as capitalise on their position within the network of community resources/responses.
The evidence of a range of national inquiries, as well as academic research in the area of youth homelessness and early school leaving, points to the establishment of school and community partnerships as being of vital importance - they also note the very real difficulties in achieving this outcome. The YSC Initiative has been extraordinarily successful in this regard.

The majority of services believed there was a critical need for a formal memorandum of understanding between the two departments. The importance of policy and administrative collaboration at a State level has also been articulated in a number of national inquiries.

The active support of the school leadership is a vital ingredient as is the degree of congruence between the individual school philosophy and that of the YSC project.

The key issues surrounding early school leaving and youth homelessness were found to be consistent with those identified through a range of other studies. YSC’s and school contacts identified family, socio-economic, individual and school factors as being of significance. Family conflict was cited as the major issue surrounding youth homelessness and early school leaving.

The capacity of the YSC Initiative to work with families, particularly outside of the school and outside of school hours, is critical to the success of the program.

YSC’s are utilising a range of interventions, strategies and practices including individual and family counselling, family mediation, group work, information dissemination, peer support programs, in-service training and referrals.

The Initiative has had mixed success in improving the identification of young people in the target group with little support for the use of student surveys as a primary tool. Strategies such as improved referral systems within schools as well as staff training and student peer support were preferred.

The process for developing formal protocols between schools and government and community agencies was also viewed as problematic with many YSC’s citing the absence of a formal protocol between DFYCC and Queensland Education as creating a policy vacuum within which they struggled to establish the legitimacy of other relevant protocols.

Youth Support Coordinators were well positioned as expert points of referral for schools with the majority of referrals being to counselling services (33%) followed by education and support programs (23%).

The marked success of the Initiative needs to be considered in the context of the short time that it has been in operation and it’s relatively small size and limited resources. This means that the Youth Support Coordinator Initiative has a largely untapped potential to more fully address the major problems of student homelessness and early school leaving across the state.

1.2 Recommendations

A number of recommendations have been made which primarily address the need for sharpening the Initiative’s focus and development.

1. The Youth Support Coordinator Initiative be maintained as a key program in the prevention of, and early intervention to, early school leaving and student homelessness and that it be enhanced to include other identified areas of high need as well as other high need schools within the current catchment area. That all Youth Support Coordinator positions be full time positions.
2. That the Program Guidelines be rewritten in collaboration with key stakeholders including:
   - a clear rationale, aims, objectives, outcomes and outputs;
   - standard data collection systems and reporting requirements;
   - more explicit targets (eg indigenous, gay and lesbian young people);
   - that good practice be documented and continuously developed (eg the Youth Program to investigate production of regular bulletins which build upon the body of knowledge);
   - that the development of inter-agency referral protocols be further addressed as part of good practice; and
   - that the Guidelines include an acknowledgment of the Initiative’s contribution towards a supportive school environment.

3. That a YSC Working Group or Reference Committee be established comprising DFYCC, Education Queensland, YSC project representatives, the Youth Affairs Network of Queensland and individual experts. The Terms of Reference for the Working Group to include guidelines review, data collection systems, strategic policy oversight, trend analysis, local management advisory structures, information and training needs.

4. That the active collaborative involvement of all key stakeholders, including key school personnel and DFYCC officers, be encouraged in the development and ongoing review of operational plans and service delivery and that the options for the operations of local YSC advisory committees be explored further.

5. That the data collection system be reviewed, within an ongoing program evaluation (progressive as well as summative) framework, in collaboration with YSC projects and other stakeholders.

6. That the guidelines provide agreed definitions of early intervention and prevention of student homelessness and early school leaving and that these definitions be included with a description of the target group.

7. That recognizing that different locations have different needs (for example, different locations may have a greater identified need for longer term individual counselling and family work) but that a developmental and case coordination model be further articulated and promoted as good practice.

8. That the YSC Initiative be complemented by additional resources which strengthen the capacity for individual and family counselling, support and mediation.

9. That policy guidelines be developed between DFYCC and Education Queensland as part of strengthening the support for interagency ventures at a school level.

10. That DFYCC and Education Queensland play a greater role in selecting schools to be part of the program and ensure that schools demonstrate a commitment to collaborative partnerships.

11. That DFYCC initiate discussions with Education Queensland and other relevant stakeholders to identify appropriate responses to prevention strategies in Upper Primary Schools.
12. That DFYCC pursue discussions with Queensland Housing and other relevant stakeholders to further explore available and potential options for students who are homeless or at risk of homelessness.

13. That the targeting of students with issues exclusively related to homelessness be monitored by regional offices and the Program area and that this issue is further considered by the proposed YSC Reference Group.

14. That DFYCC utilise the findings from the evaluation of the YSC Initiative to ensure appropriate benchmarks for program support and development, particularly for pilot programs, and to review existing information exchange and reporting requirements between funded services, regional offices and the Program area in central office.

15. That future training for YSC’s and departmental staff resourcing the Initiative address the needs of specific high risk groups, good practice, specialist skills and knowledge development and that where possible, training events allow for some joint sessions between YSC’s, DFYCC and Education Queensland.
2.0 Introduction

The YSC Initiative represents the first attempt by any state government in Australia to put into practice, on a state-wide level, the central recommendations of a series of national inquiries which, one after another, from 1989 to 1996, called for a coordinated and collaborative approach to youth homelessness and early school leaving focusing upon partnerships between schools and community services (Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission (HREOC), 1989; House of Representatives Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training (HRSCCEET), 1992; HRSCCEET, 1994; House of Representatives Standing Committee on Community Affairs (HRSCCA), 1995; and HRSCCEET, 1996a). Consequently the significance of the Youth Support Coordinator (YSC) Initiative can not be understated.

2.1 Background to the Youth Support Coordinator Initiative

The Queensland State Government, in its 1996-97 State Budget, allocated $1.9m over three years to be directed to community organisations for the employment of Youth Support Coordinators. Youth Support Coordinators were to target young people in schools who were experiencing personal and family problems and who were at risk of leaving school and/or home prematurely. In July 1997 thirteen community organisations across the State received three year non-recurrent funding for this Initiative under the Youth Services Development Grant which is administered and coordinated by the Department of Families, Youth and Community Care (DFYCC) through its Office of Youth Affairs (OYA). The Office of Youth Affairs liaised with Education Queensland in the development and implementation of the Initiative through the Inter-departmental Youth Affairs Coordinating Committee.

The YSC Initiative adopted a rationale based upon the recommendations of several national inquiries and the evidence provided by other significant Australian research into youth homelessness and early school leaving including Mackenzie and Chamberlain’s 1994 National Census of Student Homelessness. The central elements of the YSC rationale are:

- Youth homelessness and early school leaving are significant problems confronting Australian and Queensland society (HREOC, 1989; Batten and Russell, 1995; and HRSCCA, 1995);

- If appropriate action and support is provided at an early stage of a young person leaving home, the spiral towards chronic homelessness can be avoided (Chamberlain and Mackenzie, 1995: 28-32 and HRSCCA, 1995: 271-274);


- There are strong links between early school leaving and homelessness as:
• approximately two thirds to three quarters of young people who experience homelessness do not complete the school year (HREOC, 1989: 56-58; HRSCCA, 1995: 249; HRSCEET, 1996a: 45);

• young people’s experience of schools has been identified as either a protective or contributory factor in youth homelessness and early school leaving dependent upon the presence or absence of school support (HREOC 1989: 273-274; Chamberlain and Mackenzie, 1995: 30-32, HRSCCA 1995: 250-258; and HRSCEET, 1996a: 62-68);

• The underlying issues for early school leaving and homelessness are similar requiring a similar range of resources and responses (HREOC 1989: 83-142; HRSCEET, 1992: 1; HRSCEET, 1994: vii-viii; Batten and Russell, 1995: 13-54; HRSCCA, 1995: 37; HRSCEET, 1996a: 7);

• Youth homelessness and early school leaving can be more effectively addressed when schools are integrated into the network of community services and support resources that exist in local communities because:

  • The causes of youth homelessness and early school leaving whilst clearly linked to family, school and socio-economic factors are complex and multi-faceted requiring a multi-dimensional response;

  • A school focused early intervention and prevention approach to youth homelessness and early school leaving requires additional resources and responsibilities, which can not be simply added to existing teaching responsibilities. Other departments and community based services need to play a role in assisting schools with these tasks (HREOC, 1989: 309-314; HRSCEET, 1994: v & 38; Chamberlain and Mackenzie, 1995: 31; HRSCCA, 1995: 250-258; and HRSCEET, 1996a: 4-5);

  • An early intervention strategy requires coordination at all levels of the service system - at the client level, at the local community level, and at the government level (HREOC, 1989: 32; HRSCEET, 1994: 38; Chamberlain and Mackenzie, 1995: 38-40; HRSCCA, 1995:366-374; and HRCEET, 1996a: ix); and

  • Young people who experience homelessness and early school leaving are a diverse group which includes sub-groups with distinctive ‘special needs’ including young people with disabilities, young people from non-English speaking backgrounds, indigenous young people, young people living in rural areas and gay and lesbian youth (HREOC, 1989: 129-142; Chamberlain and Mackenzie, 1995: 32-37; HRSCCA, 1995: 325; and HRSCEET, 1996a: 47-50).

The development of the Initiative was also based upon the assumption that:

• Services located in the community are well positioned to fulfill a coordination and school-community linking role at the client and local community level.

This rationale provided the framework to establish the Initiative’s purpose and aims and to guide program targeting.
2.2 YSC Purpose and Aims

2.2.1 YSC Purpose

Youth Support Coordinators will work with schools and community organisations to identify and refer young people who would benefit from being linked to personal and family support services, and to work with young people aged 12-25 and their families to ensure that they are able to access support.

2.2.2 YSC Aims

- To work with young people, their families and support agencies to develop networks and coordination processes that will enable the establishment of early intervention and prevention strategies to link young people and their support agencies;
- To facilitate the development of protocols and procedures whereby schools and community groups can readily communicate about the needs of young people who are at risk of prematurely leaving school and/or family;
- To coordinate information dissemination strategies to provide details about Government and non-Government support services available to support young people and their families; and
- To engage the support of the community to find ways to develop service responses to address the needs of these young people and their families.

2.3 The Projects

Applications were invited for funding from community organisations and eleven projects were subsequently approved in February 1997 from fifty-five submissions. A further two projects were approved in June 1997. All projects were selected on the basis of the following criteria:

- inclusion of the proposed project sites in the high incidence areas identified using existing data on student homelessness; school suspensions and exclusions; Supported Accommodation Assistance Programme (SAAP) services; and homeless youth referrals to Protective Services;
- demonstrated collaboration amongst high schools and Government and community agencies offering youth and family services in the target area;
- high level of existing youth and family services in the community which would benefit from greater coordination of client referrals;
- size of population of young people aged 12 to 18 in the target area;
- the inclusion in the project plan of strategies to work effectively with young people of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds, of non English speaking backgrounds and young people with disabilities;
- the applicant organisation’s proven experience to manage a youth project and
workers and its ability to describe how it will achieve outcomes; and

- the potential for co-locating the Youth Support Coordinator with a community-based organisation which has a history of or the potential to work collaboratively with other community service organisations.

Seven of the projects are located in the Greater Brisbane area, two are located on the Sunshine Coast and a further five are located in regional cities.

The regional project located in Rockhampton specifically, although not exclusively, targets indigenous young people and is managed by an indigenous organisation.

Each of the thirteen projects work in a number of nominated or ‘target’ secondary schools. The number of target schools ranges from one to five with most of the projects working with 2-3 schools. The target schools were self-selected as a part of the application process and each nominated school was required to support the auspicing organisation’s funding application.

Each of the thirteen projects has adopted different sets of strategies or ‘models’ in response to local needs incorporating different mixes of individual counselling and family work\(^1\) strategies, coordination strategies and community development strategies.

### 2.4 This Report

This report draws upon the findings of the YSC evaluation as well as the extant body of literature on youth homelessness and early school leaving in Australia. The structure of the following chapters reflects the key evaluation questions and are as follows:

3.0 Evaluation of the YSC Initiative
4.0 What are the identified issues surrounding Early School Leaving and Student Homelessness?
5.0 To what extent has the Initiative assisted young people to remain at school and to maintain safe, supportive environments?
6.0 How effective has the Initiative been in delivering key outputs?
7.0 What factors contribute to the success of projects in delivering key outputs?
8.0 What issues are there in relation to the future development of the Initiative?
9.0 Conclusion

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\(^1\) For the purposes of this report the term ‘family work’ includes family support, family counselling and family mediation.
3.0 Evaluation of the YSC Initiative

3.1 Background

The YSC Initiative was conceptualised as an innovative pilot initiative pioneering a statewide coordinating and collaborative model. A thorough evaluation was seen as the key to unpacking the practical experience of this model both in terms of:

(a) the success of the Initiative as a whole in assisting young people to remain at school and to maintain safe, supportive environments; and

(b) identifiable good practice arising from the experience of the thirteen projects working on the ground in partnership with target schools.

This report focuses primarily upon the first part of this exercise although elements of good practice are included within the contents of the report.

3.2 Evaluation Committee

An evaluation committee was established which mirrored the principles of collaboration and coordination by including representatives from Education Queensland, DFYCC and the YSC projects. The committee also included Dr Chris Chamberlain from Monash University who provided expert advice.

The evaluation committee oversaw the development and implementation of the evaluation aims, evaluation framework, a data collection system employing client contact forms and an evaluation methodology. The committee also reviewed the draft evaluation report.

3.3 YSC Network

The YSC Network is a forum of all YSC projects. Besides selecting YSC project representatives for the evaluation committee the YSC Network was regularly consulted and made a series of invaluable contributions to the development and implementation of the evaluation.

3.4 Evaluation Aims

The evaluation aims to:

- assess the extent to which the Youth Support Coordinators assist young people to remain at school and to maintain or develop safe, supportive home environments;

- assess the effectiveness of the program in delivering the key outputs;

- identify factors contributing to the success of projects in delivering key outputs;

- identify good practice in:
• early identification of students who are at risk of prematurely leaving home and/or school;

• development and maintenance of protocols for interaction between schools and community agencies, including referral to appropriate support agencies and programs of students identified as being at risk;

• provision of direct assistance by the Youth Support Coordinator to students identified as at risk;

• dissemination of information to students and their families about services for young people at risk; and

• identify issues and recommend strategies in relation to the future development of the program.

3.5 Evaluation Methodology

An intensive, grounded and thorough evaluation process, incorporating both qualitative and quantitative methods, has allowed the Office of Youth Affairs to confidently report on the effectiveness of the YSC Initiative as a whole and the effectiveness of practices adopted by individual projects.

The evaluation was conducted by Ms Cathy Boman and Mr Rod Kippax of the Office of Youth Affairs, Department of Families Youth and Community Care, who liaised closely with the YSC Evaluation Committee. The principal components of the methodology were:

a) analysis of 986 Client Contact Forms collected from September 1997 to September 1998 by all YSC projects;

b) semi-structured interviews with the 13 Youth Support Coordinators;

c) semi-structured interviews with the 9 DFYCC Regional Youth Affairs Officers resourcing the YSC projects;

d) semi-structured interviews with 35 target school representatives including Guidance Officers, Principals, Vice Principals, Head of Social Justice Departments and Learning Support Teachers across all 13 YSC projects;

e) a semi-structured interview with the Principal Youth Affairs Officer, Program Development, Office of Youth Affairs;

f) a focus group held with 11 Youth Support Coordinators;

g) a survey of the Principals of target schools with a return rate of 25 out of a possible 35;

h) a survey of young people who were clients of YSC services;

i) case studies provided by YSC projects;

j) school profiles provided by 25 of a possible 35 target schools;

The strength of this methodology lies in the use of intensive qualitative strategies. In-depth exploratory interviews were held with all Youth Support Coordinators,

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2 One of these interviews also involved the Area Manager whilst another also involved the Community Resource Officer.

3 An interview was conducted with every targeted school with the exception of the Rockhampton project where 5 interviews were conducted, two of which were with regional staff with responsibilities across all the targeted secondary schools. One of these interviews was held with a primary school receiving services from the YSC project.

4 The survey of young people was unsuccessful with a poor return rate. This data was not included in the report.
Departmental Regional Offices resourcing YSC projects and 99% of target schools. This produced a high degree of confidence in the reliability and validity of these findings - a confidence that was strengthened by a grounding of the results of the evaluation through feedback from the evaluation committee.

The methodology also made possible very powerful repeated sets of comparative studies between projects and schools drawing attention to key success factors. For example, it was possible to isolate the effect of school ‘culture’ by comparing the outcomes of a number of studies where the YSC practice and other variables were similar but the school culture differed or isolate the effect of practice by comparing projects where the practice differed but where school cultures and other variables were similar.

There are however some weaknesses in the quantitative data which has resulted in a negative bias. In other words the impact of the Initiative is likely to be greater than that reported through the data collection system because:

- inconsistencies in the reporting of YSC ‘services provided’ has resulted in an understating of the actual services provided to YSC clients; and
- the client contact form only captures the work with individual young people and does not report on group work, indirect teacher support or the impact of whole school or community development practices.

These limitations do not undermine the confidence in the findings of this evaluation because:

- the limitations of the data collection system have created a negative bias;
- the quantitative data was not employed to examine good practice;
- the quantitative data was not considered in isolation but in conjunction with a broad range of intensive and extensive qualitative data sources.

The only weakness in the qualitative data is the lack of direct input from community organisations and families. Whilst this input may have strengthened the validity of the evaluation it does not undermine the confidence of the findings as the impact of the Initiative on these stakeholders is indirectly captured through the interviews with schools, Youth Support Coordinators and Departmental Regional Officers and through the quantitative data collection.
4.0 What are the identified issues surrounding early school leaving and student homelessness?

Numerous studies have identified socio-economic, family, individual and school factors as key issues surrounding early school leaving and youth homelessness in the sense that they both cause and complicate the consequences of young people leaving school and home prematurely (HREOC, 1989; Beresford, 1993; Bradley and Stock, 1993; Batten and Russell, 1995; HRSCCA, 1995; Thomson, 1995; Crane and Brannock, 1996; Brooks et al, 1997; HRSCEET, 1996a; Chamberlain and Mackenzie, 1998; and PMYHTF, 1999).

Special attention is drawn throughout the literature on youth homelessness to the adverse effects of high youth unemployment, an increased dependency of young people on their families and family conflict. As the recently released Prime Ministerial Youth Homelessness Taskforce (PMYHTF) report noted:

‘...since the 1970s the transition from dependence on family or other support networks to living independently in the community had become increasingly difficult for many young people. Fewer employment opportunities, particularly for young people, a shortage of affordable housing, family poverty, changing patterns of family formation, and family breakdown were the main factors identified as contributing to growing numbers of young people becoming homeless’. (1999: 8)

Similarly the literature on early schooling leaving notes that whilst ‘basic structural changes in the labour market, including the disappearance of unskilled jobs traditionally filled by early school leavers’ (HRSCEET, 1995: 2) has contributed to a greater number of young people attempting to remain at school, that socio-economic disadvantage, including the correlation between socio-economic disadvantage, poor literacy and numeracy skills and high unemployment, continued to guarantee a strong relationship between early school leaving and young people with a low socio-economic background (Beresford, 1993: 16; HRSCEET, 1993: 1; and HRSCEET, 1995: 2, 25-26 & 43-44).

In drawing a distinction between early school leaving and youth homelessness, the available literature tends to place a higher emphasis upon school factors, such as repeated experiences of academic failure, inflexible school responses and alienating school environments, as contributing to early school leaving - including early school leaving by young people who are homeless (Coventry, 1988; Beresford, 1993; Bradley and Stock, 1993; Batten and Russell, 1995; HRSCEET, 1995; AYPAC, 1995 in HRSCEET, 1996b; Thompson, 1995 and Brooks et al, 1997). Whilst in regard to youth homelessness, school factors are implicated more commonly as an intervening variable in youth homelessness (HREOC, 1989; Crane and Brannock 1996; HRSCEET, 1996a; Chamberlain and Mackenzie 1998; and PMYHTF, 1999).

The responses, by Youth Support Coordinators and target school representatives, to the question: ‘What do you see as the major issues in relation to young people who are identified as being homeless or at risk of homelessness or early school leaving’ were consistent with the results of previous studies cited above (Fig 4.1).
Youth Support Coordinators and school representatives identified socio-economic, family, individual and school factors. Socio-economic factors included poverty, cultural barriers, unemployment, housing and issues relating to the rural context of the particular YSC project. School factors included school responses to student behaviour and school structure. A broad set of family factors included family conflict, physical, sexual and emotional abuse, changing family structure, family drug abuse and parenting skills. Individual issues included the effects of bullying, behavioural disorders and social skills. Family factors, and in particular family conflict, was generally cited as the most significant issue surrounding youth homelessness and early school leaving. School factors were seen as directly leading to early school leaving and indirectly impacting upon youth homelessness as an intervening variable contributing to chronic youth homelessness.

Fig 4.1 Identified Issues Surrounding Youth Homelessness and Early School Leaving
5.0 To what extent has the Initiative assisted young people to remain at school and to maintain a safe, supportive environment?

“This is a great project and I hate to see it go away - a number of young people have been greatly helped by the Youth Support Coordinator who has helped us with the overwhelming numbers of young people with behaviour management and other social problems - the concern is that these problems are getting bigger and more difficult because of specific learning difficulties and other social problems such as working parents no time etc- its either the Youth Support Coordinator or nothing.”
Deputy Principal

“If you save one kid it’s been a success - and the Youth Support Coordinator has certainly done more then that.”
Head of Department

An assessment of the ‘extent’ to which the Initiative has assisted young people to remain at school and to maintain or develop safe, supportive environments, requires firstly an assessment of the immediate impact of the Initiative and then an assessment of the limitations or boundaries of this impact in relation to the whole population of young people in the target group.

5.1 Impact of the Initiative

The YSC Initiative has been highly successful in assisting young people who have been identified as being either homeless or at risk of homelessness or at risk of early school leaving. The measurement of this success is reflected in the overwhelmingly positive perceptions of school interviewees, Youth Support Coordinators, Regional Resource Officers and Principals as well as the evidence provided by the YSC client contact data base.

5.1.1 Perceptions of Schools, Youth Support Coordinators, Departmental Regional Officers and Principals

The vast majority of the interviewees felt that the Initiative had been highly successful in assisting young people in the target group and comments like “Excellent, fantastic! Absolutely successful!” were common. Fig 5.1, 5.2, 5.3 and 5.4 capture some of the enthusiasm that stakeholders have for the overall performance of the Initiative.
Fig 5.1 Success of The YSC Initiative in Assisting Young People Who Are At-Risk of Early School Leaving. Interview Responses

Successful 78%
Unsuccessful 10%
Unsure 12%

Fig 5.2 Success of The YSC Initiative in Assisting Young People Who Are Homeless or At-Risk of Homelessness. Interview Responses

Successful 82%
Unsuccessful 9%
Unsure 9%

Fig 5.3 Success of YSC Initiative in Assisting Young People At-Risk of Leaving School. Principal Survey

Successful 65%
Highly Successful 15%
Highly Unsuccessful 5%
Neither 15%

Fig 5.4 Success of the YSC Initiative in Assisting Young People Who Are Homeless or At-Risk of Homelessness. Principal Survey

Successful 55%
Highly Successful 33%
Highly Unsuccessful 6%
Neither 6%
5.1.2 Client Contact Data

In the period from September 1997 to September 1998 alone YSC projects provided individual counselling, family mediation, family counselling, information, referrals and group work to at least 986 young people in the target group. Of these, 181 were either homeless or at risk of homelessness, 398 were at risk of early school leaving and 183 were both homeless or at risk of homelessness and at risk of early school leaving. Fig 5.5 illustrates the proportion of services delivered directly to young people by Youth Support Coordinators whilst Fig 5.6 and Fig 5.7 illustrate the demographics of direct service delivery.
As mentioned previously these figures do not capture significant areas of Youth Support Coordinator practice. For a start these figures do not report on all group work nor do they report on indirect work such as providing in-service training, support and assistance to teaching staff working with young people in the target group. Most importantly the YSC client data does not assess the impact of a range of community development and whole of school strategies which appear to have had a significant indirect impact on the target group. For example YSC projects overall devoted significant amounts of time to activities such as raising awareness in school and local communities, providing information globally, linking agencies to schools, contributing to full-service school development and contributing to policies promoting more supportive schools.

Consequently as the client contact data only captures the one-to-one work conducted by YSC projects, and as one-to-one work comprised only one part of the strategies generally adopted by YSC projects, the client data can not be interpreted as either a complete assessment of the impact of the Initiative or even a representation of the most significant impact. In fact, as schools repeatedly emphasised, the success of the Initiative lay in the combination of one-to-one work with more proactive developmental work such as linking schools to community.

Nevertheless the client contact data, in conjunction with the interview and survey data, does clearly corroborate the fact that the YSC Initiative is reaching a significant number of young people and having a significant impact.

5.2 Limitations of the YSC Initiative

The above results clearly indicate that the YSC Initiative has had remarkable success in assisting significant numbers of young people in the target group both in terms of impact and outcomes for individuals. However there are limitations and qualifications to this success imposed by the dimensions of the problem of youth homelessness and early school leaving in the target schools and the short length of time that the Initiative has been operating prior to the evaluation.

5.2.1 Dimensions of the Problem

In the absence of any systematically collected data it is impossible to determine the exact numbers of young people in the YSC schools requiring assistance. It is
possible however to arrive at a conservative estimate based upon student homelessness and early school leaving research.

On the basis of the 1994 National Census of Homeless School Students, Chamberlain and Mackenzie, in 1995, estimated that there was an average of 11 homeless students per 1000 school students in any one week in the target schools. This makes it possible to estimate that there are approximately 350 homeless students in all of the target schools in any one week. Which, on the basis of Queensland youth homelessness figures, converts to a total figure of between 800 and 900 students in the target schools who experience periods of homelessness in any one year (unpub: 2).

Chamberlain and Mackenzie also estimated that students who were at-risk of homelessness comprised between 10 - 14% of a typical school population (1998: 98). This equals approximately 3,250 to 4,600 students in the target schools who are at risk of homelessness at any one time and this will include 1,300 to 1,950 students who are seriously at risk of homelessness.

Arriving at an estimate of the number of early school leavers in the target schools is more difficult because there is less reliable data. However, by examining under age school leaving we can get some idea of the enormous numbers of early school leavers. A reasonable conservative estimate is that there are between 1-4 % of all 12 to 14 years olds that leave school early and 10 % of all 12 to 14 year olds who are potential early school leavers requiring support and special assistance to remain connected to school (Brooks et al, 1997: 3). This means that in the target schools there is likely to be between 200 to 800 under-age early school leavers whilst there is an estimated 2,060 12 to 14 year old students who are at risk of leaving school early. Of course this does not include the numbers of young people who fail to make the transition from Primary School nor does it include those of non-compulsory age that leave school early after Year 10 but before Year 12.

Given that there is a significant overlap between the fields of early school leaving and homelessness it is not possible to determine an accurate estimate of the exact size of the YSC target group. Nevertheless the above estimates help to explain the common observation by school interviewees that the Initiative could assist many young people who went unassisted if there were a lot more Youth Support Coordinators or if there was one Youth Support Coordinator in every school. The comment: “I could use the Youth Support every day of the week because the social issues are increasing not decreasing.” was a familiar refrain throughout the study.

A simple way of reframing this observation is to say that, in practice, a significant limitation of the Initiative was the number of target schools and young people within each of the YSC clusters placing demands upon the Youth Support Coordinator.

This limitation is only exacerbated by the fact that a number of YSC’s consistently receive referrals from schools at the extremely difficult chronic crisis end of the spectrum rather then the early intervention end. Whilst any young person at risk of
homelessness or early school leaving requires a significant amount of time and 
energy to address their needs, young people who are at the point of late 
intervention are even more demanding. As one Deputy Principal put it:

“We try to work it that he gets the hardcore difficult kids. To be 
effective he has to have less than five or six. He comes once a week 
to us and his goal is to link with support agencies. One day a week is 
not enough because he’s dealing with homeless kids and street 
kids.”

5.2.2 Length of Operation at the Time of Evaluation

The perception by key stakeholders that the Initiative had been a success was 
qualified by an appreciation that there were limitations to what a single worker could 
achieve in such a short period of time given that most of the projects have only 
been operating for 15 months prior to this evaluation whilst two of the projects were 
unable to commence work in schools until January 1998.

Furthermore commencement of work in schools was not a simple matter of turning 
up for work on the day. As Chris Chamberlain and the Prime Ministerial Youth 
Homelessness Task Force amongst others have pointed out, negotiating entry and 
maintaining a presence in schools is a challenging and time-consuming task for 
community organisations (Chamberlain and Mackenzie, 1998: 144; and PMYHT, 
1999: 20-23). Both parties are exposed to all the unknowns of an innovative 
relationship in an institutional environment where the pressures of duty of care and 
educational responsibilities weigh heavily on Principals and school staff alike. 
Essentially it takes time to understand the school environment, negotiate the 
hurdles, build the necessary relationships of trust and reach a point of mutual 
understanding. As one Deputy Principal succinctly commented:

“What needs to be understood is that the project can take 12 months to get 
established. It takes time getting to know people, understanding who you 
are dealing with, understanding school politics, establishing credibility, 
developing protocols, building networks and starting to get schools to look 
beyond job. I wouldn’t want the job of establishing the role - its a huge ask 
particularly in an environment where services are really dispersed in really 
large schools. These schools are really mini-cities that you are trying to 
negotiate with a complex mix of personalities. We have to make sure that 
our expectations aren’t extraordinarily high. It has to be understood that 
there are limits on the Youth Support Coordinator’s ability to impact.”

Quite clearly then there have been limitations to the impact that the Initiative has 
had upon the target group. Yet to point out these limitations does not diminish the 
success of the Initiative - it simply places this success in a realistic context. Nor can 
the extent of the Initiative’s success be reduced to a simple mathematical exercise 
of subtracting 986 client contacts from an estimate of several thousand. This is 
because direct client contact is only one measure of the impact of the Youth 
Support Coordinator Initiative. In fact, if anything, these figures emphasise the 
importance of other components of the Initiative such as establishing schools within 
referral networks and linking schools to community thereby multiplying the available 
resources and services to support staff and to parents and young people requiring 
assistance. The problem is of course that these strategies also take time, but as a 
Guidance Office commented:
“I would like to have the program for another ten years - it takes a while and it needs to be developed but one thing is obvious: having a Youth Support Coordinator is great. The Youth Support Coordinator has added a great deal to the school and will continue to do so.”
6.0 How effective has the Initiative been in delivering key outputs?

The Initiative, whilst recording significant successes overall, has not been universally effective in delivering the key outputs. In particular the establishment of protocols between schools and community and government support services has been notably unsuccessful whilst the dissemination of information about available services and the identification of young people in the target group has had mixed results. On the other hand, referrals and the establishment of referral networks and the development of school-community links have been outstandingly effective.

6.1 Key Output 1: Identifying Young People in the Target Group

The Initiative has had variable success in improving the identification of young people in the target group. Fig 6.1 and Fig 6.2 below illustrates these mixed results.

![Fig 6.1 How Successful Has The Initiative Been in Improving The Identification of Young People in The Target Group? Interview Responses.](image-url)
Stakeholders agreed that early identification was highly critical to successful interventions with the target group and there was also general agreement that responses within schools to date had been largely reactive rather than proactive. But interviewees did not generally agree that student survey approaches to identification, such as those employed in Chamberlain and Mackenzie’s National Census, were useful. Attempts by YSC projects to encourage schools to implement the survey were almost universally rejected. Schools and Youth Support Coordinators presented a significant range of reasons why ‘student survey approaches’ were dismissed including:

- problems with labelling of students
- a concern with the perceived ‘big brother’ disempowering nature of the approach
- concerns with validity and reliability
- concerns with confidentiality
- concerns that the implementation of a student survey would be highly traumatic
- questions surrounding the value of widespread identification in the absence of any ability to respond to subsequently identified needs
- a practical concern with the amount of time that surveys demand in an environment where time is the least available resource
- a concern with the reaction of parents.

Instead schools and Youth Support Coordinators valued approaches which built upon systems of identification that were already in place. This commonly meant enhancing the network of referrals from teachers to Guidance Officers, Deputy Principals and other support staff.

YSC projects embraced a number of strategies to enhance the networks of referrals. In some cases this involved a significant investment of energy and time in encouraging more systematic approaches through case coordination and school based interagencies. In other cases it involved developing strategies where young people could easily self-refer to the YSC. But more generally it involved education and information based strategies aimed at increasing the awareness and skills of school staff and increasing the awareness and skills of young people themselves.
The establishment of peer networks, peer support and peer mediation through training and group work was seen as a critical component of improving identification. This observation is borne out by the fact that, apart from one project which has adopted an early identification strategy based upon absenteeism, all of the reported successes involved projects which had been able to implement staff and student education strategies. Conversely reported lack of success was accompanied by the relative absence of staff and student education strategies.

In some ways the reported successes in improving identification were the incidental result of schools needing to tighten definitions in order to refer to the YSC and/or simply having another person available. More often however it was noted that Youth Support Coordinators were not ‘just another support person’. Unlike other support staff or teachers YSC’s were recognised as being able to link young people to community services. This is an important point because schools frequently noted that teachers, guidance officers, administrative support and school management were often aware of young people who were having personal and/or family difficulties but had not responded prior to the YSC because they ‘did not believe that there was anything that they could do.’ In other words ‘identification’, or rather, engagement improved because teachers and others began to recognise that there was someone who could ‘do something’.

There are however at least two significant problems associated with a dependency upon school referral networks which are reflected in the difficulties that projects had in delivering this key output. The first problem is that strategies aimed at enhancing referral networks take considerable time and effort - progress can be at an evolutionary pace. The second problem is that the widespread dependency upon referrals from schools has meant a dependency upon the ability of school staff to accurately identify all young people in the target group. But there are considerable pressures upon school staff to reactively respond to a range of challenging behaviours related to education rather than proactively identify young people in the target group - especially young people who are ‘hidden’ because they do not demonstrate challenging behaviours. The shift from reactive to more proactive strategies based upon early identification was acknowledged as a highly desirable but difficult task. As a Guidance Officer commented:

“When the YSC project started the Principal set up a meeting of support staff within this school to look at all the issues including how do we identify young people at risk. I think this is really important but I think it is a big ask. If the school is saying this is the YSC’s total responsibility well this is very unrealistic - you have to get feedback from all the players - this is close to 100 staff. This job is a big ask - you can’t wear all of this on your own.”

These difficulties accompanied by the failure of the student survey approach have placed limitations upon the effective delivery of this output.

6.2 Key Output 2: Establishment of Protocols

The importance of establishing and maintaining protocols between schools and community agencies has been explicitly emphasised in school based early intervention research (Chamberlain and Mackenzie, 1998: 128; and PMYHTF, 1999: 35). The establishment of protocols implicitly provides the procedural and
policy framework to support a highly developed collaborative partnership between schools and community agencies.

Protocols have been successfully and effectively developed between a number of YSC projects and target schools. The establishment of protocols in these cases was seen as being highly important, and in few instances as critical, because they provided a clearly documented framework for service operation, which increased the efficacy of the partnership.

However whilst there was general agreement that the establishment of protocols would be either important or highly useful in practice there has been a lack of success in delivering this key output. The following quote from a Youth Support Coordinator summarise the overall experience of the Initiative in relation to the development of protocols: “The protocol output has caused a lot of grief. Its pretty unrealistic for new services.”

Whilst a number of projects successfully established documented protocols between the YSC agency and their target schools only one project has attempted the difficult task of developing formal protocols between a number of local agencies and their target schools. A number of projects have established informal procedures rather than formal protocols.

A significant number of school interviewees, Youth Support Coordinators and Departmental Resource Officers questioned the importance of the output. Many thought they were unimportant and would even impede the progress of the Initiative, an equal number thought that whilst they might be useful they were not critical and the remaining third considered that protocols were important.

Furthermore there was general agreement that the delivery of this output to date had involved a series of difficulties including:

- the size of the task;
- the reluctance by schools and community agencies to participate in the development of protocols because (a) they didn’t see the need; (b) community agencies were concerned about entering into formal binding agreements with schools; and (c) community agencies were concerned about the possibility of an overwhelming workload;
- the complexity of the task which would involve the difficult job of integrating a wide range of philosophical and procedural frameworks;
- the potential for protocols to reduce the flexibility of school-community relationships imposing the same kinds of cumbersome practices which handicap school responses to young people in the target group;
- questions surrounding the feasibility of a community agency adopting a lead role in a process where there are so many more powerful players such as schools and government agencies who often had inflexible protocols and procedures of their own;
- the fact that it was too early in the life of the Initiative to attempt to establish protocols. The following comment by a Youth Support Coordinator echoed the thoughts of many interviewees:

  “I believe that developing protocols and then developing relationships is putting the cart before the horse. You need to develop
relationships which give rise to processes that work and then document protocols.”

Overall there was a sense that whilst documented protocols were valuable they were not necessarily critical. What was seen as critical was the ability to appropriately refer young people and the development of links between schools and outside agencies. This did not require the establishment of documented formal procedures or protocols between the schools and these agencies. Instead the establishment of documented protocols between the school and a range of government and community agencies was seen as a useful end product of a long process that was necessarily developmental. Many of the projects have only just begun the first steps in the process.

6.3 **Key Output 3: Referrals and Referral Networks**

YSC projects have been exceptionally successful in ensuring that young people in the target group have been referred to appropriate and responsive services and in establishing and maintaining referral networks. Fig 6.2 below shows that only a very small number of schools indicated that the YSC project had been unsuccessful and all of these accounts related to schools where the YSC project had not successfully engaged with the particular school. On the other hand in the vast majority of the schools comments like “it’s been absolutely fantastic” and “very effective” were common.

![Fig 6.2 How Successful Has the YSC Initiative Been In Ensuring that Young People in the Target Group are Referred to Appropriate Services? Interview Responses. Frequency](image)

YSC projects referred a total of 461 young people that they had direct contact with to a range of referral agencies. The main reasons for referrals are provided in Fig 6.3.
Youth Support Coordinators generally tended to be positioned as expert points of referral for schools. This happened in two main ways: (1) young people were referred to the YSC who subsequently referred them to other agencies; and (2) Youth Support Coordinators provided advice and information to school staff on the range of services available.

A lack of either accessible, in terms of distance, cost or timeliness, or appropriate services, particularly housing, family and personal counselling and alternative education services, posited a significant obstacle to successful referrals. Young people were also commonly reported as often being reluctant to be referred to other agencies. As one Youth Support Coordinator noted:

“I had a weird notion that I’d be able to easily refer. But a good referral process usually involves much more than a phone call - to be preventative requires a lot of work - if families or young people disclose to you then they are reluctant to be referred even if those services exist. Linking to community services is not an easy thing.”

Despite these obstacles YSC projects were outstandingly successful in delivering this key output.
6.4 **Key Output 4: Dissemination of Information**

Overall the YSC projects have had significant success in disseminating information about government and non-government services available to support young people and their families however Fig 6.3 shows that unlike referrals and referral networks this success was not universal.

![Fig 6.4 How Successful Has the YSC Initiative Been in the Dissemination of Information?](image)

Instead there was a strong relationship between the type of model and the success at delivering this output. YSC projects that placed more emphasis upon coordinating referrals and less emphasis upon individual counselling and family work and/or YSC projects that had a strong emphasis upon group work were successful whilst projects that placed more emphasis upon individual counselling and family work without group work were generally seen as being unsuccessful in the dissemination of information or limited to disseminating information to direct clients only. The not successful in Fig 6.4 also includes those situations where the YSC project had not successfully engaged with the particular schools.

A range of highly successful and creative strategies were employed by YSC projects including:

- Newsletters to parents, other services and the general community;
- Distribution of pamphlets, 'Z-Cards', information packages, information books and service manuals to teachers, young people and parents;
- Groups, class presentations, visiting speakers and speaking at assemblies;
- Internet home pages;
- Youth Expo's, Markets, special events;
- Peer support, peer mediation and peer education; and
- School diaries.

A number of school based issues posed particular problems for the delivery of this output including the issue of confidential access to information by young people and the need to be sensitive to the public face of the school.
Yet despite these limitations the Initiative as a whole has been highly effective in the delivery of this key output.

6.5 **Key Output 5: Linking Schools, Community Services and the Wider Community**

There are two recurrent themes that are consistently emphasised in academic research and national inquiries relating to youth homelessness and early school leaving. The first is that it is vitally important to establish school and community partnerships. The second is that this is an extraordinarily difficult task which is confronted by a formidable set of cultural and institutional barriers at the central government, regional and local levels which work against the intended goal of inter-departmental and school-community collaboration (HRSCCA, 1995; Crane and Brannock, 1996; Chamberlain and Mackenzie, 1998; and PMYHTF, 1999)

It is against this background that we can measure the extraordinary success of the Initiative in linking school, community services and the wider community. This success has been the foundation of the success of the Initiative as a whole. Fig 6.5 and Fig 6.6 provide some insight into the depth of the effectiveness of the Initiative in delivering this key output but the frequent comments of “absolutely brilliant” and “highly successful” may provide more.

![Pie chart showing successful 91% and unsuccessful 9%](image-url)

Fig 6.5 How Successful has the YSC Been in Developing School-Community Links? Interview Responses
YSC Projects generally succeeded in either building upon or enhancing existing links between schools and the community or constructed links. The greatest effectiveness was seen in linking schools to community agencies. However there were a number of projects that were also beginning to effectively link families and the broader community to schools.

A number of highly successful strategies have been adopted including:

- conducting on-site youth service events;
- conducting a range of in-school programs where community agencies either independently, or in conjunction with the YSC, delivered educational and training programs to teachers and students;
- enhancing or developing school and community interagencies;
- developing business-school relationships through employment and welfare projects;
- developing and implement employment initiatives;
- enrolling young people in schools in a range of groups and activities such as co-developed TAFE programs, YACCA programs and other groups conducted by community or government agencies;
- conducting parent information nights, parent groups and parent training;
- facilitating service entry into schools; and
- facilitating parent and community linking with schools.

Again, the linking of agencies, families and community to schools is a developmental process. A number of projects reported that whilst the links had vastly improved these links were still largely dependent upon the Youth Support Coordinators themselves. At the same time however there were many examples...
where the schools were either expanding upon pre-existing links with the community and community agencies or were beginning to establish links independently of the YSC. This point, and the effectiveness of the Initiative in delivering this key output, is best summed up in the reflections of a Regional Youth Affairs Officer who noted that as a result of the Initiative:

“These schools are more informed about the community - how to link, what’s out there, peak organisations and people. The schools are starting to link directly with services and in some instances they are able to make better assessments. I think they often confer with the YSC - checking their assessments. The schools are getting a better perspective of the role of community agencies and the school’s position of where they sit - that they don’t have to resolve everything and this may be true of education as a whole. They are increasingly recognising the range of resources in the community both in other government departments and in the community sector and they’re beginning to utilise them more effectively.”
7.0 What factors contribute to the success of projects in delivering key outputs?

Quite clearly the majority of school-YSC partnerships have been markedly successful and as a consequence have borne out in practice the theoretical predictions of the many national inquiries advocating collaborative partnerships between community organisations and schools. Just as clearly the Initiative has had to negotiate a series of obstacles and hurdles in the largely unexplored territory of coordination and collaboration on local, regional and state government levels. The question is, what factors have assisted the Initiative to achieve these successes and overcome these obstacles? The answer to this question lies partly within schools, partly within the model of funding community based agencies to employ Youth Support Coordinators, and partly with the collaborative skills of schools, youth support coordinators and DFYCC resource officers.

7.1 The Active Support of the School Leadership

The successful delivery of key outputs was dependent upon the active support of school leadership and to a lesser extent, the collaboration of Guidance Officers and the commitment of teachers and staff in general to the principles underlying the Initiative. Of these three the active support of the school leadership, in particular the Principal, was the most critical to the success of individual projects. Essentially the success of individual projects was strongly influenced by the degree to which the school leadership welcomed, supported and promoted the Initiative through a range of actions such as allocating time and resources to support the YSC; promoting the position in staff meetings and throughout the school; encouraging the involvement of the YSC on school committees and in other school activities; and adopting flexible school-YSC protocols or procedures that provided significant support and autonomy for the YSC within the school. The support of the school leadership enabled, facilitated and maintained YSC engagement within schools. As the Principal of one school noted:

“Administration supports and promotes the Youth Support Coordinator. I open the doors, for example with the Guidance Officer or by inviting the YSC to behavioural management meetings. If the administration doesn’t open the doors it will make it extremely difficult”

Furthermore the support of the school leadership was generally correlated with the extent to which the school was committed to pastoral care and in particular committed to pursuing school-community agency partnerships. The degree of fit between the welfare philosophy and welfare practices of individual schools and the underlying principles of the Initiative either facilitated or inhibited the effective delivery of key outputs. In particular a supportive school leadership provided a firm platform to negotiate and tolerate the tensions that exist between the presence of an outside agency operating within the school and the school’s duty of care - especially in relation to ensuring clear communication with parents, student confidentiality, mandatory reporting and legal liability.

In practice this meant that the greater the dissonance between the welfare practices of the school and the welfare practices of the project the harder the project had to work ‘against the tide’ and the less successful were the outcomes. Conversely, the
greater the compatibility, the more the project worked ‘with the tide’ of established advocacy and welfare practices and student support structures and the more successful the outcomes.

7.2 Collaborative Approaches to Working with Schools

The ability of YSC projects to engage and maintain the support of schools and hence develop effective school-project partnerships was a key success factor. YSC projects were able to develop successful productive partnerships when they adopted collaborative, consultative and developmental approaches which were based upon an understanding of both school and community systems, open communication, mutual respect and a continued willingness to adopt strategies which matched the identified needs and culture of schools.

As a Guidance Officer commented:

“To be successful YSC’s need to spend time meeting critical people, helpful people, people in the admin organisation - schools are very complex places and it takes at least three months to understand schools. A mistake that the YSC can make is to jump in at the deep end too quickly and try to change the world yesterday. If you go at it like a bull at a gate then people will close the door at this school. To come in you have to be accepted in the local school culture.

You have to prove that you’re acceptable to the school culture - therefore experience the school, observe, watch and…. First up - what is it that you expect from me? How do you see my role? What would you like me to do? If there are problems, what did they do? What did you like? What do you see that I could do differently?”

Having had previous experience in the education system was an advantage simply because these YSC’s appreciated what would and wouldn’t work in their approach to schools. As one YSC reflected:

“I worked for years within Education and therefore I was keenly aware of what you can’t do. You can’t walk in and say that I’m going to save the world. Instead I worked with the schools giving them the decision of what they wanted me to do. Therefore I always approach with a concept and get their thoughts about whether it would work. You can’t be a power person. Principals need to know what happens - its about ownership its the same with young people and the school. Unless the schools have ownership then it wouldn’t work.”

The question of ownership is important, not just because schools tended to resist the imposition of a framework, but also because school ownership is tied up with the significant and often competing pressures of school responsibility to parents, educational responsibility and duty of care. As one school contact said:

“What this means is that there has to be an effective process of getting to know the YSC - and after working with the YSC they’ve built up credibility and trust and now the school is really keen to have her. But it takes a while to work up level of trust.”

32
Therefore the effective delivery of outputs is dependent upon developing trust and credibility which in turn is largely dependent upon a sensitivity to the pressures placed upon schools and a sensitivity to important elements of school culture including:

- school protocols and procedures;
- school politics;
- appearance;
- the value placed on punctuality, reliability and the timely completion of tasks;
- avoiding judgement;
- being committed to the school; and
- the value placed upon tangible concrete outcomes.

Of these the last was particularly important. YSC projects that tailored their responses in schools to ensure tangible ‘runs on the board’, usually in the form of successful outcomes with individual young people, were able to engage and maintain effective partnerships relatively quickly.

Open channels of communication regarding individual and project work in schools underpinned all of these different elements in successful collaborative partnerships. Without open and frequent communication collaboration was impossible and projects tended to flounder. Communication channels were most effective when there was a strong commitment to communication on the part of the school and on the part of the YSC. In a busy school environment this often meant that YSC’s needed to be proactive, persistent and determined.

Finally it needs to be pointed out that a willingness to collaborate and to respond to the needs of the school does not equate with deferential compliance. Instead many successful partnerships have occurred within a framework of YSC’s strongly advocating for young people and their families and as a result of the initiative and persistent determination of the YSC to overcome an initial resistance from schools. As one Deputy Principal noted what was needed instead was someone who was “assertive but willing to listen, to learn and to compromise”.

### 7.3 Community Agency Operating in Schools

By operating within a cluster of schools YSC projects could become firmly established within the school system as an extension of school services to young people and families. Consequently they are able to capitalise on the ‘first to know’ position of schools. In other words they were able to capitalise on the fact that schools are often the first organisation to identify serious problems in personal or family lives of young people. In effect this means that young people, families and educational staff have much easier access to the services of the Youth Support Coordinator and/or the range of community agencies in the local or regional referral network.

On the other hand, as community agencies, the YSC projects are able to capitalise on their links with community networks; gain flexibility from their freedom from the restrictions of the protocols, procedures and multiple accountabilities of a large institution; and strategically exploit their position of being outside of school management.
Being outside of the school system was critical to the success of the Initiative at the local level. Being outside of the school system accrued an enormous range of advantages including:

- Youth Support Coordinators were seen to be safe sources of support for young people and their families because they were not seen as authority figures; they were not associated with negative experiences of schooling; they were not bound by the same mandatory reporting requirements of the school, with the concomitant fears of government intervention; and they had a strong commitment to confidentiality so that young people and families were assured that shared information was not going to 'do the rounds' of the school;
- Youth Support Coordinators were able to be more flexible in their responses to young people because they were not tied up with having to enforce the discipline policies of the school;
- Youth Support Coordinators are in the position of being able to mediate between families and schools and to advocate for individual young people because they are able to challenge decisions made by the school;
- As a non-government organisation, YSC projects were able to strongly advocate for young people and their families in a number of forums;
- As a non-government organisation, YSC projects are able to utilise community development strategies to develop local responses to identified gaps in service delivery;
- Standing outside of the school system meant that YSC projects have more freedom to raise potentially sensitive issues such as the needs of gay and lesbian young people; and
- Standing outside of the management structure of the school provided YSC projects with an independent platform from which to maintain collaborative relationships so that the direction of the Initiative was less vulnerable to the pressures from within schools to reactively respond to crisis management.

Having links to the community was also seen as critical to the success of the Initiative. In practice this meant that YSC projects had a foot in both 'worlds' and tended to act as proactive conduits between the two. Their links with community agencies not only meant being able to access a referral network but also meant that they were able to encourage community agencies to link with schools and encourage schools to link with community agencies. Importantly YSC projects were able to advocate on behalf of schools in the face of considerable resistance from community agencies to work collaboratively with schools. Conversely YSC projects were frequently trusted by schools to act as mentors for community agencies wishing to develop collaborative relationships.

Having an overall vantage point across schools and community was also critical to a number of attempts at collaboratively identifying and responding to the needs of the target group. A Guidance Officer described this well when she commented that:

"The project has worked very well in getting us to all work together on the single issue of youth rather then just with our own service. This has happened because the Youth Support Coordinator is outside of all agencies - she focuses on what the youth need rather then focus on a systems perspective eg education service or health service. She identifies different needs and then links with other issues - she identifies and coordinates responses by identifying the need in one
context and seeing the bigger picture - sees it in the community context rather than just a piece of the whole.”

The end result of being a community agency operating in schools is that YSC projects are able to gain a double advantage of the ‘first to know’ position of schools and the advantages that accrue with being a community agency.

7.4 The Ability to Work With Families

Family work was either coordinated or directly undertaken by all the YSC projects. School, Youth Support Coordinator and DFYCC interviewees almost universally agreed that family intervention was critical to the success of the Initiative as many of the issues surrounding early school leaving and homelessness centred upon the family. Therefore the ability to work with families, and in particular to work with families outside of the school and outside of school hours, was seen as a significant component of the success of the Initiative. In fact many schools reported that this aspect of the Initiative was, as a Guidance Officer expressed, a ‘God-send’ that filled a vital role that schools were unable to address.

Delivering services outside of schools was seen to be important because this enabled YSC projects to follow up on young people and their families and it also meant that family work was often able to occur in a safe and familiar environment free of the often negative and fearful associations with schools. The link with families worked in both directions from the school to the family and back again to the school. This occurred in three main ways:

• working with families often had significant impacts on the behaviour of young people in schools;
• YSC’s were often able to negotiate more flexibility for young people in schools on the basis of a greater understanding and sensitivity by school staff to family circumstances; and
• YSC projects were able to act as the link between the family and the school.

The ability to work with families was reported to have had a significant impact on identification and referral outcomes.

7.5 Working Outside of the Physical Boundaries of the School and School Hours

Besides working with families, being able to work outside of school boundaries and school hours enabled a range of successful outcomes including:

• the provision of services in locations where young people and their families were most comfortable;
• outreach of services to young people who had either dropped out of school, who were regularly absent from school or who had transited to another school in the local area;
• outreach of services to young people and their families in isolated rural areas;
• improved success with referrals as young people and their families were frequently physically driven to community agencies; and
• maintaining a continuity of service through follow up after school and in school holidays.

7.6 Flexible, Holistic Client Driven Service Delivery

Coordinating and/or providing family work and the ability to provide outreach services beyond school boundaries and school hours were two components of the overall flexible, holistic and client driven service delivery which characterised the Initiative. These inter-related facets of the Initiative were readily identified as key success factors in the delivery of outputs. As one Principal remarked:

“The YSC can do things we can’t. He can work with families, he can work in different clothes - he is not a teacher and therefore he is not as restricted, for example with language. He gets down to the kids and they open up to him more effectively”

Flexible, holistic client driven service delivery meant that Youth Support Coordinators:

• responded quickly to the needs of young people and their families;
• tailored different responses to different school environments;
• were able to develop the service within schools as the partnership evolved;
• fashioned personalised responses to current and changing individual needs;
• make careful assessments which allowed them to accurately and successfully respond to the complex inter-related needs of young people and their families with a continuum of personalised interventions including counselling, family mediation, advocacy, referrals and assistance with transport, accommodation, training, employment and income support; and
• provided the working platform for various information and identification strategies.

7.7 Coordinated Service Delivery

The work intensive nature of issues surrounding homelessness and early school leaving and the large size of the target group constantly threaten to overwhelm support staff both inside and outside of schools attempting to assist these young people and their families. Consequently strategies which enhanced efficiencies whilst ensuring accessibility were a success factor in the effective delivery of key outputs.

There are a number of identifiable strategies that increased efficiencies in schools including:

• clear referral guidelines which emphasised early intervention rather than issues surrounding school behaviour management;
• coordinated referral systems which channelled appropriate referrals to the YSC;
• careful assessment of referrals by YSC projects which improved appropriate service delivery and;
coordinated case management, which avoided the duplication of services, decreased the likelihood of young people falling through the net of support services and increased the likelihood of managed follow up.

Although self-referrals by young people and their families had the potential of decreasing the efficiency of referral systems they remain a critical part of effective service delivery because the option to self-refer increases the accessibility of the YSC project. In any case coordinated case management ensured that self-referrals did not result in inefficient service delivery.

Coordinated approaches to case management and referrals also facilitated efficient school based responses to the issues of young people and their families which had been identified outside of the school system.

7.8 Skills and Knowledge

The skills and knowledge of Youth Support Coordinators was also widely recognised as a key success factor including social work, counselling, and community development skills as well as a wide knowledge of different services and networks. As a Principal summarised:

“I hold the YSC in very high regard - the YSC is exceptionally skilled. They provide a point of view which is really different from ours and see another side of young people’s lives - this can be problematic but it is also really refreshing - this means through challenging each other we get a better outcome for young people.

This program gives us a way of working with young people in a way we’ve never had before - as Principal I can’t get into all the other complex issues - family issues - we need someone with the skills and knowledge of outside agencies. There’s nothing to replace the YSC with.”
8.0 What issues are there in relation to the future development of the Initiative?

The Initiative has now reached a point of maturity where it is possible to highlight areas for future consideration. Attention needs to be given to the purpose and aims, targeting, inter-departmental coordination, DFYCC program development, the management of YSC services, resourcing, funding levels and effective practice with indigenous young people in the target group.

8.1 Purpose and Aims

8.1.1 Description of Purpose and Aims

The Initiative will benefit from further refining the purpose and aims. Interviewees widely reported that they found it difficult to understand ‘what the Initiative was all about’. The lack of clarity about the Initiative’s rationale, purpose and aims has been unhelpful in terms of monitoring, managing and promoting the Initiative in schools. As the PMYHTF report concurred, one of the necessary features of effective collaboration is ‘a clearly defined task or issue that needs to be addressed’ (1999:20). This problem can be effectively addressed by revisiting the Initiative’s guidelines.

8.1.2 Contributing to Supportive Schools Aim

The Initiative’s rationale, purpose and aims should more clearly reflect the importance of a supportive school environment and whole of school approaches. The critical role of supportive school environments has been reflected in the range of whole-of-school strategies that YSC projects have implemented or supported but is not clearly articulated in the purpose and aims. This has undoubtedly contributed to the uncertainty surrounding the Initiative’s rationale, purpose and aims which is exemplified in a Principal’s observation that: “We don’t utilise the YSC as effectively as we can because we don’t fully understand where it’s all leading, what vision is driving it.”

8.1.3 Identification

The output relating to the identification of young people needs to be revisited to ensure that the wording clearly encapsulates effective practice.

The problem lies with the phrase ‘to identify young people’. Whilst this phrase clearly takes up on the need to proactively identify young people in order to provide assistance at a point of early intervention (Chamberlain and Mackenzie, 1998: 118-119) it does not as clearly take up the strong evidence that effective intervention only occurs when it is undertaken in a personal, empowering and voluntary manner (Crane and Brannock, 1996 and PMYHTF, 1999).

The end result is that the current wording of the output readily lends itself to disempowering approaches to working with young people which are inconsistent with good practice identified in the above research and inconsistent with effective YSC practice.
As noted earlier, effective YSC practice in relation to identification involves recognising and pro-actively engaging with young people within a network of peer, student-teacher and student-support staff relationships which embrace the principles of voluntary, client-centred, client driven practice. It is this principle of proactive engagement that needs to be considered in the future wording of this key output.

8.1.4 Protocols

The key output relating to the establishment of formal documented protocols has also been highly problematic in practice. The reality is that only one project has made any progress in the establishment of formal protocols between schools and a range of government and community agencies. Whilst many respondents recognised that protocols could be useful and even valuable, far fewer considered that protocols were critical to the aims of the Initiative. Consequently, in the absence of an overarching policy framework for establishing protocols between schools and community agencies, the establishment of protocols more logically, in terms of the community development philosophy inherent in the Initiative, and practically, belongs as an element of good practice in the key outputs relating to the establishment of effective referral networks and linking schools to community and government services.

Recommendation

That the Program Guidelines be rewritten in collaboration with key stakeholders including:

- A clear rationale, aims, objectives, outcomes and outputs
- Standard data collection systems and reporting requirements
- more explicit targets (eg indigenous youth, gay and lesbian youth)
- That good practice be documented and continuously developed. (Eg the Program to investigate production of regular bulletins which build upon the body of knowledge.)
- That the development of protocols be further discussed as part of good practice.
- That the Guidelines include an acknowledgment of the Programs contribution towards a supportive school environment.

(Recommendation 2)

8.2 Targeting

A number of issues have arisen involving the targeting of the Initiative which require careful consideration including the focus upon early intervention, the balance between homelessness and early school leaving, the geographic targeting of the Initiative, the targeting of individual schools and the targeting of primary schools.

8.2.1 Early Intervention and Prevention

The targeting of young people at the point of early intervention or prevention has tended to be overwhelmed by the pressure applied by the ongoing behaviour management needs of schools despite the realisation by key stakeholders that proactive strategies are far more desirable and effective than reactive strategies.
Recommendation

That the guidelines provide agreed definitions of early intervention and prevention of youth homelessness and early school leaving and that these definitions are included in a description of the target group.
(Recommendation 6)

8.2.2 Student Homelessness and Early School Leaving

The balance between targeting student homelessness and early school leaving needs to be carefully monitored. Currently it is difficult to estimate how effectively the Initiative is targeting young people who fall into the homelessness target group without also being in the early school leaving target group. Of concern however is the emphasis in a number of school referral systems on criteria which lean more towards issues associated with early school leaving such as absenteeism or challenging behaviour. This is of particular concern given that engagement with young people in the target group tends to rely upon these school referral systems. Certainly the numbers of direct clients with homelessness issues only are far less than the numbers of clients with early school leaving issues. (Fig 8.1) However it is difficult to determine whether these differences are significant.

![Fig 8.1 Current Situation](image)

Recommendation

That the targeting of students with issues exclusively related to homelessness be monitored by regional Offices and the Program area and that this issue is further considered by the proposed YSC Reference Group.
(Recommendation 13)
8.2.3 Geographic Targeting

Each of the YSC projects was located in areas of identified high need. However there are other areas that have been identified as having equally high numbers of young people in the target group.

Furthermore there are a number of schools within currently targeted areas that also have large numbers of young people in the target group. These schools can not be included in current YSC clusters under present levels of resourcing.

8.2.4 Targeting Individual Schools

A two tiered process was employed to target individual schools. At a state level target areas were carefully selected on the basis of a number of researched criteria and then on a local level schools self-nominated to be included within YSC clusters. Greater deliberation needs to be taken in the process of selecting schools at the local level if the Initiative is expanded in the future. In particular greater consideration needs to be given to school size and the demonstrable commitment of school leadership to collaborative partnerships with YSC projects.

Recommendations

The Youth Support Coordinator Initiative be maintained as a key program in the prevention of, and early intervention to, early school leaving and youth homelessness and that it be enhanced to include other identified areas of high need as well as other high need schools within the current catchment area. That all Youth Support Coordinator positions be full time positions. (Recommendation 1)

That DFYCC and Education QLD play a greater role in selecting schools to be part of the program and ensure that schools demonstrate a commitment to collaborative partnerships. (Recommendation 10)

8.3 Inter-Departmental Coordination and Collaboration

Coordination and collaboration between DFYCC and Education Queensland needs to be significantly improved. Limitations with coordination and collaboration have resulted in four inter-related problems:

- that despite the fact that schools volunteered to participate in the Initiative YSC projects reported that they were required to overcome significant barriers to gain initial acceptance and support within a number of schools;
- schools reported that the implementation of the Initiative was handicapped by an absence of information including information about the Initiative’s aims, objectives, management and operation;
- Education Queensland endorsement and support for the Initiative was not sufficiently articulated to schools which left individual YSC projects in a vulnerable and isolated position where it was quite often necessary to undertake a lengthy process of negotiating involvement with schools on a one-off individual relationship level; and
• the absence of an overarching policy framework meant that schools and YSC projects have had little support in resolving a number of key issues such as confidentiality and legal liability which in some cases threatens the viability of the partnerships.

These problems corroborate the emphasis placed upon coordination by each of the national inquiries relating to youth homelessness and early school leaving. These inquires have stressed the importance of policy coordination and collaboration at a state and federal government level. In particular the Morris Report noted that:

‘The fragmentation of policy and administrative arrangements at the Commonwealth and State government level puts enormous pressure on community based services to establish ways of coordinating and delivering services.’ (HRSCCA, 1995: 370)

A point that was taken up and developed by the Ministerial Council for Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA). A paper approved by MCEETYA, ‘Schools as Sites for Early Intervention,’ has particular relevance here where it states that interventions targeting ‘at risk’ young people through schools requires ‘coordination mechanisms at a senior and central level in government to develop guidelines and policies which promote effective intervention strategies through schools’ (MCEETYA, unpub: 3).

The critical role of policy coordination at a central level ensures that inter-departmental coordination between Education Queensland and DFYCC is a key issue in the future development of the Initiative.

Recommendations

That a YSC Working Group or Reference Committee be established comprising DFYCC, Education QLD, YSC project representatives, the Youth Affairs Network of QLD and individual experts. The Terms of Reference for the Working Group to include guideline review, data collection systems, strategic policy oversight, trend analysis, local management advisory structures, information and training needs. (Recommendation 3)

That policy guidelines be developed between the Department of Families, Youth and Community Care and Education QLD as part of strengthening the support for interagency ventures at a school level. (Recommendation 9)

8.4 DFYCC Program Management and Development

Program performance measurement, ongoing program support and program area resourcing are three aspects of DFYCC program management and development that need to be further addressed to increase the efficacy of the Initiative.

8.4.1 Program Support

The provision of two YSC training events and the one-to-one support provided by individual Regional Resource Officers to YSC projects were the two most commonly identified positive aspects of DFYCC program support.
Program support however remains an issue for the future development of the Initiative. Further attention needs to be given to improving access by regional offices and funded services to relevant and consistent program information; to strengthening the partnership between DFYCC and funded agencies and to improving the communication between the program area, regional offices and funded services.

Effective program support is also dependent upon the provision of training that enables Youth Support Coordinators to develop and/or maintain the considerable range of skills required in the successful delivery of outputs. This is particularly true with regard to meeting the needs of specific groups of young people such as indigenous and gay and lesbian young people or young people with disabilities. It is also evident that joint YSC, Regional Resource Officer and Education Queensland training is mutually beneficial.

8.4.2 Program Performance Measurement

A comprehensive range of strategies have been put in place to measure the performance of the initiative including service agreements, a state-wide data collection system and the state-wide evaluation. These strategies have allowed a thorough assessment of the Initiative’s overall performance at the point of time of this evaluation. Future improvements to program performance measurement needs to focus upon the area of ongoing program and project performance measurement and reporting and upon refining the current data collection system. This will necessarily involve refining outputs and outcomes and clarifying roles and responsibilities of the program area and regional offices.

8.4.3 Program Area Resourcing

Effective program management and program development is contingent upon appropriate resourcing. This is particularly true for the implementation and development of new initiatives and pilot programs as they require a substantial level of resourcing in their early stages of implementation. Program area resources were considerably constrained in their capacity to successfully deliver effective program management and program development.

Recommendations

That DFYCC utilise the findings from the evaluation of the YSC Initiative to ensure appropriate benchmarks for program support and development, particularly for pilot programs, and to review existing information exchange and reporting requirements between funded services, regional offices and the Program area in central office. (Recommendation 14)

That future training for YSC’s and departmental staff resourcing the Initiative address the needs of specific high risk groups, good practice, specialist skills and knowledge development and that where possible, training events allow for some joint sessions between YSC’s, DFYCC and Education QLD. (Recommendation 15)

That the data collection system be reviewed, and an ongoing program evaluation (progressive as well as summative) framework developed, in collaboration with YSC projects and other stakeholders. (Recommendation 5)
8.5 Management of YSC Services

There are a number of issues surrounding the management of YSC services, including the role of the reference group and focus, direction and support.

8.5.1 Reference Groups

The notion of YSC reference groups as an ongoing source of support, consultation and direction has been relatively unsuccessful and frequently problematic across the program. Poor participation by key stakeholders has meant that many reference groups meet infrequently if at all.

YSC projects have independently arrived at a number of alternative strategies, which, to varying extents, have successfully replaced the support, and consultative functions of the reference group. One of these strategies, the development of a school based youth issues interagency involving representatives of school clusters, community agencies and the YSC project appears to be particularly successful.

8.5.2 Focus, Direction and Support

The successful management of YSC projects is dependent upon: (1) the collaborative and active involvement of all key stakeholders, including the management committee, to provide a fully informed decision making foundation for focus, support and direction; and (2) clear lines of accountability to management committees, schools and the Department of Families, Youth and Community Care. Project workers become isolated and vulnerable and outcomes much more difficult to achieve when these elements are absent. Conversely where all key stakeholders have been actively involved in reference groups, management committees and in supportive relationships with YSC projects, Youth Support Coordinators have been far less isolated and outcomes have been enhanced. This parallels the findings of Crane and Brannock (1996: 89), Chamberlain and Mackenzie (1998: 140) and the PMYHTF (1999: 20-21).

The problems surrounding reference groups however has meant that they do not and perhaps can not adequately address these requirements. Reference groups, particularly where there has been a lack of active involvement by management committees, have tended to confuse the lines of accountability because they can not take up legal responsibility for the management of the project and yet are in the best position to inform decisions pertaining to focus and direction. Alternatively, management committees have clear legal responsibility but are not usually the best informed. This is particularly unhelpful in an environment where issues of legal liability and duty of care are of paramount importance. Conflicts within reference groups between school representatives and the Youth Support Coordinator have only exacerbated this problem.

The solution to this impasse’ lies within the experience of the Initiative itself. A number of Youth Support Coordinators have developed a range of independent relationships with individual school contacts, Managers within their community organisation, Senior Guidance Officers and Departmental Resource Officers for focus, direction and support. These last two roles have been able to make unique contributions to the ongoing development and review of local YSC projects because they are not directly involved in service delivery to young people within schools and they occupy positions which provide a broader and more detached regional overview. This suggests that the need for more effective collaborative involvement could be resolved through a formalisation of these relationships through the
establishment of local YSC project advisory committees which included a District Education Queensland representative, the DFYCC Resource Officer, a Management Committee representative, school representatives and young people and community members. Clearly defined terms of reference focused upon providing advice to the YSC management committee regarding the:

- development and ongoing review of the operational plan;
- development of an effective grievance procedure accessible to all key stakeholders; and
- coordination of communication with the proposed inter-departmental YSC steering committee;

would maintain clear lines of accountability and ensure that the advisory committee remained purposeful and relevant to the needs of its members whilst increasing ownership of the project as a whole.

Recommendation

The active collaborative involvement of all key stakeholders, including key school personnel and DFYCC officers, be encouraged in the development and ongoing review of operational plans and service delivery and that the options for the operations of local YSC advisory committees be explored further. (Recommendation 4)

8.6 Indigenous Young People

The Initiative as a whole has been highly successful in engaging with indigenous young people in the target group. Interestingly, indigenous young people represent over 17% of the total of identified client contacts whilst they represent only 5.2% of the total school populations. Although an exact comparison is impossible, as a result of the absence of any exact data, this figure would appear to be consistent with the over-representation of indigenous young people amongst early school leavers. For example, the House of Representatives’ *Truancy and Exclusion From School* reported Year 12 school retention rates of only 29% for indigenous females and 22.5% for indigenous males as compared with 76.2% for other non-indigenous students (1996: 51).

A closer examination of these figures reveals that 81% of the indigenous contacts are attributable to the two projects employing indigenous Youth Support Coordinators. A statistic which gives rise to two important questions concerning the efficacy of non-indigenous and indigenous Youth Support Coordinators

The first question relates to the efficacy of projects with non-indigenous Youth Support Coordinators. At first glance the statistic that the eleven ‘non-indigenous’ Coordinators reported direct contact with only 19% (29 young people) of the total number of indigenous young people reported throughout the state appears to be a matter of concern. However it is not possible to draw any strong conclusions from this statistic because it does not capture the full impact of these projects upon the indigenous target group. The majority of these projects adopted indirect strategies in working with indigenous young people, such as closely liaising with indigenous Community Education Counsellors (CEC) within schools or by linking indigenous community organisations to the schools. Indirect strategies of this kind will not be reflected in this figure of 19%. Furthermore many of the non-indigenous
Coordinators noted that it takes time as a non-indigenous worker to build networks and relationships with indigenous Counsellors and the local indigenous community.

Nevertheless this situation needs to be closely assessed. Firstly, it remains to be seen whether the indirect strategies employed by non-indigenous workers will be effective in the long run. Secondly, there is some concern that the current needs of indigenous young people in non-indigenous YSC schools are not being adequately addressed. The fact that the indigenous YSC’s, unlike the non-indigenous YSC’s, receive a significant number of referrals from CEC’s in their schools suggests that there may be needs that CEC’s cannot adequately address. In other words the indigenous YSC’s may be filling a gap which is not currently being filled by non-indigenous YSC’s. Of course this phenomenon could also be the result of local factors or it could simply be a manifestation of necessarily different strategies which both have the same impact in terms of addressing the needs of indigenous young people. In either case a closer examination is necessary to determine the long-term impact upon indigenous young people with projects employing non-indigenous Coordinators.

The second question relates to the efficacy of the indigenous projects. Whilst an evaluation of individual YSC projects was outside of the scope of this evaluation the client contact figures indicate that these services have been remarkably successful in engaging with indigenous young people in the target group. It is also evident from the interviews that the model employed by the YSC project managed by the indigenous organisation was notably different from other models throughout the state. Essentially this model had a far greater emphasis upon working within local indigenous community networks, a characteristic that was shared by the other service employing an indigenous Coordinator. A closer examination of the efficacy of both of these services is likely to produce exceptionally valuable and transportable lessons in good practice - especially in relation to the notoriously difficult problem of indigenous early school leaving.

8.7 Resourcing, Support and Funding

The question of what constitutes adequate resourcing and funding for YSC projects revolves around several inter-connected issues related to the ‘isolation’ of projects, the tension between ‘hands on’ strategies, such as individual counselling and family work, and broader developmental strategies, the particular YSC project model and the accessibility of community services.

8.7.1 YSC ‘Isolation’

Youth Support Coordinators were funded within organisations that already provided a range of other community and youth services. Whilst this has worked well in a number of agencies to reduce the isolation of the YSC and enable integrated service delivery, it has been relatively unsuccessful in a number of others for a range of reasons including: the physical isolation of the worker; subtle and/or major differences in target groups; or simply the fact that other services within the agency were already overwhelmed by demands on limited resources. The end result has been that a significant number of Youth Support Coordinators have been operating in relative isolation as single worker projects.

But the size and nature of the target group and the breadth of the objectives works against the efficacy of single worker projects. Furthermore the delivery of flexible client driven services to families and young people requires significant amounts of
time and energy - a fact which led the PMYHTF to conclude after two years of evaluating early intervention pilots that ‘services with at least two workers are generally more effective’ (1999: 25).

8.7.2 The Tension Between ‘Hands On’ and Developmental Strategies

Whilst there was strong agreement, particularly from schools, that the Initiative needed to maintain a ‘hands on’ or individual and/or family work component, there was also strong agreement that the strengths of the Initiative lay in its ability to developmentally link outside community and government agencies and different community groups to the school. Whole-of-school developmental strategies were also highly valued and are clearly necessary in the outputs relating to dissemination of information and identification. Unfortunately these different strategies do not sit easily together especially as Youth Support Coordinators were providing a service to a number of different schools. The intensive demands of individual counselling and family work are difficult to manage alongside the demands of the developmental strategies.

8.7.3 Accessibility to Services

The tensions between ‘hands on’ and developmental strategies are multiplied in most target areas by the relative paucity of available, accessible or appropriate services.

In particular interviewees reported that the demand for individual and family counselling far outstripped the availability of these services in local areas. The counselling services that did exist were seen to be either inappropriate, because they were culturally inappropriate or targeting a different client group, or inaccessible because of geographic distance or because of long waiting lists.

Available housing services also failed to match the need and in some instances worked against attempts to prevent chronic homelessness and early school leaving. For example, housing, when it is available, is often not in close proximity to the school - which means that young people already struggling to maintain connections with the school, family and friends are presented with another significant barrier which effectively increases the likelihood of a disconnection with these links and subsequently increases the chances of chronic homelessness. Similarly a number of Youth Support Coordinators pointed to problems with Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP) accommodation. SAAP housing was either outside of the local area or was not geared to support young people attending school. Furthermore there are significant dangers in housing young people who are at the point of ‘first break’ from the family, and who are still attempting to maintain ties with their families and their school, with young people who are chronically homeless and permanently disconnected from school.

The lack of alternative education was also cited as a significant problem particularly by Youth Support Coordinators. There was a perception that there was not enough alternative options for young people whose education needs were not being met by the mainstream schooling system.

The lack of these services has placed enormous pressure upon Youth Support Coordinators to attempt the difficult task of responding directly to education needs and long term individual and family counselling whilst at the same time attempting to coordinate responses and employ broad based strategies.
Recommendation

That DFYCC pursue discussions with QLD Housing and other relevant stakeholders to further explore available and potential options for students who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. (Recommendation 12)

8.7.4 YSC Project Models

These tensions still existed but were less apparent where the YSC project balanced the demands of ‘hands on’ and developmental strategies by adopting, what can be described as, a ‘coordination model’, where the emphasis was placed upon the coordination of referrals, group work, whole-of-school strategies and community development rather then on individual counselling or family work. Short-term individual counselling and family work is undertaken by the YSC within the coordination model but long term individual and family work is avoided. The focus of casework quite clearly is upon coordinating referrals.

The coordination of referrals does not mean simply providing information to schools about available community and government services. The coordination of referrals describes a process where the YSC takes the responsibility of ensuring that the holistic welfare needs of individual young people and their families are being addressed. This involves assessment, actively linking young people and their families to a range of appropriate community and government services and follow up with further assessment and referrals depending upon the support needs of the young person and their family.

Similarly community development is much more than interagency networking. Community development in the context of the YSC Initiative also includes actively promoting community agency work within schools through the coordination, co-facilitation or mentoring of specific projects; linking key stakeholders to coordinate responses to identified school based issues; and developing and facilitating specific collaborative projects in response to gaps in service delivery to young people within target schools.

The strength of the coordination model lies in its ability to offer a range of tangible services to schools whilst avoiding the time consuming responsibilities of long term personal and family work. By providing a range of tangible services, including the coordination of referrals, group work, project development, and the provision of training and information to young people, parents and staff, these projects are able to effectively engage and maintain successful partnerships with schools. Importantly these projects are able to reduce the pressures on schools and school support staff by taking up primary responsibility for addressing the complex welfare needs of a specific number of students within the school. By avoiding the time consuming demands of long term individual counselling and family work they are more able to devote time to broad based, group and community development strategies to more effectively deliver on the outputs relating to identification and information.

It is worthwhile pointing out that a number of projects, after initially piloting models involving long term case work, are attempting to shift towards the ‘coordination model’ to increase the impact of their service. Significantly there also appeared to be fewer problems with continuity and accessibility to YSC services with the projects employing a coordination model.
Not surprisingly the broader issue of accessibility to appropriate community and government services still impacted upon this model. But the greater emphasis upon broader based strategies means that there is significantly more potential to develop community and whole of school responses to identified gaps. In the short term at least two of these projects have, with difficulty, surmounted this obstacle by allocating brokerage funds to assist young people and their families to access private provider counselling.

It is important to recognise however that this model may not necessarily match the needs of all schools and all areas, particularly in those areas where there may be fewer appropriate and/or accessible services. Which means that this model is not necessarily ‘better’ than other models in other localities. What needs to be remembered is that the particular strength of the Initiative is that local responses are collaboratively developed in response to local needs.

Recommendation

Recognizing that different locations have different needs (for example, different locations may have a greater identified need for longer term individual counselling and family work) but that a developmental and case coordination model be further articulated and promoted as good practice. (Recommendation 7)

8.7.5 Fewer Schools or Another YSC in Each Project?

Nevertheless the tensions between the demand for ‘hands on’ and developmental strategies have resulted in many key stakeholders questioning the funding levels and/or targeting of the Initiative. There was a general agreement by many schools, YSC projects and Regional Resource Officers that it was necessary to reduce the number of schools per project and/or fund another YSC worker in each project. YSC’s suggested that the funding of two workers would allow the individual and/or family work strategies and developmental strategies to be effectively split which in turn would markedly increase the ability of YSC projects to deliver both individual counselling and family work whilst taking full advantage of developmental strategies. There was some consensus that this would also enable YSC projects to increase the number of schools in each cluster.

Of these two proposals there was much stronger agreement to fund another YSC worker. There are a number of persuasive reasons for this including:

- the tensions between ‘hands on’ and developmental strategies would still exist in a smaller number of schools and that the potential of proactive approaches would therefore still be largely unrealised;
- that it would be extremely difficult to withdraw from an existing target school;
- that rather then reduce the number of schools there was strong pressure to increase the number of schools both to other secondary schools within the area who were already referring to the YSC and to upper primary schools and that employing another worker would allow this to occur;
- that there were distinct advantages in including other local secondary schools within the same area because of shared issues and because of transient students;
that Upper Primary schools were repeatedly identified by schools, YSC projects and DFYCC Regional Officers as pivotal points in the early intervention of early school leaving and the prevention of homelessness. A viewpoint mirrored by the 1992 HRSCEET Literacy inquiry and 1995 HRSCEET Truancy and Exclusion inquiry. YSC projects that were involved in primary schools reported that this was a particularly successful strategy which had a number of distinct advantages including:

- continuity of interventions in families which was particularly relevant for indigenous families;
- addressed the critical point of primary-secondary school transition; and
- improved outcomes based upon early intervention.

Recommendations

That the YSC Initiative be complemented by additional resources which strengthen the capacity for individual and family counselling, support and mediation. (Recommendation 8)

That DFYCC initiate discussions with Education QLD and other relevant stakeholders to identify appropriate responses to Upper Primary Schools. (Recommendation 11)
9.0 Conclusion

“I hope the project continues its a very positive program and the need is very great because there are so many young people crying out for support and assistance that we as teachers can't give them and its therefore essential that we have youth workers to give us professional assistance.” **Deputy Principal**

“What am I going to do with these kids that need help if we don’t have this? I have been begging all year for external people.” **Year Coordinator**

“The Youth Support Coordinator’s shouldn’t underestimate the importance of the work that they are doing.” **Regional Youth Affairs Officer**

The Youth Support Coordinator Initiative has quite clearly been an outstanding success. It has been enthusiastically endorsed by the overwhelming majority of schools and has had a significant impact upon the problems of student homelessness and early school leaving within the target schools within the limitations imposed by time and resources.

As a pioneer the Initiative represents a strong endorsement of the principles of collaboration, coordination and school-community partnerships upon which it was founded. Much of this success has rested upon the enthusiasm and willingness of key stakeholders to bridge the gap between schools and the wider community.

The translation of these principles from theory into practice has not surprisingly raised a number of issues or lessons which, when addressed, can only increase the impact of the Initiative.

The success of the Initiative needs to be considered in the context of these early obstacles, the short time that it has been in operation and it’s relatively small size and limited resources. Essentially this means that the Youth Support Coordinator Initiative has a largely untapped potential to more fully address the major problems of student homelessness and early school leaving across the state.
Bibliography


