Not just fun, worthwhile

Consultation with children and young people on the
NSW Department of Education and Training Futures Project: Excellence and Innovation

“School is important because if you didn't go you would be a lump of jelly.”

“It doesn't need to be fun all the time, not fun, just worthwhile.”

“Teachers and the things they teach need to be relevant and easy to understand if they are going to influence what we do later on in life.”
CONTENTS

1. The Commission for Children and Young People........................................... 2
2. Introduction ...................................................................................................... 2
3. Consultations with Children and Young People about the Futures Project ...................................................... 3
4. Children and Young People’s Participation...................................................... 3
5. Schooling and Training in NSW .................................................................... 4
6. Improving Public Education and Training: Six Action Areas ...................... 7
7. Action Area One: Friendly and respectful teachers ...................................... 9
8. Action Area Two: Engaging teaching and learning strategies ..................... 13
9. Action Area Three: Flexible and diverse curriculum choices ...................... 20
10. Action Area Four: Fair rules that are applied justly .................................... 29
11. Action Area Five: Adequate buildings and facilities ................................... 34
12. Action Area Six: Caring adults at school and home .................................... 38
13. Conclusion .................................................................................................... 41

References ........................................................................................................... 42
1. THE COMMISSION FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

1.1 The NSW Commission for Children and Young People (‘the Commission’) promotes the safety, welfare and well-being of children and young people in NSW.

1.2 The Commission was established by the Commission for Children and Young People Act 1998 (NSW) (‘the Act’). Section 10 of the Commission’s Act lays down three statutory principles which govern the work of the Commission:

a) the safety, welfare and well-being of children are the paramount considerations;

b) the views of children are to be given serious consideration and taken into account; and

c) a co-operative relationship between children and their families and community is important to the safety, welfare and well-being of children.

1.3 Section 12 of the Commission’s Act requires the Commission to give priority to the interests and needs of vulnerable children. Children are defined in the Act as all people under the age of 18 years.

1.4 Section 11(d) of the Act provides that one of the principal functions of the Commission is to make recommendations to government and non-government agencies on legislation, policies, practices and services affecting children.

2. INTRODUCTION

2.1 The Commission is pleased to make a submission to the NSW Department of Education and Training Futures Project consultations.

2.2 There have been many reviews, evaluations and inquiries into the schooling and training systems of New South Wales. Most recently there has been the Public Education Inquiry (Vinson, 2003), the NSW Department of Education and Training’s Time to Teach: Time to Learn (Eltis, 2004) and the investigations of the Minister for Education’s Public Education Council.1 Each of these studies consulted with community members to gain their perspectives on the future of schooling and training. These three inquiries give a good picture of the strengths, challenges and competing interests of schooling and training at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

2.3 The recommendations of many other research studies, inquiries and evaluations, including the whole of government NSW Aboriginal Development Plan – Two Ways Together and the Commission’s Suicide and risk-taking deaths of children and young people and Report of an Inquiry into the best

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1 The Commission regrets the decision to disband the Public Education Council. The Council’s approach exemplified best practice in listening to and acting on the advice of children and young people. Its investigations and suggestions on Early Childhood were important contributions to maintaining quality at this essential stage of learning. As an exemplar of genuine participation the Council will be greatly missed, as will its championship of public education in NSW.
means of assisting children and young people with no-one to turn to, add richness and depth to the picture and reveal the complexities and hopes of the community about the education of children and young people.

2.4 This report is a compilation of the perceptions, concerns and ideas provided by children and young people during the Commission’s consultations about education in New South Wales. The views of children and young people are supported by the ideas found in research into the strengths and weaknesses of schooling and training today.

2.5 The words of children and young people speak clearly of their experiences in the schools and colleges of New South Wales today. They also share many of their hopes and aspirations about improvements that could make going to school and college a more relevant and enriching experience for future generations.

3. CONSULTATIONS WITH CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE ABOUT THE FUTURES PROJECT

3.1 In preparing this submission, the Commission consulted with approximately 120 children and young people aged 4 - 19 years through a series of small focus group consultations.

3.2 During December 2004 and January 2005 15 focus groups were conducted with children and young people in different parts of New South Wales. Groups deliberately sought out the views of children and young people across the spectrum of experience with schooling and training. The Commission spoke with children and young people who are successful learners, those who are ‘successful enough’ learners, those who struggle to get through, those who are about to begin school, those who have left mainstream schools and colleges to attend alternative programs and those who by choice or coercion have left schooling and training.

3.3 Focus groups were held with children and young people attending Government, Catholic and Independent schools, as well as with those attending alternative programs, TAFE courses or university courses. The focus groups included children and young people from metropolitan, regional, rural and remote areas; Indigenous backgrounds; culturally and linguistically diverse family backgrounds; and varying socio-economic groups. The Commission also consulted with young people who are homeless, children and young people with disabilities and young people in a juvenile detention centre.

4. CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE’S PARTICIPATION

4.1 When things change for the better in school communities it is often the result of the participation of children and young people. Varnham (2004)
suggests that the active participation of children and young people in the decision making of their schools and colleges benefits all stakeholders.

_Not only does the greater inclusion of children in school decision making benefit schools themselves but society benefits through the growing up of children who understand the importance of respect for human rights and the practical reality of democratic decision making._

4.2 In fact adults often say that the participation of children and young people was the driving force behind their success.

_Students showed that, given the opportunity, they have the capacity and energy to promote change, to identify racism, to challenge discriminatory behaviours and to uncompromisingly demand radical change in themselves, their peers and their families._

4.3 Holdsworth (1986) suggests that ‘participation’ has a variety of meanings in schools and colleges. These meanings include simply a _passive presence_ such as being in a classroom or staying on to Year 12, to taking part in activities over which they have no say and having a say in discussions. Holdsworth believes these are limited forms of student participation and by participation he means:

… an active role for students in decisions about and implementation of education policies and practices and of the key issues that determine the nature of the world in which they live.

4.4 Opportunities for children and young people’s participation in schools exist not just in the governance of the school but also in the teaching, learning and curriculum choices available to students. These opportunities for broader participation in school life should be available to all children and young people, not just a few.

5. SCHOOLING AND TRAINING IN NSW TODAY

5.1 Since the time of Plato societies have argued about the content of education. Public education in NSW is no stranger to controversy and at the beginning of the 21st century there is much to debate.

5.2 Lingard & Ladwig (2001), Neumann (1996) and Vinson (2002) say that one of the fundamental problems with schooling and training at the beginning of the 21st century is that competing values and purposes jostle for emphasis in educational practise. They suggest it is time for a re-visioning of the purposes

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of public schooling. This re-visioning would bring a 21st century perspective to balancing three competing perspectives of what public schools should be doing:

• nurturing the sense of a shared community life
• promoting ‘a fair go for all’
• gaining access to employment and life opportunities.

5.3 When **nurturing a sense of a shared community life** public schools and colleges play their part in assisting children and young people to develop friendships and social networks, compassion for others and respect for the diversity found in Australian society and around the world.

*It’s important to go to school to learn, get a job, learn for life.*

5.4 When **promoting ‘a fair go for all’** public schools and colleges labour to assist children and young people to be competent in literacy and numeracy so that they can access information, discern bias in information and make informed judgements and decisions.

5.5 When schools and colleges promote ‘a fair go for all’ they also provide of a range of curriculum options and specific interventions to cater for talents, interests and aspirations of all children and young people in their charge. This includes assisting those young people whose success at school and in life is limited by educational or social disadvantage.

5.6 Rigby (2002), Collins (1996), Smolicz (2001) and Engle (1996) each reminds us that promoting ‘a fair go for all’ must also overcome the negative influences of discrimination that can undermine the learning of those who encounter bullying, sex-based harassment, prejudice and racism or disruptions to their emotional well-being. The aim of this sort of fair go is resilience.

5.7 When focusing on helping young people with **gaining access to employment and life opportunities** schools and colleges act as gateways for entry to employment and the life opportunities afforded by paid work.

*School is important …learning, and making friends…so you can get a job in the future.*

5.8 Although all three purposes are considered important components of a healthy public education system, it is common for the first two to be emphasised by education professionals and the third, the economic and instrumental purpose, to have greater emphasis among parents, students and employers.

**5.9 Education as a ‘user pays’ commodity**

5.9.1 Authors such Bowles & Gintis (1996) and Caldwell & Spinks (1988) influenced the adoption of economic rationalism which has become the dominant management approach in public education over the last decade. This

5.9.2 Supporters of this approach say it increases parental choice and promotes healthy competition. Critics say that has had severely detrimental impacts on public schools.

There has been a variably successful attempt to turn schools and other education institutions into market-based service providers competing for customers (students) both between and within systems. The marketisation of education, has seriously damaged the notion of universal provision and the promotion of choice as both a right and a market mechanism, has seriously damaged the idea that equity must underpin that provision.5

5.9.3 Apple (1995b) argues that these ideas have had a detrimental impact on the management and outcomes of schooling and training.

We have in fact transformed the meaning of democracy, so now it’s almost all about consumption practices. We have de-classed, de-raced, and de-gendered people, de-sexed them, de-territorialized them in some ways, so that we're all individuals. What's public is bad, and what's private is good, by and large.6

5.9.4 Signs of these principles have emerged within the schooling and training system of New South Wales. Rather than releasing funds to allow all public schools to provide quality education for all, a focus on ‘market forces and choice’ is drawing students and finances away from comprehensive public schools in favour of selective schools within the public sector and schools of the private sector. Increasingly, the children of those who can afford to pay go to well resourced schools and colleges. Those unable to pay must make do with what is available in their local public school.

5.9.5 In this environment, the notion of a ‘level playing field’ is rapidly disappearing. Wealthy schools, (both public and private), play hard to attract the ‘good students’ whose HSC results confirm community perceptions of the school’s ability to ‘value add’ when it counts. Good results in public tests and examinations yield more students. More students and more fees yield the means to offer better resources, a chief predictor of student opportunity and success.

5.9.6 Public education has traditionally looked after the disadvantaged and helped many to achieve their best. It has been a critical force in transforming lives and assisting individuals to higher learning and better employment opportunities. Allowing supremacy of ‘market forces’ over ‘principles of equity’ will diminish the capacity of the schools and colleges of the most disadvantaged to bridge

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the ever widening gap between what they can provide and what is offered to children and young people who attend wealthier schools and colleges.

6. IMPROVING PUBLIC EDUCATION AND TRAINING: SIX ACTION AREAS

6.1 Children and young people participating in the Commission’s consultations on *Excellence and Innovation* highlighted many of the issues and concerns raised by other children and young people in previous consultations and inquiries about public education in New South Wales. Comparing these comments with the concepts identified in the literature, there is remarkable coherence in the critical factors identified by children and young people and adult researchers.

6.2 This coherence may be surprising to some, and yet, as children and young people spend so much time in schools and colleges it really shouldn’t be all that startling. Children and young people’s regular observations enable them to identify the very things that researchers and evaluators write about after visiting their schools to investigate what is happening.

6.3 For this report the consistent messages of the children and young people we spoke with have been summarised into six *Action Areas*. To improve the quality and outcomes of public education children and young people suggest that schooling and training needs:

- friendly and respectful teachers
- engaging teaching and learning strategies
- flexible and diverse curriculum choices
- fair rules that are applied justly
- adequate buildings and facilities, and
- caring adults to support children and young people at school and home.

6.4 None of these expectations is new. None is likely to be unexpected. The views of children and young people confirm that the best teachers, schools and colleges have always met these expectations and meet them now. The challenge for the NSW Department of Education and Training is to build on the undoubted successes of many of its teachers, schools and training colleges in meeting these expectations to maintain an organisational climate in which the determination to meet these expectations flourishes.

6.5 The good news for the NSW Department of Education and Training and its teachers is that, although they would prefer a bit more ‘fun’, the majority of children and young people do recognise the successes of their own teachers, schools and colleges in nurturing their sense of community, giving them a fair go at acquiring the basics and helping them to work towards life and career aspirations.

*I love my school. I like my teachers. I enjoy my lessons.*
I’m not very mathematically minded. I don’t like it but I had to do it up until year 10. I liked getting exposed to different things, even if I didn’t like them – broad general knowledge.

6.6 On the other hand, there is a minority, though not insignificant number of young people, for whom current methods of schooling and training bring only frustration and failure. We need to do more for those young people who struggle to get to school, enjoy limited success or unrelenting failure and do not achieve anything like their potential or aspirations. It remains a serious concern that most of the young people in this group are from families among the least well-off in our community in terms of wealth, health, employment opportunities and family resources.

I hate school.

Rather come here (alternative education centre) than school. Coming here is nice and slow. People are not bashing you.

Not interested in the subjects being taught, not relevant to life.

Waste of time, school. They got me doing the gardening.

6.7 Going to school is important

6.7.1 Although some children and young people said they would prefer a life without the need to go to school, the majority recognised that they needed to go to school and most wanted to attend. Most young people thought it was important to at least finish Year 10 and that having a compulsory age school attendance age of 15 years was a good thing.

Going to primary school to learn.

It’s important to go to school to learn, get a job, learn for life.

School prepares you for life, especially subjects like life skills that give you general knowledge and teach practical information.

Education is important. Because you get a better foundation.

6.7.2 Even young people who had left school early said that going to school was important, but it just hadn’t worked out for them. One young person the Commission spoke with told us that he wants his own children:

To go to school ... learn as much as they can and do their homework when they come home.

6.7.3 Children and young people accept that they need to go to school to learn. They also pointed out that school is one of the most important places to make friends and maintain friendships. In many cases it is their friends who motivate them to keep attending school and provide support when they have troubles.

You make friends and build strong relationships.
I get to see all my friends.

7. **ACTION AREA ONE: FRIENDLY AND RESPECTFUL TEACHERS**

7.1 **Teachers as critical to education**

7.1.1 Both children and young people acknowledge teachers as the most critical element making a difference to the quality of their experience of schooling and training. It is worth emphasising that children and young people identified ‘teachers’ and not ‘teaching’ as the most important element.

*My teacher makes the subject interesting.*

*The teachers.*

*It’s probably the individual teacher, like, their personality and that, that’s what you get along with, teachers, their personality.*

7.1.2 The youngest children, who were about to leave pre-school and start Kindergarten in 2005, had both idealised and realistic expectations of their prospective teachers.

*I want my teacher to be like Batman and teach me how to fly, but a real teacher won’t be like that.*

*Teachers will be cool.*

*If I were the teacher I would say “everyone on the carpet, sit down and we will read stories”.*

7.1.3 Vygostky (1978) and Bernstein (1972) wrote about the impacts of social relations in classrooms. They say that relationships with others play a fundamental role in the development of thinking and learning.

*Every function in the child’s cultural development appears twice: first, on the social level, and later, on the individual level; first, between people (interpsychological) and then inside the child (intrapsychological). This applies equally to voluntary attention, to logical memory, and to the formation of concepts. All the higher functions originate as actual relationships between individuals.*

7.1.4 Bruner (1966) says that children are social beings and, through social interactions, acquire frameworks for interpreting their world. Bruner’s insights about learning have underpinned experiments where children and young people learn together as learners and teachers.

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7.1.5 Teachers are major figures in the worlds of children and young people. The relationships they form with learners play a large role in determining attitudes about schooling, ongoing engagement with learning and consequently the ultimate success or failure of the children and young people they teach.

7.1.6 In recent years there has been a slump in the status of teaching as a career within the Australian community. Hargraves and Lo (2000) suggest that the lower status of the teaching profession is a result of the co modification of education mentioned earlier. They say that:

While teachers and schools are the catalysts of change in the informational society, they are also its casualties - casualties of the weakening of the welfare safety net, casualties of reduced expenditure on the public good, casualties of students’ families caught in social upheaval, casualties of the widespread de-commitment to public life.8

7.1.7 Children and young people said that in their schools and colleges there are many teachers who are ‘good enough’ at relating to students, there are some teachers who can establish quality relationships with some kids but not others, and there are a few teachers who are ‘really cool’ and who are able to gain the respect and admiration of most if not all students.

7.1.8 From the experiences of children and young people it is also clear that there are a substantial number of teachers, which some young people we spoke called ‘stress-heads’, in schools today who have not developed or who do not sufficiently display this critical competency.

7.2 Good teachers

7.2.1 When asked to explain what they meant by their answer, ‘teachers’, children and young people were unanimous in explaining that good teachers are those who know how to create and maintain quality relationships with students and how to maintain fair boundaries of acceptable behaviour without demeaning, bullying or being disrespectful.

Teachers should know how to talk to you, to communicate with you and get along with you just like friends.

Good teachers are funny, want to help you learn and are friendly in class and outside.

Teachers who talk with you like an adult and connect are good.

Teachers should be like a good mate, easy going.

I like my teacher ‘cause he listens to what you have to say and lets you explain.

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Need to reach a balance between being nice to students and in control of the class.

7.2.2 Some young people suggested that teachers need to work on developing their relationships with students outside the class room and there are ways that schools can help facilitate this.

Could have student and teacher netball games for example. Just muck around, have fun together where everyone’s equal.

7.3 Bad teachers

7.3.1 In a similar way, children and young people were not reticent in identifying characteristics of poor teachers. In essence these were factors that disrupted quality relationships or resulted in differential treatment for some children or young people.

Schools would be better if teachers treated students with respect.

If I don’t take that shit [yelling, bad treatment] at home, why should I take at school from a teacher?

Sometimes the teachers aren’t as understanding as you’d like them to be.

Makes you feel unmotivated to learn when a teachers says, ‘I don’t want to be here either.’

He wouldn’t explain to you how to do the work. He wouldn’t talk to the class. He would just sit down and read his book and leave the work on the board for you to do … He didn’t even try. That’s a bad teacher.

7.3.2 When asked about the things they don’t like about school, children and young people often said:

Grumpy teachers.

Mean teachers or teachers who give hard work or lots of homework.

Teachers who lose it and shout.

7.4 Teachers influence learning

7.4.1 One of the startling impacts of the quality of relationships between teachers and students is that good relationships ‘turn children and young people on’ to learning and poor relationships ‘turn children and young people off’ learning.

Teachers make you like the subject or not.

My Maths teacher likes me. I like Maths.

I like English because I want to be a writer. I have two teachers for English. One’s really bad and one’s really good. The good one teaches us a lot and our class always listens – we don’t do that in every class.
Not really what they are teaching but how they teach.

I’ve got a Maths teacher who only picks on me and three other guys and no-one else. He makes me not enjoy it even more. That’s the only subject I don’t like.

7.4.2 Despite their diminished status, teachers and what they do in their classrooms remain the most critical determinant of the success or failure of children and young people.

7.4.3 Ben-Peretz (2001) says that teacher education programs need to create two things:
   - teachers who know how to manage the learning of children and young people in learning communities
   - a learning community of teachers who esteems both theoretical investigation and practical wisdom, that is a pedagogy of inquiry.

7.4.4 Australian researcher Ken Rowe (2003) says that teachers make a difference, for good or bad in the learning of the children and young people they teach.

   … the key message to be gained from the educational effectiveness research sited … is that quality teachers and their professional development do make a difference, and that it is not so much what students bring with them that really matters, but what they experience on a day-to-day basis in interaction with teachers and other teachers in classrooms.9

7.4.5 Rowe (2003) says that it is extremely important for teachers to undertake quality professional development throughout their careers. He suggests that any proposed changes to improve student success will be wasted unless teachers have opportunities to learn about them and absorb them into their personal pedagogies. He takes a swipe at current management practices when he says:

   A reliance on curriculum standards and stateside assessment strategies without paying due attention to teacher quality appears to be insufficient to gain the improvements in student outcomes sought. The quality of teacher education and teaching appear to be more strongly related to teacher achievement than class size, overall spending levels or teacher salaries.10

7.5 Children and young people’s participation in teacher education

7.5.1 The Commission is interested in the exciting potential of work by Helen Cahill at the University of Melbourne who has developed a new pedagogy which involves young people playing a key role in assisting teachers to develop relationship skills.

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9 Rowe, K. J. (2003). The Importance of Teacher Quality as a key determinant of Students’ Experiences and Outcomes of Schooling. ACER Improving Learning, ACER: Melbourne, p24.
10 Ibid. p21.
7.5.2 This work arose from the observation that despite considerable expertise and knowledge in their subject areas, teachers often complete their training with limited practice in communicating or understanding children and young people who will be their students. As part of the program, young people conduct workshops with teaching students, using role-play and problem solving activities to educate teaching students on communicating with young people about social, emotional and health issues.

7.5.3 The Commissions considers that this work could be adapted for teacher training in New South Wales.

Towards improving public education and training

Children and young people unanimously identified the ability to establish and maintain quality relationships with kids as characteristic of ‘good teachers’ and as a critical quality lacking in teachers they thought of as ‘bad teachers’. The consistency of this response across age-groups suggests that development of the critical capacity to develop and maintain friendly and respectful relationships with children and young people should not be left to the randomness of personal qualities alone.

- The Commission recommends that pre-service teaching training should include developmental experiences for trainees in developing and refining this critical competency. Assessments during the period of probationary service in schools prior to obtaining registration from the NSW Institute of Teachers should include certification that graduate teachers have demonstrated appropriate skills in establishing and maintaining quality relationships with the children and young people in their classes and school communities.

- The Commission also recommends that the Department of Education and Training encourage schools to increase awareness of the benefits of teachers interacting in positive ways with students outside formal classroom settings at school.

8. **ACTION AREA TWO: ENGAGING TEACHING AND LEARNING STRATEGIES**

8.1 Children and young people spend the bulk of their time at school in lessons with teachers. They told us that the quality of what they experience in those lessons varies greatly from teacher to teacher, class to class, school to school.

8.2 In New South Wales today, the objectives and outcomes of syllabuses are the foundation, though not the full extent of the curriculum taught in schools and colleges. The ways teachers go about capturing the interest of learners and encouraging sustained learning during individual lessons as well as over a
course of study, is pedagogy. Pedagogy is the foundation of every teacher’s work and has enormous influence on the success and failure of learners.

*The only problem with school is that it’s very curriculum based. I reckon they should have more flexible teachers. History … English … Maths all have interesting stuff. But because it’s so curriculum based it’s really dry. It doesn’t grab you. That’s one of the things that got me out of school.*

8.3 Rowe’s (2003) assertion that teachers require quality professional development means that teacher educators, the teachers of teachers, must possess a rich understanding of pedagogy. An understanding that enables them to show teachers how to develop personal pedagogies that capture and sustain student interest, but which are also flexible enough to change when the needs of learners in their classes change.

8.4 Unfortunately this doesn’t seem to be the case. The training of most teachers takes an ‘assume every one is the same’ approach and devotes insufficient time to training in pedagogies that can cope with the wide range of learning talents and interests that are present in every group of learners. Ramsey (2000) identified this critical failing.

*Inordinate interest exists in universities in the school curriculum, especially in the Higher School Certificate, but at other levels as well. When the question is asked about the pedagogy needed to teach a prepared syllabus, the discipline areas have little to offer….For a university to be at the forefront of research in its discipline without being expert on the pedagogy required to pass on its major concepts to others, is an anomaly that universities must address.*

8.5 The comments that follow reveal a little of what children and young people experience. They also reveal the need to achieve greater consistency in the quality of teaching that children and young people receive.

8.6 *The best teaching and learning is fun*

8.6.1 Children and young people of all ages said that making learning fun was a characteristic they admired in the best teachers. It was often said that the best teachers made learning ‘fun’ and that as a consequence learning was easier.

*Big school will be fun.*

*I reckon a good teacher is willing to actually try to make it fun to learn than just plain old boring copy off the board.*

*Good teachers make learning interesting and fun.*

*When lessons are fun it’s easier to learn.*

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8.6.2 What children and young people meant when they said teaching or lessons were ‘fun’ depended on their own age, experience and interests. The range of meanings of fun could be summarised as:

- **Hands-on activities** – Examples of hands-on activities that children and young people thought were fun included crafts, art, sports, music, computing, experiments in Science and VET-related activities such as horticulture, mechanics and work skills.

  *Should be more PE.*

  ... doing woodwork and metalwork ... build toolboxes, CD racks, stuff you can use.

- **Extra-curricula activities** – Examples of extra curricula activities that made school or learning fun were debating, sport, chess, choir, clubs, student representative council, cadets, excursions and community service. The main point about these activities was that children and young people themselves chose to participate and they provided social opportunities. The activities brought them into contact with potential new friends, often across age-groups and schools.

  *Good teachers let you go on excursions.*

- **Getting outside more** – Many boys, but certainly not all boys and equally some girls as well, exemplified fun at school as getting away from the desk and classrooms to be outside more. They thought it was good to be playing games, sports or doing activities such as drawing in Art, observing in Science, measuring in Maths and doing surveys in English and Human Society and Its Environment.

  ... they take you out on a farm and you do farm work, like learning to drive tractors and stuff.

- **Technology** – The use of equipment and technologies, particularly computers, was a frequently identified example of how teachers could make learning more fun. Children and young people spoke of the best teachers using technologies to promote learning, to make learning easier and to break the monotony of teacher talk and books.

  *Using computers is the best thing about school.*

8.6.3 The task faced by public schools and teachers in providing learning experiences that are fun and appropriate for the diversity among students is complex. This complexity was readily demonstrated by the children and young people who participated in the Commission’s consultations.
8.6.4 While all children and young people agreed that schooling and training would be improved if the fun content of lessons overall was increased, there was only limited agreement about how this could be achieved. Any suggestion offered by some kids as a way to increase fun met with rolled eyes, sighs and groans of disagreement from others. Whatever the suggestions, there were children and young people, who by virtue of their talents, interests and personal preferences, did not agree that it would result in more fun for them at school. In fact, some kids believed that adopting some suggested activities would be detrimental to their success and participation in schooling or training.

I like lessons. I don’t want to go outside and play.

I like school. You learn good stuff ... numbers ... spelling ... words ... writing ... tables.

I'm hopeless at woodwork and crafts. That wouldn't suit me.

Extra curricula activities are often not interesting for many students, eg. sports carnivals, especially for girls as they get older.

8.7 The best teaching makes learning and success feel easy

8.7.1 An important aspect of the fun in lessons envisioned by children and young people is the notion of learning being easy. They often said that if a subject is easy you like it and find it fun, but if it is hard then you simply don’t find it fun.

Learning at my school is easy. I like it.

School is easy.

Maths is easy.

English is easy.

8.7.2 To make it clear what they meant by ‘easy’, children and young people said that it’s not that they want exercises and activities that are too simple. That would be boring. What they were recalling were those lessons in which teachers introduced them to new concepts or tasks in ways that they could understand.

I like keeping busy and doing work.

The teacher does diagrams on the board. That makes it easier for us to understand.

8.7.3 For children and young people, it doesn’t matter if the activities are challenging as long as the teacher provides enough support and guided practice. In this approach to teaching and learning, children and young people note that teachers focus on helping them to succeed not on making it hard.

Things are much easier here because you get help, I'm good at Maths and English now, but wasn't at school.
8.7.4 Some children and young people said that it was difficult for teachers to provide individual help to everyone who needed it because there are so many people in the class.

I'm a bit slow with reading and writing. The teachers say take your time, but you've got to finish in their time. I couldn't get help. There were too many kids.

8.8 The best teaching and learning captures interest

8.8.1 Both children and young people recognise that they can't expect every part of every lesson to be fun. They recognise that sometimes learning requires effort and a bit of struggle to 'get things'. They recognise also that in the real world, some things, (like going to work or attending school), have to be done even if a person would prefer not to do them.

8.8.2 It is not an unending flow of fun that children and young people expected from teachers, (although if it were possible that would be appreciated). Rather, they wanted all teachers to have the skills to capture and motivate their interest in learning. They suggested that some teachers have this skill already, but not all teachers.

It doesn't have to be fun all the time, not fun, just worthwhile.

I like how she varies the way we learn, it keeps us awake and alert and helps us memorise stuff.

A teacher's passion for their subject helps.

Good if they challenge and push students a little.

Whether I do their homework depends on whether they check it.

8.9 Poor teaching and learning strategies

8.9.1 Children and young people were easily able to identify things that they considered were examples of poor teaching strategies. They gave examples such as making students write or read large amounts of text from the board, textbooks or photocopies sheets.

You have those ones who just read it out of a textbook. You can't relate to them. You don't feel like they are a person, they're just like this machine spitting out information.

Teachers need to teach students, not just give them questions to answer.

Don't learn from homework and repetition, just making mistakes over and over again.
It's alright if teachers write everything on the board 'cause you just copy it ... No, you don't learn it. When it comes to exams I'd just stay home or try to copy off someone.

8.10 **Composite classes and mixed ability classes**

8.10.1 Some children and young people had strong views about the impact on learning of being in composite classes in the primary years and mixed ability classes throughout their schooling and training.

*Composite classes are not good. If you’re good at things you finish long before the younger kids and have to wait. It’s boring.*

*I preferred composite classes – friendlier.*

*Teachers always help the younger kids in composite classes. We got told, “Do pages 45-49.”*

*Mixed ability classes depend on class size so teachers have time for everyone.*

8.11 **Homework isn’t always useful**

8.11.1 The issue of doing homework was raised by children and young people in most consultations. Opinions varied about doing homework and its usefulness in learning. A number of children and young people remarked that if not taught properly at school then they are merely practising mistakes at home. Of concern was the lack of support or reference at home when attempting to do homework.

*Don’t learn from homework and repetition, just making mistakes over and over again.*

*Its good to have homework, but you gotta have someone there to help you do it. My sisters were there to help me.*

*I do my homework depending on the teacher, if they don’t push me or check the homework I won’t do it.*

*Hopeless … unless you have hard arse parents who make you do work at home.*

*Don’t do my homework ‘cos there’s no one to help me.*

8.11.2 Both children and young people commented that doing homework sometimes leaves no time for anything else in their lives, and if they are genuinely busy and do not complete set tasks at home they are punished or fall behind.

8.11.3 Young people consistently raised concerns about assessment schedules not being coordinated across subject departments. This results in unrealistic expectations and excessive workloads for many young people.
They assume school is your life and that you don’t have other subjects.

I had five assignments due at once – you can’t do it.

They all wait to the end to give you assignments. There needs to be communication between faculties so you can do your best.

8.12 Use exams and tests, but other things too

8.12.1 Few children and young people like exams and tests, particularly those that make them feel that the greatest emphasis is on results rather than learning. A number of children and young people expressed anxieties about tests and examinations.

Typically what happens is you get stressed, your mind goes blank and by the time you have sorted yourself out the exam time is up.

They are designed for those people who remember a lot. They’re not the fairest way to judge people.

It’s all about the marks. It should be based on how you can improve. There needs to be more of a focus on learning from your mistakes.

HSC brings too much pressure and expectation from everyone, teachers, family and friends.

Will it really matter if you get 50% or 90% in six months? There’s too much pressure. They rely on the number and ranking too much. Does it really matter if you came first or last?

8.12.2 Even though they don’t like them much, the majority of children and young people accept the need for some testing and examinations in assessment programs monitoring their progress. Many young people call for alternatives to the pressure of the Higher School Certificate (HSC) examinations and other exams.

Exams only test your memory.

Because different people have different skills, [it’s] unfair to written tests all the time and base everything on these.

Should be another way to assess knowledge, rather than testing, eg. class participation.

It’s all about the marks. It should be based on how you can improve. There needs to be more of a focus on learning from your mistakes.

Towards improving public education and training

Children and young people’s comments about approaches that increase the amount of fun in lessons suggest that teachers need support to apply this approach to bring greater success to students and to enrich their teaching and leaning programs.
The Commission recommends that the quality teaching framework introduced in the discussion document *Quality teaching and learning in New South Wales schools* be investigated and implemented extensively in schools.

The Commission also recommends that greater investment be made in the ongoing professional development of teachers. It is suggested that rather than ‘train the trainer’ packages, this development provides opportunities for teachers to come together to consider and solve common teaching and learning concerns.

It is suggested that one way to make the curriculum relevant and teaching engaging is to get feedback from students and to encourage their participation in curriculum development, the choice of subjects offered and the manner in which subjects are taught.

9. ACTION AREA THREE: FLEXIBLE AND DIVERSE CURRICULUM CHOICES

9.1 The curriculum is the foundation of schooling and training in the New South Wales education system. It sets out what students are expected to learn and establishes the goals that teachers and students work to achieve. It also guides the selection of content through which goals are achieved and determines the criteria by which students are assessed and schools held accountable by their communities.

9.2 Currently, HSC examinations and the University Admissions Index (UAI) which is based on HSC results, exert tremendous pressure on the curriculum and the way it is taught. The pressure to succeed at the HSC is most directly felt by young people and their families in the last two years of high school. There is evidence, however, that anxiety about getting a good HSC result is creeping down the years so that families are paying for children aged nine and ten years to attend coaching schools in preparation for entrance tests for ‘opportunity classes’ and selective high schools. In a similar way, families engage tutors for their secondary aged children to help them whenever their results do not match expectations.

9.3 The academic focus of the curriculum with the HSC as the gateway to tertiary entrance, suits many young people, but not all. Young people, both those who succeed in the academic curriculum and those who find it a trial, say that schools should offer academic, vocational and life skills options from which young people can ‘mix and match’ to tailor a course of study that suits their talents, interests and aspirations.

9.4 Frow (2001) has said that schools are the only place in contemporary Australian society that have access to most children and young people of the
nation. This access, combined with a reliance on education as a chief agent of
cchange, leads to unreasonable demands being placed on the curriculum of
schools. In response to the increasing demand in the 1970s for schools to
remedy the failings of families and societies, Bernstein (1972) made this pithy
statement:

*Schools cannot save society.* 12

9.5 Teachers say that it’s not that what is in the curriculum is of itself
inconsequential, just that there is too much of it to fit in. The NSW Department
learning in NSW schools* recognised that the curriculum was very crowded.
The Review recommended the number of curriculum outcomes be reduced by
identifying a smaller number of outcomes that would become mandatory.

9.6 Reducing the number of outcomes to a manageable level is a good idea.
However, as the recent attempt by teachers to nominate mandatory outcomes
for the primary school curriculum demonstrates, choosing the outcomes to be
mandatory and those to be left out can only be achieved by measuring their
importance against a set of values. Foster (2004) says

*The proposed mandatory outcomes show that when ‘biting the bullet’ to
make the hard choices, even diligent, caring teachers believe that
outcomes striving for equality and a decent, compassionate society go so
far down the list they miss out on mandatory inclusion. Shame-faced as
we might feel, it is essential that we face the reality that few parents or
teachers faced with the same choices would choose differently. The stark
question remains, by choosing what we think is best for our kids, will our
kids have to pay too high a price later?* 13

9.7 *Everyone needs ‘the basics’*

9.7.1 Most children and young people the Commission spoke with agree about the
role of schools, essentially primary schools, in helping all kids to acquire the
basics of literacy and numeracy.

*School is important because if you didn’t go you would be a lump of jelly,
you won’t know anything when people ask you.*

*School helps you learn about life and then you can get a job, go to TAFE or
Uni if you want.*

*You need the basics, like reading and writing … and numbers.*

9.7.2 Some young people expressed concern that others at their schools could not
read properly. They said that the basics like reading, writing and mathematics

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13 Foster, D. (2004). *Boys will be boys, but do they have to be?* in *Occasional Papers,* Catholic Board of Continuing Education: Sydney, p. 3.
need to be taught thoroughly at primary school because by the time they reach high school they are expected to 'just know it'.

*It’s so shocking to see people in our year who can’t read properly. Like they just slipped through the system. That shouldn’t be happening.*

*Reading needs to be targeted in primary school. As soon as you hit high school, you are expected to read.*

9.7.3 Basic Skills Tests and English Language and Literacy Assessment (ELLA) results confirm that overall the majority of children and young people in NSW are achieving required literacy and numeracy benchmarks.

9.7.4 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OEDC: 2000, 2003) statistics reveal that children and young people in New South Wales do better in reading and mathematics than the kids of most developed countries.14

9.7.5 Nevertheless, there remain concerns, ranging from mild to serious, for those children and young people who do not reach anticipated benchmarks for their age. Young people in this group confirmed that appropriate support from schools makes a difference.

*I’m not good at reading and writing, but I’m learning it here. The teachers and other kids who have had trouble help me.*

*Some teachers care and pay special attention to me.*

*Both the school and carers have been very supportive, helping me keep doing well at school.*

*There are people to support you if you need extra help with work or personal problems.*

9.7.6 Literacy and numeracy are not the only things that children and young people consider to be basics that are the foundation of a fair go for all. They mentioned a range of intervention and support strategies that they have experienced or seen operating to assist other students to do better at school.

*The Intensive English Centre is a good place. It helps you learn English, make friends and learn how school works in Australia.*

9.8 *One size does not fit all*

9.8.1 Young people advise that no matter how well any restructuring of the curriculum manages to suit some or even most, it will not suit the diverse needs of all children and young people. The subjects and courses that some find interesting and engrossing, others find boring or irrelevant.

*What I’m good at suits me. But it doesn’t suit everyone.*

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Don’t pay much attention in classes that I have no interest in.

Yeah, but I think it (going to school) is still over-rated. Teachers, parents and students put too much value on it. There are other options after school that will get you places.

The only problem with school is that it’s very curriculum based. I reckon they should have more flexible teachers … It’s really dry. It doesn’t really grab you.

9.8.2 Some young people recommend that the bodies making decisions about what goes into the curriculum should include the voices of those who have to study it – children and young people themselves.

Should have students on Board of Studies to keep the curriculum relevant.

9.8.3 It’s not that young people wish to take over the decision-making about the curriculum of schools and colleges, they simply want their views to be heard and taken seriously along with those of other stakeholders.

9.9 Keep curriculum relevant

9.9.1 Children and young people spoke of their preference for a curriculum in which they could follow their interests and talents. A curriculum of this sort, they said, would be relevant to their lives.

It doesn’t have to be fun all the time, just worthwhile.

Not interested in the subjects being taught. Not relevant to my life.

I don’t really like school. I think that there should be a way to learn but also give the students like an opportunity to do something they want to do.

9.9.2 For some children and young people, ‘relevance’ is synonymous with ‘being active and doing things with my hands’. These kids request teaching and learning activities that yield tangible results and that both they and others could use to establish that they have done something. Preferably something that brings direct benefits to their own lives.

Our school is good – we have excursions, BBQs, school camps and juggling.

I’m better at using my hands. Like mechanics, I can do it and I get more out of it.

Practical subjects like woodwork, cooking and PE.

Design, art are good – frees your mind and gives your logical mind a break.

Music is my favourite – teacher uses different methods of teaching, varies them to keep you awake and you go on excursions.

Using computers in lessons is good - useful.
9.9.3 Other children and young people did not discount this view of relevance but were keen to assert that some kids were better at academic study than at using their hands in practical classes.

Nothing I do in woodwork ever works out. I’m better at Maths and Science.

Not everyone is good at practical subjects.

PE and sport are stressful if you’re not good at them.

9.9.4 As this range of comments indicates, whether particular subjects or activities were considered ‘relevant’ and ‘interesting’ depended to a large extent on the level of success children and young people experienced when they attempted them.

9.10 **Offer a wide variety of choice to suit needs and interests**

9.10.1 As well as having more fun at school, many children were keen that their schools provide as wide a range of experiences as possible both in their lessons and in the extra-curricula offerings.

I like doing numbers and reading. My friend, she likes climbing and running.

We have clubs at our school. We can do lots of things like sports, crafts, music, drama – we get to choose.

It’s good to do stuff like debating and choir.

Not everyone is good at school, but everyone likes games.

If we finish work early we get to choose what to do until others catch up. I write stories.

9.10.2 Similarly, young people consider that there should be more than one way to succeed at school. Some suggested that schools should focus more on developing skills for life and building on talents and strengths than making everyone following the same path to university.

It should be more about learning about life than the job thing.

The answer to the question is easy. Will I remember these things later on? If the answer is no, then you’re not learning for life, don’t do it.

9.10.3 Among some young people there was disagreement about the most appropriate basis on which to make subject choices. Some thought you should follow talents and interests, what you are good at. Others believed it was more important to choose subjects that maximised possibilities of getting the highest ranking on the UAI.

Go with interests and talents.

Forget what you’re good at, do the subjects that get the best UAI rating.
Maths and sciences give the best marks.

Once you get to university you make your own choices.

9.11 Provide alternative courses for those who don’t want to go to university

9.11.1 Federal and state governments promote the benefits of young people staying at school longer, using Year 12 retention rates as an indicator of the success of education systems. This promotion has rendered the School Certificate virtually meaningless and by default made the HSC both the end of schooling credential and the gateway to university education.

9.11.2 The grim reality of schooling today is that most young people staying on the complete Year 12 and striving for success in such courses will not gain a university place. Young people in New South Wales understand the statistics of this reality.

9.11.3 Rather than force all of them through the competitive sorting and ranking process required by the minority who will gain university entrance, young people deserve the opportunity to follow a variety of genuine alternative curricula options. They want alternatives that prepare them to meet the demands of living in the ever-changing and global community in which they will live their adult lives.

Especially in Griffith, there’s no need, ‘cause you can get so many jobs where you don’t need life your HSC and stuff. You can leave at the end of year 10 and get a job.

Some need it. Some don’t.

It should be more about learning about life than the job thing.

There needs to be more publicity on other options, because school may not be for everyone.

9.11.4 The idea of ‘alternative courses’ for secondary students has a mixed history in New South Wales schools. Some great innovations have been developed by the Board of Studies and by local schools to cater for the diverse interests and skills of young people.

9.11.5 The chief concern about alternative courses is the tendency for them to swiftly evolve from ‘enriching options’ provided for some to being the prescribed ‘Mickey Mouse option’ for all young people who does not succeed in the mainstream academic courses as taught in their school or college.

Offering a variety of curricula does not mean putting together a set of courses labelled easy, average and hard and then equating hard with best. It means cooperatively constructing rigorous and interesting courses centred on students’ interests and talents. It means that schools should show society
that democracy honours all of its honest workers, not just those who finish university and make a lot of money.  

9.11.6 Re-conceptualising the structure of secondary education so that it offers genuine alternatives in this way will take time and test the courage and conviction of education professionals, employers and the wider community.

9.12 Maximise the use of available time

9.12.1 A number of young people complained that there wasn’t enough ‘real work’ in the junior secondary years. “Real work” that really mattered to teachers and students was perceived to commence in Year 11.

Early secondary wasn’t that productive.
There is more pressure in high school but it doesn’t really hit you because there aren’t major exams until you are almost out of there.

9.12.2 It does seem strange that many young people returning to school some six weeks after finishing the School Certificate and Year 10 face a quantum leap in teacher, family and peer expectations of their attitudes to study. The level of homework they are expected complete and their ability to function in a less controlling discipline regime also changes significantly.

It’s like … yesterday in Year 10 I’m a kid … today I’m Year 11 … HSC … like a totally different person.

They assume that school is your life and you don’t have other subjects.
Teachers don’t take other subjects into account. They think their subject is best. They need to coordinate assessments with other subjects.

9.12.3 Some young people considered that the years of compulsory schooling were enough. Their view was that the last two years of secondary school were too focused on the HSC and UAI.

Should finish after Year 10 … and be able to work with that qualification.

Yeah, too many people do it (stay on to Year 12) because they are forced to … it stops being about learning …

But people generally think the UAI is the be all and end all. There needs to be more publicity on other options.

9.13 Build on the good reputation and successes of TAFE

9.13.1 NSW TAFE has an enviable reputation for meeting the personal and educational needs of young people who find themselves unsuited to the schooling system.

9.13.2 Young people are attracted to TAFE by its perceived adult discipline regime, flexible curriculum options, its shorter-term, modular programming and its emphasis of hands-on, vocational learning.

Like the program (TAFE Access) because they treat you like adults, give choices about what is learned and how we learn it.

Didn’t like school because teachers treat you like children.

Not interested in the subjects being taught (at school), prefer practical work like in the program.

9.13.3 Even when young people were involved in programs developing communication, numeracy or study skills, they found these courses more directly relevant to their needs and lives than similar subjects taken at school.

I like doing English now … you use it every day.

Hated English and Maths, but want to learn them now because you need them to get into the workforce.

9.13.4 Although young people in a range of special support programs found VET courses at TAFE more appealing, many TAFE teachers are finding the increasing presence of younger people in their classes hard to manage.

9.13.5 Young people praise the support provided through many TAFE access programs. TAFE teachers, however, speak of insufficient funding that limits their capacity to provide the programs, student places, resources and support services that have already proved their worth in helping young people to participate in and gain maximum benefit from TAFE courses.

Difficult to get up early and keep going all day because don’t have breakfast, school doesn’t provide this like the program does.

Program has a bus which is really helpful because I can’t get a bus pass.

There are extra people here to support you if you need help with work, personal issues.

9.14 Make alternative education programs available

9.14.1 While the majority of young people work their way successfully enough through schooling and training, there is a minority who do not settle well into the learning and discipline regimes of traditional classrooms, schools and colleges. Schooling for these young people, often from an early age, is more like a combat zone than a learning environment. It is common for these young people to be moved from school to school in search of a support system with the capacity to cater effectively for their specific needs.

Found it hard and so mucked up, so people thought I was bad.
Teachers are stressed out ‘cause there’s so many kids to look after. They just wanna get through all the work. Can’t be bothered with slow kids.

9.14.2 As the years go by, these kids come to believe that although most teachers identify their need for help, few have the time, interest or the ‘know-how’ to help them. With this reality, it is little wonder that they ‘fall through the cracks’ and either elect out, drift out or are driven out of school.


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I \text{ am particularly interested in the way in which schools mediate—through both the overt and hidden curricula—those messages and values that serve to privilege some groups at the expense of others.}^{16}
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9.14.4 In Australia, Connors (2000) has identified persistent inequality in the educational outcomes and opportunities of marginalised and most vulnerable children and young people.

9.14.5 Zyngier (2004) says that the usual response of government and education authority policies and reports faced with the poor outcomes and limited opportunities of disadvantaged young people is to increase expectations on schools to ‘fix the problems’. Connors suggests:

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\text{While schools cannot be expected to do it all themselves, they can and should take explicit responsibility for ensuring that students remain engaged in education.}^{17}
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9.14.6 Holdsworth (1986) adds that enhancing student engagement in learning has been identified as a key challenge particularly associated with the middle years of schooling.

9.14.7 Some of these young people find caring professionals and supportive new friends when they move to a school another location and settle successfully into teaching and learning programs of their new environments. Unfortunately, there a small number of young people whose temporary or longer-term needs are not met within the structures of mainstream schools.

They just don’t like me … probably because I was mucking up … it’s just the way I am. Trouble.

Worawa Aboriginal College (Healesville, Victoria) – all black fellas, was a good school, lived on campus, learnt about culture, best school I went to.

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Old school class was noisy, lots of students this is better with only seven rather than 30 people.

I was a nuisance … made it to Year 8 and got kicked out … couldn’t do it.

9.14.8 Public education needs systems and facilities that can offer viable alternatives for those young people who, for a range of family and personal reasons, mainstream schools and colleges are unable to cater for effectively.

Towards improving education and training

The current emphasis on an academic curriculum and the high status afforded to university entrance does not cater for a sizeable proportion of children and young people whose talents, interests and aspirations do not lead them to academic institutions.

- The Commission recommends that the NSW Department of Education and Training enhance existing support programs in the first years of school and the introduction of additional programs, especially a numeracy program, to support children identified as experiencing learning difficulties.

- The Commission recommends a revised plan for schooling to re-establish the credibility of an end of schooling credential at the Year 10 level and allow young people to choose an academic or vocational education focus for the final years of secondary schooling. This will need the combined support of the NSW Department of Education and Training, the Board of Studies, P&Cs and teacher unions.

- It is recommended that alternative education programs, such as TAFE Access, be enhanced to provide options for young people whose needs are not being met by mainstream schools.

- The Commission also recommends that the NSW Department of Education and Training consider ways to ‘advertise’ its achievements in helping young people to reach their aspirations of entry into apprenticeships, traineeships, TAFE vocational training programs and employment, as well as those who have gained tertiary admission.

10. ACTION AREA FOUR: FAIR RULES THAT ARE APPLIED JUSTLY

10.1 Schools need rules

10.1.1 While acknowledging the need for respectful relationships and enforcement of boundaries, many children and young people believed that the learning environments of schools were unnecessarily regimented and too dominated by the authoritarian rule of adults. Rules were often believed to unfairly focus on petty fetishes rather than on things that matter.
They don’t care about you learning, they worry about what you are wearing.

No hats – that rule sux.

10.1.2 Vinson (2002) revealed that concerns about the disruptive behaviours of some students are shared by children and young people, by the teachers and other staff members of their schools and colleges and by their families and members of the broader community.

10.1.3 While classroom teaching has always required skills in managing groups of people, teachers today say they spend too much time preventing and dealing with the disruptive, argumentative, abusive and violent behaviours of a small number of students. Anecdotal evidence collected by Mills (2003) estimated that the amount of lesson time consumed by teachers dealing with disruptions in one small school varied from 20-30% in some classrooms to 70-80% in others.

10.1.4 Children and young people were united in support for the development of school rules to include the participation of all those who would have to abide by them.

Students should have more say on rules and feel free to talk to teachers about why the rules are made, eg. I don’t understand why have to wear joggers all year, even in summer, when teachers able to wear any shoes they like.

10.4.5 Some children and young people were incensed about differential ways in which some teachers ‘turned a blind eye’ to the behaviours of some students but were pedantic and heavy handed in their dealings with others.

Kids they like … they get away with heaps. Not us, they pick on us even if we’re doing nothing.

… and like in schools, some teachers … if a couple of people in the class, they’re like being noisy and stuff, they punish the whole class, they don’t pick out people and you have to stay in.

10.2 Suspension and expulsion

10.2.1 The levels of suspension and expulsion are a serious concern to all in the education community. Although data on suspensions and expulsions is not publicly available, anecdotal evidence points to the widespread use of these tools by schools. It is alarming that children as young as 5 years old exhibit behaviours that teachers, schools and their communities feel warrant suspension and exclusion.

10.2.2 Engle et al (1996) suggest that one potential source of the behaviours that lead to suspensions and expulsions may be intermittent or long-term difficulties and dysfunction at home. Teachers and schools can provide a stable and safe
haven for children and young people. However, they often do not have the expertise and resources to deal with the number of children and young people who require high-maintenance interventions to prevent or help them deal with upsets, distractions or depression caused by events at home.

10.2.3 When asked why they or others they know were suspended, children and young people gave a range of reasons, from fighting with other students to not turning up to school enough. Two commonly mentioned causes over which schools have some control are bad relationships with teachers and limited success in learning:

… they don’t like the teacher. You want to annoy people who annoy you. It you liked your teacher and she was nice, you wouldn’t want to annoy her by being naughty.

… teachers who don’t respect the students.

… cranky, stressed, overly strict teachers.

Found it hard and so mucked up. If you knew how to do it you would probably like it.

Too hard, especially maths.

10.2.4 The use of suspension and expulsion points to another potential source of disruptive behaviours amongst students, alienation. Mau (1992) says that alienation can be understood as experiences of powerlessness, meaninglessness, normlessness and social estrangement or isolation. Bronfenbrenner (1996) says that alienation is a key challenge of youth in our time. Holdsworth (2004) adds that schools either contribute to alienation, (through inappropriate structures and approaches which encourage student passivity) or in engage students in their learning and in working to achieve authentic and productive outcomes.

10.2.5 The Australian Curriculum Studies Association (1996) claims that:

Genuine consultation with students enhances student and teacher effectiveness. The use of varied approaches and a broad repertoire of learning strategies decrease boredom and enhance engagement in learning. When students believe the teacher cares, they are more engaged in leaning.18

10.2.6 The Department of Education and Training’s Suspension and Expulsion of School Students – Procedures (2005) suggest that suspension allows:

… students time to reflect on their behaviour, to acknowledge and accept responsibility for the behaviours which led to the suspension and to accept responsibility for changing their behaviour to meet the school’s expectations in

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the future. It also allows time for school personnel to plan appropriate support for the student to assist with successful re-entry.  

10.2.7 Thus suspensions are seen as a kind of behavioural circuit breaker. For the 75% of suspended students in public schools who do not ‘re-offend’ suspension would appear to have this effect.

10.2.8 Children and young people, whether suspended or not, do not necessarily share this view about the effectiveness of suspensions as a disciplinary tool. They point out that for those who do not enjoy or do not want to be at school, suspension can be an ‘official holiday’ and does not provide incentive for students to change their behaviour. Many children and young people expressed the view that in-school suspension is a more effective means of addressing students’ behavioural shortcomings and avoids the problem of kids being left unsupervised at home.

_I was expelled because I didn’t go to school enough. When I wanted to go back they wouldn’t let me._

_Never expelled, always suspended. I deserved it, but you don’t learn anything from it. I learnt more from an internal suspension._

_I think discipline is good, ‘cause if I didn’t get put on a contract then I would be @#%*ed for the rest of my life because I should have no education – the contract kept me in school and doing what I had to do._

10.2.9 The most identifiable problem is that despite their comprehensive expectations, the Department’s procedures do not appear to be strictly followed in all instances.

**10.3 Stop bullying**

10.3.1 Most children and young people report that they have been bullied at some stage of their schooling. Boys report being more frequently bullied than girls, and primary school children are generally bullied more often than high school students. While boys are more likely to be threatened or bullied physically, girls are more commonly bullied through exclusion from social groups.

10.3.2 Collins (1996) reported that a staggering 80% of Year 6 boys and 90% of Year 10 boys reported that physical bullying of boys by other boys was part of life at school.

10.3.3 For some children and young people, bullying is an ever-present cause of anxiety and disruption to their learning. The most common form of bullying being verbal harassment.

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Pre-school, I hated it, 'cause they all call me a baby, the other kids teased me.

10.3.4 Some children and young people dealt with the bullies themselves or with the help of friends. Some found that the intervention of adults stopped bullying or at least reduced the frequency of it.

Dealt with it myself. Told the bully off.

It stopped after a while, but then someone else decides to pick on you. I have tons of friends who stick up for me.

10.3.5 Some children and young people felt trapped and that they were left to fend for themselves.

And about teachers, you really don’t want to talk to them because you get scared they’re going to tell who’s been bullying you. They [bullies] pick on you more and they get all their friends, ‘say meet me after school’, they bash you up and otherwise say you are chicken. They push you over and call you names. It gets really annoying.

Teachers don’t really help to stop other kids from picking on you. You know, I’m in a wheelchair, I can’t really retaliate when someone throws something at me.

Teachers say, ‘just ignore it’, but they don’t understand.

I used to try dealing with it myself, I don’t believe in dobbing.

10.3.6 Re-vitalisation of teaching and learning programs to capture the interest of children and young people has the potential to increase interest in learning and reduce the incidence of disruptive behaviour. With its innovative use of drama techniques that encourage children and young people to develop empathy by ‘walking in the shoes of others’, the Commission considers the Cooling Conflicts – Anti-bullying program recently announced by the NSW Department of Education and Training has the potential to be both an engrossing learning activity and a significant force in reducing the levels of bullying at school.

10.3.7 Dr Ken Rigby, a leading researcher in this area, has commented that teacher training institutions sometimes fail to recognise the need for skills in this area. (Rigby, 1996)

Towards improving education and training

Children and young people acknowledge that schools and colleges need rules, but question the reason behind some rules and the inconsistent way that rules are often applied.

- Some innovative schools and colleges are involving children and young people in the development and application of sanctions, such as
suspensions and expulsions, against inappropriate behaviours. The Commission supports a broader application of these strategies to make rules and discipline strategies more effective.

- The Commission is of the view that suspensions and expulsions should only be used as a last resort only where other sanctions are not appropriate. The NSW Department of Education and Training should continue to monitor the frequency of suspensions and expulsions within schools and their effectiveness as a disciplinary tool with a view to encouraging schools to consider alternative options such as in-school suspensions.

- The Commission suggests that teachers, as part of their teacher training and induction on taking up a school appointment, receive information and training on policies, strategies and practices which can reduce bullying and protect the most vulnerable students.

11. ACTION AREA FIVE: ADEQUATE BUILDINGS AND FACILITIES

11.1 The appearance of public schools and colleges

11.1.1 The submission of the NSW Secondary Principal’s Council (2002) to the Inquiry into the provision of public education in New South Wales stated that schools which look run down send a message to the community that what they offer is second rate. Many children and young people support this notion and notice that the buildings and amenities provided for students and teachers at their public school do not match those available in other schools, public and private, in other neighbourhoods.

*Looks like a jail. Makes you feel like you are locked up … trapped inside.*

*The school is small and old.*

*It looks like a shit-hole. All concrete and bars everywhere.*

11.1.2 Children and young people were very clear in describing what they wanted their schools to look like. Some young people suggested that students should be involved in helping to create schools that looked more appealing to children and young people.

*Could have legal art walls for students to paint for art classes.*

*Schools should look modern.*

*I like it when they have lots of grass so you can run around.*

*My school is next to the bush so it’s nice and peaceful.*
11.1.3 The OECD Program on Educational Building supports the comments of children and young people saying that adequate physical facilities are an essential characteristic of the provision of quality education (OECD, 2001).

11.1.4 Vinson (2002) supports this idea. He says that the presence or absence of appropriate physical conditions, such as a comfortable classroom temperature, a physically safe and clean environment with areas suitable for study and play, room designs that support good pedagogy and basic educational facilities like ‘wet areas’, can mean the difference between learning and failure. He adds,

… when allowance has been made for other relevant factors, the physical state of a school is one effective predictor of student achievement. Research suggests that the quality of physical space affects self-esteem and student-teacher interactions, parental involvement, discipline and interpersonal relations. 21

11.2 Fix up run down and dirty amenities

11.2.1 Children and young people hold varying opinions about the amenities of public schools and colleges. Some children and young people praised the facilities they enjoyed. More often, however, children and young people voiced complaints about the run down, neglected state or inadequacy of what they had to ‘make do with’ in public schools and colleges.

Facilities are one of the most important things. If facilities are working and clean it makes you feel comfortable and it is easier to learn.

Facilities at TAFE are pretty good.

The most important facilities are toilets … water/bubblers, clean and comfortable classrooms.

It gets too hot. Most people end up in the irrigation channel.

Important to have space and grass to run around on at school.

Updated library resources. You don’t want a museum.

At school we have no play equipment. Need playground equipment, slippery dip.

11.2.2 Children and young people previously told the Commission that clean and safe school toilets are important to them and are often inadequate in their schools. Comments from the recent consultations reveal this issue remains a concern amongst kids.

The toilets are old and dark. They smell bad.

The toilets are really shocking. Its very rough, you don’t want to go in there.

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The toilets are disgusting.

11.2.3 During the consultations, the condition of buildings, amenities and grounds was raised by children and young people who attended public schools and colleges, particularly from those in lower socio-economic communities. On the other hand, buildings, facilities and amenities were rarely mentioned during consultations with children and young people who attended schools in affluent communities or private schools.

11.3 Maintain and update computer equipment

11.3.1 A lot of appropriate acclaim has been given to the major investment of the public education system in the provision of computer technology in schools. Children and young people agree that learning to use computers and using computers to assist their learning and studies are essential, often enjoyable aspects of their studies.

Writing stories on computers is good.
Using computers is cool … makes learning fun.
Computers are so part of life, we need to learn to use them.

11.3.2 Some children and young people in the Commission’s consultations spoke of deficiencies in the provision and use of computers in public primary and secondary schools.

Doing schoolwork on computers is good … but all the computers should work … and one each.

We go to the computer room. Half the class has old Macs and half has new ones. The teacher goes, ‘if you’re using the old computers do this, if you’re using the new ones do that’… so confusing. It’s bad … waste of time.
The internet is too slow. Sometimes a whole lesson goes and we haven’t downloaded any stuff.
Some teachers are so bad at technology. They don’t know enough – like about computers and DVDs. A lot of time is wasted.
If the teachers know about computers it’s good. If they don’t, there’s no-one to help them. It’s woeful …

11.4 Transport to and from school

11.4.1 Two things about transport concern children and young people. The first is about the difficulties some face getting to and from school. The limited transport options were the major concern for those in those living in region and rural settings. Reliability of urban transport services was the chief concern in larger towns and cities.
There's one bus in the morning and one in the afternoon. If I miss it, I don't get to school or I have a long walk home.

The library stays open like a homework centre after school for Year 11 and 12 kids. I can't stay 'cause I can't get home if I don't get the school bus.

… improve the transport system. If the trains are late and I'm late to school the office ladies are like: oh it's your fault ra, ra, ra, and that's no excuse, detention.

11.4.2 The second transport concern, mainly from young people, was the restrictions placed on gaining bus and train passes. The lack of access to free travel for tutoring, work experience and other out of school commitments was raised as an issue by some young people.

We were watching (the NSW Premier) on TV and he stated that no child should pay to catch a bus to school yet if you live too close the school they don't let you get a bus pass they make you pay or you can't catch a bus.

Friends with bus passes meet at the shops and then go home. I haven't got a pass so either have to pay or not go.

11.4.3 Having access to affordable and safe public transport is an essential part of education. If children and young people are unable to get to school or college, or turn up late, their education is directly affected.

**Towards improving public education and training**

The messages of children and young people about the facilities and physical environment in which they go to school or college are simple enough. Where things are in need of repair, repair them. Where grounds need care, care for them. Where equipment, books or resources are needed, get them.

- The Commission considers that well maintained toilet blocks and properly functioning drinking bubblers are basic amenities that should be of a minimum standard in all public schools and colleges. The Commission recommends that the NSW Department of Education and Training allocate sufficient funds to refurbish toilet blocks and water bubblers in all schools and colleges.

- The Commission supports the recommendation of the NSW Secondary Principal’s Council that the global budgets of schools and colleges should include adequate funds for repairs and maintenance.

- The deficiencies in technology support and training for teachers noted by children and young people are a serious concern. The Commission recommends that schools and colleges have regular access to technical support officers with the time and expertise to maintain local area networks and provide support for minor problems.
The Commission recommends that the NSW Department of Education and Training provide adequate internet bandwidth to NSW public schools and colleges so that children, young people and teachers have appropriate access to internet resources.

It is recommended that the NSW Department of Education and Training and Department of Transport work together to assist schools and colleges develop school travel plans that address difficulties children and young people face in travelling to and from school and college.

12. ACTION AREA SIX: CARING ADULTS AT SCHOOL AND HOME

12.1 School can be a stressful experience for some children and young people and certain periods of schooling can be more difficult than others. An issue often raised by young people currently attending school was the levels of anxiety and stress they experienced. Stress reached intolerable levels in the senior secondary years as HSC assessments and examinations approached.

The pressure makes you lose concentration and makes you nervous before exams.

There’s pressure to do well from family and friends.

But there is so much pressure on you to go onto year 12 to go really well.

HSC brings too much pressure and expectation from everyone, teachers, family and friends

12.2 During these difficult times, children and young people need to have supportive adults at home and school to help them get deal with the stress.

12.3 The importance of relationships

12.3.1 Fuller (1998) tells us that four things promote the well-being of children and young people: peer connectedness; fitting in at school; feeling loved by your family to the extent that they will help you to understand yourself better; and having an adult outside your family take a positive interest in you. A concept of connectedness, of belonging to a family, an area, a friendship group or school is crucial to building resilience.

12.3.2 The Commission’s report of its Inquiry into the Best Means of Assisting Children and Young People With No One to turn To (2002) highlighted the importance of good relationships in the lives and learning of children and young people.

For children and young people to be happy, healthy and safe the most important thing is to have good relationships with their families, friends and the communities they live in. When one of these relationships is bad, kids
will generally be okay if they have good relationships with the others. But when all of these relationships are bad then things can be really tough.  

12.3.3 If possible, children and young people prefer to get help from family and friends.

If you had a good father and a good mother, then you’d be laughin’
I talk to Dad if something bad has happened.
Your friends are always there, so you’ve got a lot of trust in them

12.3.4 Beyond friends and families, adults they know and trust, like school and college staff, are acknowledged as sources of quality support.

This school is really good. The teachers here are good friends with other teachers, but they’re also good friends with students. You know they are going to be there and that they won’t go and gossip to other people …

The workers help you find a place to live, help you study, help you find work. They understand you and have fun with you …

School counsellor is good, helps with problems.
She’s so nice. She’s not biased or anything. She doesn’t like judge you.

12.3.5 The most critical factor determining whether children and young people will turn to adults in schools and colleges is the degree of trust they have that the private business they share will be treated confidentially. Once this trust is broken, it is extremely difficult to regain.

The normal schools … a guidance counsellor tells everyone your business.
Talking to teachers is OK … if they won’t talk bout you.
No use talking to teachers. They just tell your parents.

12.3.6 Some young people said that there should be more help from teachers or other trusted people, like Counsellors in schools. They said the training some teachers receive about identifying warning signs in students is good and should be taught to all teachers. However, teachers need support from properly trained and information on making appropriate referrals.

12.4 Involving parents and the community in schooling

12.4.1 A few young people who had left school early said that it might have helped them if their parents and families were more involved in their education. One young person told us how he started to loss interest in school and skip classes at the same time that his parents stopped taking an interest in his school and

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helping him with his homework. Some young people suggested that schools have a role in encouraging parents and families to get involved.

*Lots of schools only offer parents to come to school for reports. There should be more focus on building those relationships so the parents can bring up issues and talk about what their children need.*

*My Aunties, they worked there [at the school] sometimes, they helped me heaps.*

12.4.2 Children and young people also suggested that schools should build links with local communities and community organisations that can provide supports to young people. Some young people who had left school early and were attending TAFE told us that the good relationships between staff at their school and local TAFE helped to get them into the TAFE program.

*If it wasn’t for him (the Aboriginal Education Assistant) I would be smoking grass and useless. Doing nothing and going nowhere.*

12.4.3 It is important that school staff, such as Career Counsellors, have good relationships with local TAFEs and providers of other alternative programs and are not just advising young people about their options on leaving at the end of Year 10 or 12.

**Towards improving public education and training**

The comments of children and young people confirm the assertions of resilience research that the relationships made with friends and caring adults at school can literally be life savers when children and young people experience difficulties as learners or in their personal lives.

- The Commission acknowledges that teachers are trained to teach and that the role of psychologist and counsellor for young people with problems lies beyond their expertise. However, the Commission recommends pre-service and in-service training of all teachers should contain developmental experiences which enable them to develop quality relationships with their students and to identify students in need of additional support.

- Identification is one aspect of helping children and young people in need. Although, identification is of little use if the personnel and services required to assist are not readily available. The Commission reaffirms our previous recommendation that the NSW Department of Education and Training increase the minimum ration of school counsellors to student to 1:500 and remove the requirement that school counsellors
must hold teaching qualifications to increase the pool of potential counsellors.

- The Commission also supports our previous recommendation that all NSW schools should be required to provide alternative educational programs and other forms of support to children and young people who are suspended or expelled.

- Strategies such as the Schools as Community Centres Program are potentially beneficial in bringing families and schools together to support children and young people’s education. The Commission suggests that programs which build and maintain relationships between schools and families before and when children attend school be further investigated and considered for implementation across all schools.

13. CONCLUSION

13.1 It would be a triumph if in 2015 the community of NSW could survey the public schools and colleges of the state and say that as a result of the NSW Department of Education and Training Futures Project:

- children and young people find teachers friendly and respectful
- teachers have enriched pedagogies that enable them to cope with the mixed talents, skills and interests of learners in their classes
- children and young people learn the basics in ways that maintain their interest
- a relevant curriculum develops a life-long love of learning for children and young people
- public schools and colleges are acknowledged leaders in giving all learners a fair go at success at school
- children, young people and teachers have access to the resources they need
- every public school and college looked well cared for, and
- children and young people have access to caring adults at school and home.

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24 Ibid. Recommendation 13, p135.
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