School Leaving Age Review
Department of Education and Training
GPO Box 33
SYDNEY NSW 2001

Dear Sir/Madam

I am writing regarding your invitation to make comments on the school leaving age reforms.

Consistent with Premier’s Memorandum 2007-07, *Best Practice Principles for Youth Participation*, the Commission has undertaken consultation with various groups of young people and their input is summarised in this letter.

It was decided that the most valuable contribution the Commission could make to this discussion was to share the views of young people who might not otherwise have an input. 20 girls and 18 boys aged between 10 and 23 years spoke with Commission staff about school leaving age. These young people had a range of particularly relevant experiences including family breakdown, homelessness, school expulsions and becoming parents at a young age.

They shared their experiences with a range of problems in school and made some suggestions about how they could be improved. The most common suggestion was that teachers should be better able to communicate with young people.

Young people with behaviours that schools had found problematic, usually realised that their behaviour had been unacceptable at times. They said that they were able to work in some environments, but not those that their schools had been able to offer them.

They felt they could work in environments that gave them freedom to have breaks when they needed them and to work at their own pace. They wanted students and teachers to understand their situation and be supportive and welcoming of them. They wanted to feel that, while sometimes their behaviour was unacceptable, as people they were welcome and wanted at school. They also wanted to know that they were missed if they did not attend. Several former students said that, once they developed a reputation for having problems at school, it was very difficult to change that reputation or to find teachers who would not prejudege them.
For young people who were mothers, their priorities understandably changed once their child was born. The care of their child is of primary importance, taking precedence over school. If these young women are to continue in education, they need flexibility and facilities to enable them to care for their child as well as study.

Young people identified the OTEN year 10 equivalent course as an example of a flexible and appropriate alternative to traditional schools. They suggested that a program as flexible as this be open to students under 15 years. For students with extreme behaviours drug or serious family problems, the young people felt school retention may be achieved by allowing for self-paced learning in a non-competitive environment with supportive staff.

All the young people we spoke with supported vocational education being included as part of school work and as an activity outside school hours. For many students at risk of disengaging, school work which was directly relevant to life now or in the immediate future kept them engaged. Early school leavers strongly supported students being able to move to an apprenticeship at 15 years if this was their desire. They felt that a person who knows what they would like to do should be allowed progress with their plans. They suggested that a student who would rather be, for example, working in retail or hospitality was likely be disruptive to other students and gain little from being at school.

Young people who had left school to enter the fulltime workforce told us that looking for a job was a fulltime occupation in itself, at least for the young person. Currently, it may not be possible for a young person to continue fulltime education or training at the same time as they are actively seeking work.

Young people suggested organised sessions be offered to assist young people in their search for work, and more targeted careers counselling. They thought these were useful steps to help students get what they want from school and to help them transition to the workplace, without having to disengage from school completely.

Those who had left school early for reasons other than workforce entry told us about their difficult life experiences. Some said that they had been faced with making decisions about drugs and sex at very early ages, before these issues had been canvassed in any depth at school. They said that they had made some bad decisions, which might have been avoided if they had access to sex and drug-related education in primary school, and had been given some suggestions about getting help. They wanted this information provided at the time in their lives when they were faced with making these decisions. They felt that avoiding these bad decisions and obtaining help when needed might have enabled them to stay on at school successfully.

These young people reported some experience of school counsellors, both positive and negative. They generally felt that there should be more school counsellors, as they thought existing counsellors had too little time for actual
"counselling", but they had reservations about whether counsellors always maintained confidentiality.

Some students need support with family, financial and personal problems. For young people, this cannot be limited to information and referrals. It needs to involve working actively with the young people to arrange support and consistent services, sometimes using a case management model.

When asked what would make young people more likely to attend school if schools remained as they are now, none of the young people we spoke with could offer any suggestions.

Thank you for agreeing to extend the deadline for this response. If you have any further queries, please contact Jaki Wilson, Senior Policy Officer on 9286 7217 or jaki.wilson@kids.nsw.gov.au

Yours sincerely

Gillian Calvert
Commissioner
19 August 2008