

Learning in Alternative Settings: What makes a sustainable program?

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This paper is provided the framework for a workshop delivered by Peter Cole at the Learning for Choices Expo, Sydney, 24 June 2004.

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1. Introduction

This paper provides background documentation to a workshop delivered at the Learning Choices Expo on 24 June 2004. The Expo was auspiced by the Dusseldorp Skills Forum.

The workshop focused on students in 'alternative settings' and outlined the state of play in Victoria, including commentary of the range of alternative setting providers and the characteristics of student attending alternative settings. It also proposed some best practice principles and a framework for considering best practice features. Finally the workshop highlighted some issues facing providers of learning in alternative settings and proposed some actions that government could take to support learning in alternative settings.

The original work that informed this workshop was a paper prepared by the author and his colleagues¹ for the Victorian Department of Education and Training (DE&T) on students in diverse settings. This paper sought to determine the extent of learning in diverse settings for secondary students in Victoria and to develop a framework to support learning in diverse settings.

In the school's sector alternative settings is a term that covers several 'alternatives' such as teaching units, special assistance units, annexes, alternative schools and social adjustment centres. The alternative settings referred to in the workshop were settings catering for 'at risk' secondary students. Generally these programs had an element of voluntarism; in the sense that it was up to the young people whether or not they attended and stayed committed to a program. A broad-brush approach was adopted to defining diverse settings and insights from a range of program types contributed to the findings of the original report and to the elements of a framework for learning in diverse settings.

The task of clarifying the number of students in alternative settings is bedevilled by the diversity of arrangements and settings for the delivery of alternative programs for at risk young people. Indeed, even capturing information about the range of settings offering alternative programs is quite problematic, as not all programs are registered, as they range across all sectors, as the funding sources are diverse, and as they come and go as funding dries up or opens up. DE&T head office and regional staff responsible for transition, vocational and at risk program support largely identified the programs referred to in our original study.

2. Overview of Learning in Diverse Settings (Victoria)

Program Providers and Program Types

We identified over 60 different alternative settings providing short-term and longer-term programs for at risk young people. We survey 52 programs seeking information about the scale and focus of the program being provided, the nature of the students involved and the program 'type' and outcomes achieved. Twenty-six program providers responded. The nature and extent of the programs they offered were very diverse. Most programs were located in areas of high need, but this was not always so and there were pockets where several programs operated and others where young people had to travel substantial distances to attend a program.

Program providers operated in the school sector (e.g. Lynall Hall is a small government school catering for at risk youth), the TAFE and ACE sectors, other government departments (e.g catering for young offenders), the welfare/philanthropic sector and the private sector.

¹ Cole, P., Griffiths, B., Jane. G. and Mackay A (November 2003) Learning in Diverse Settings, an internal policy paper for the Victorian Department of Education and Training.

Students generally accessed the kind of program that best suited their particular preferences and circumstances and in some instances this could involve them in accessing different services from a variety of programs across the week.

Programs provided for at risk, young people in out-of-school settings generally offered content and experiences related to the following areas:

- literacy and numeracy development
- employability skills
- information technology competencies
- living skills
- personal awareness and self-esteem
- communication skills.

Different programs responded to different needs - some programs were designed to address needs that could be dealt with in the short-term other programs were designed to address needs that require much longer term solutions. Programs also tended to offer a broader range of certificates than were generally available in mainstream schooling. These included youth awards, vocational attainments and accreditation linked to personal and social skills development.

Some programs aimed to recycle students back into school as quickly as possible and some needed to support the young people for several years knowing that re-entry to mainstream schooling was not an option.

Under new arrangements² in Victoria, schools are expected to maintain a watching brief on students they have directed to an alternative setting and in some instances, as with ACE, are required to maintain the ongoing responsibility for the young person's welfare and learning.

Some statistics on at risk students

Nationally 71% of Year 12 completers in 2000 entered further education or training, but only 37% of early school leavers did so. The total number of early school leavers nationally in 2000 was 85,659 and of these, 31,578 (37%) were engaged in education or training and 54,081 (63%) were not in education or training. This figure of 54,081 represents 13% of all teenagers in 2000.

We took the Premier's target of 90% of students to complete Year 12 by 2010 as a goal of Government and in order to meet this target estimated that about 5,000 15-19 year olds were in need of an alternative program in Victoria in 2004. We also estimated that this number would increase annually to 14,580 young people by 2010⁴.

The Victorian Adult and Community Education (ACE) sector has increased its provision of education and training for young people between 15-19 years of age who are at risk of

² An Adult and Community Education (ACE) and Schools Partnership Memorandum of Understanding (2003) establishes arrangements between ACE providers, schools and regional offices to enable a student under the age of 15 years to participate in an ACE education program. A Partnering Agreement between the Department of Education and Training and the Department of Human Services (DHS) to cater for students in out of home care provides arrangements for ensuring that young people are supported in a coordinated fashion.

³ *ABS Education to Work, Cat no. 6227.0*, unpublished data.

⁴ Estimates are based on projections from 2001 data. It was assumed that the number of 15-19 year olds in the population is constant and that the percentage of students attending Government schools would be constant until 2010. To meet the Premier's target that by 2010, 90% of young people in Victoria complete Yr 12 or equivalent, it was assumed that enrolments in government schools would increase linearly from 2001 - 2010.

disengaging from a learning pathway. The number of learners aged 15-19 years in ACE has been growing at an annual rate of 3.1% since 1999. In 2002, this cohort comprised 7.8% of ACE learners, and approximately 6.3% of 15-19 year population in non-metropolitan areas and 3.3% in metropolitan areas are ACE learners⁵.

In 2000, there were 8,642 students aged between 14 and 19 years enrolled in the ACE sector and of these approximately 1500 were 15 years of age or younger. In June 2002, there were 3,545 VCE students attending adult providers such as TAFE institutions or ACE providers. Nearly 33% of these students enrolled in the VCE were 18 or younger⁶.

Students below the age of 20 Enrolled in Victorian Adult Community Education (ACE) Providers, 2000

Age	Female	Male	Not Stated	Total
14 & below	179	164	2	345
15	604	630	3	1,237
16	907	812	3	1,722
17	1,089	814	6	1,909
18	1,123	683	6	1,812
19	1,081	535	2	1,618
Total	4,983	3,638	22	8,643

Source: DE&T, OTTE (unpublished data)

A particular group that was brought to our attention was young people in out of home care (OOHC). Approximately 4,000 children and young people are in out of home care at any point in time (3,991 as at 30/6/02) living in a range of settings including kinship care, foster care or residential care. Over 40% of these young people are aged between 10 and 15 (1309) and 21% (867) are 15 or over.

A series of reports⁷ referred to in briefing notes to accompany the Partnership Agreement between the Department of Education and Training and the Department of Human Services indicated that children in out of home care embodied the following characteristics.

- 28% had behavioural difficulties.
- 47% had one or more types of difficulty.
- 27% of children in care had a general learning difficulty.
- 14% had a specific difficulty in reading or mathematics.
- 44% were rated as achieving below average or well below average academically.

The audit of 387 young people in residential care (2001) found that:

- 10% of primary aged children were not enrolled in school.
- 53% of secondary aged young people were not enrolled in school.
- 60% of the cohort were estimated by their Case Managers to be performing below the level expected for their age group.
- Only 18% of young people aged between 16-18 years were enrolled in either Year 11 or Year 12.
- 25% of the cohort had been formally excluded from school permanently (ie. a quarter of the cohort can never return to school as they have been excluded from several schools and their lack of education means that would not be able to fit back into a school setting).
- Most of the young people had low literacy and numeracy levels relative to other young people of their age.

⁵ Ministerial Statement on Adult and Community Education Scoping Paper (2003) – Attachment 1 p2.

⁶ Claire Robinson-Pope, VCAA June 2002, unpublished data.

⁷ Australian Council for Educational Research (1996); Audit of Children and Young People in Residential Care (2001) and Audit of Children and Young People in Home Based Care (2002)

- Many of the young people suffered some emotional disorder and/or intellectual disability, had low self-esteem and very limited employment prospects.

Whilst this is a very incomplete picture of the dimensions of ‘at risk’ young people, it does indicate that there are significant numbers who will need to be provided with on-going alternative educational opportunities if the Premier’s target⁸ is to be met. It also indicates that the degree of difficulty of getting this cohort engaged in further education and training is far more acute than is the case for the 80% or so who are engaged in regular schooling up to Year 12.

3. Early School Leavers

Who are they?

The managers of programs in diverse settings we interviewed indicated that the young people they were typically dealing with were ‘classic’ school rejects/refusers. As well as those disenchanted with schooling, participants included young people on drugs, who were homeless or who were in welfare institutions for a variety of reasons (eg. family violence and sexual abuse). Because of the sensitivities of the circumstances of the young people in diverse settings, we did not seek to collect personal characteristics or circumstances data from program participants.

Nevertheless, we observed that the young people participating in diverse settings generally fell into three broad categories:

- those who will not or do not attend school - their parents might have let them drop out or they experienced failure or were bullied, but they are basically ‘normal’ kids with a dislike for or an apathy/antipathy towards schooling;
- those who have low self esteem mostly due to literacy and numeracy problems, but who also might have problems at home or experience mild intellectual disability which may be contributing to their difficulty with formal school learning;
- those who are significantly ‘damaged’ or disadvantaged – they are likely to be in care, to have some experience of the juvenile justice system, to have psychological problems and to have a drug, alcohol or other substance abuse problem.

Indeed, a strong message that came through from the program managers was that the needs of at risk young people are quite diverse depending on the severity of the problems/issues each young person is trying to address/overcome. The range of needs exhibited and the escalating difficulty of supporting those young people with the greatest needs provides a caution to developing policy and program solutions based on a typical ‘at risk’ profile or geared to a ‘one size fits all’ response as such an approach will not meet the actual needs of most young people at risk.

What do they want from school?

A report by James et al (2001)⁹ discusses at some length the strategies that schools could adopt to re-engage potential early leavers and reduce the likelihood of the problem occurring in the first place. Drawing on previous research, they suggest that the key determinants of increased retention are:

⁸ The Premier’s target is for 90% of young people in Victoria to complete Year 12 or equivalent by 2010.

⁹ James, P., St Leger, P. and Ward, K. (2001) *Making Connections: The Evaluation of the Victorian Full Service Schools Program*, Successful Learning Project, Department of Education, Employment and Training, Victoria

- improved connectedness between teachers and students (friendliness, improving trust, mutual concern and respect) and between students and their peers
- improved curriculum (greater breadth, more vocational and practical studies, personal development and life skills)
- improved school climate (caring, supportive environment, relaxed and informal).

Their report also describes a range of responses that schools have developed in order to hold potential early school leavers at school. The programs that students considered the most successful were generally vocationally-oriented with a work placement component, had a significant out-of-school component (eg. bushwalking and excursions), provided personal and social development experiences, developed job preparation awareness and skills, and had a substantial practical components. These programs provide some insights into 'best practice' features of programs for at risk students (James et al 2001:56-60 and 62-73).

The 'critical success factors' of alternative programs identified by students were:

<i>extra help in classes:</i>	extra individual attention, smaller groups making individual attention feasible
<i>patient teachers and positive discipline:</i>	helpful, patient, fair, friendly and empathetic teachers
<i>curriculum focus on the nature of work:</i>	work placement, hands-on experience, excursions to workplaces
<i>recognition of the needs of adolescents:</i>	able to test boundaries, assume more adult outlook
<i>variety of learning experiences:</i>	exposure to new and enjoyable experiences
<i>learning new work and life skills:</i>	improved self understanding, developed job skills
<i>learning to work with others:</i>	built friendships, established strong team ethos, developed people skills
<i>acquiring identities of competence:</i>	experience of success, increased confidence about ability
<i>acquiring identities of confidence:</i>	increased personal confidence, growing sense of accomplishment, secure environment.

Interestingly enough, there appears to have been no research into structures in schools that develop close teacher:student relationships (eg. mini-schools, homerooms) and the impact these have on student satisfaction with schooling, attendance and retention.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that the way most secondary schools are organised contributes to the alienation of the most at risk students. Because teachers teach many classes all across the school, no one feels responsible or no one individual is responsible for doing anything about the child who is drifting out of schooling, even if the signs of the drift have been manifest and growing since late primary school.

Furthermore, in Victoria, we find that many of our schools in poorer areas are suffering student decline. Good students are leaving the area to attend school, new families are not moving into the area and schools that in their areas' growth period were over 800 students are now around 500 students. Consequently, these schools are finding it increasingly difficult to provide a breadth of senior curriculum options, including vocational courses, and to cater for the broad range of needs exhibited by their students.

The very young people who need alternatives in the senior years tend to be in schools that do not have the capacity to provide alternatives because their senior school numbers are too few.

What are the characteristics of 'at risk' young people?

The series of papers produced as part of the Successful Learning Project (Department of Education 1998) draw upon relatively recent research to provide information on the characteristics of at risk young people and of programs that are effective in assisting them to remain at school or find pathways to further study or work.

Dwyer et al (1998)¹⁰ describe the factors that contribute to a young person leaving school early and that are a barrier to returning to school. Ward et al (1998)¹¹ review the literature on programs for students at risk and James et al (2001)¹² refer to the literature on why students disengage from school and on what schools can do to re-engage potential early school leavers. The literature on at risk young people and on programs to meet their needs referred to in these studies also have relevance for this project.

A key message from the Dwyer et al (1998:17) literature survey is that there is no typical school leaver. They suggest that 'young people dislike, disengage from and even leave school early for a variety of reasons, at different stages in their schooling, with different attitudes towards education and different prospects for future careers'. They caution against developing a list of characteristics that describe a 'typical' early school leaver on the grounds that this may place the blame for early leaving on the students rather than seeing the reasons as a combination of personal, structural and external factors. Furthermore not all early school leavers are 'at risk'; some are 'positive leavers' who leave to take up employment or an apprenticeship.

James et al (1998:27) describes the following four types of at risk early school leaver:

1. *Would be leavers* are reluctant to leave as they would like but don't have a job to go to.
2. *Circumstantial leavers* leave for non-educational reasons (eg. family).
3. *Discouraged leavers* have a record of poor academic performance and little success in school.
4. *Alienated leavers* who are similar to discouraged leavers but whose needs are more difficult to meet.

Marks and McMillan (2001:7-8)¹³ in their trend study of 13,613 (1995 initial cohort) Year 9 students identified that the factor most contributing to school non-completion for this cohort as being low literacy and numeracy achievement in middle schooling. Their other predictors of non-completion included students coming from a low SES family, attending a government school, being male, having Australian-born parents, and growing up in a non-metropolitan area.

The Ministerial Review into Post Compulsory Education and Training Pathways in Victoria (Kirby 2000)¹⁴ identified lower socio-economic status and low academic achievement as reasons for students leaving schools early in the metropolitan area. However, in pockets of

¹⁰ Dwyer, P., Stokes, H., Tyler, D. and Holdsworth, R. (1998) *Negotiating Staying and Returning: Young People's Perspective on Schooling and the Youth Allowance*, Successful Learning Project, Department of Education, Victoria

¹¹ Ward, K., St Leger, P., Beckett, D. and Harper, G. (1998) *Providing Education and Training for At Risk and Unemployed Young People*, Successful Learning Project, Department of Education, Victoria

¹² James, P., St Leger, P. and Ward, K. (2001) *Making Connections: The Evaluation of the Victorian Full Service Schools Program*, Successful Learning Project, Department of Education, Employment and Training, Victoria

¹³ Marks, G. and McMillan, J. (2001) Early school leavers: who are they, why do they leave, and what are the consequences?, *Report of the ACER Research Conference 2001: What does the research data tell us?*, ACER, Melbourne, pp.6-12.

¹⁴ Kirby, P. (2000) *Ministerial Review into Post Compulsory Education and Training Pathways in Victoria*, Department of Education, Employment and Training, Victoria

rural Victoria with high levels of early leaving, low levels of achievement appeared not to be a contributory factor.

Researchers generally cite low levels of achievement and low satisfaction with school as the over-riding factors for early school leaving. The school culture is seen to contribute in the following manner:

- irrelevant curricula - there is little relationship between what happens in the school and the wider community and adult life;
- neglect of underachievers and rejection of difficult students- there is inadequate support for young people with academic and personal problems and
- poor student /teacher relations - the rules and regulations, school structures and student/teacher ratios contribute to negative relationships between students and teachers.

Indeed, it would appear that many of the same factors that tend to push students out of school, would act to inhibit school's attempts to re-claim students identified as at risk. Dwyer et al's research (1999) suggested that overwhelmingly it is the negative factors of schooling (push factors) that generally tip the balance between a young person staying or leaving school. They also concluded that the ability of schools to cater for the multifaceted needs of young people is extremely limited. Consequently, it is evident that students who are attending alternative settings have generally decided that mainstream schooling does not suit their needs, or if they haven't decided this, others have decided this for them.

4. Best Practice for Alternative Programs

Some key principles of good practice

We identified five key principles that we considered would guide or underpin effective practice in alternative settings. Whilst the principles should not be construed as being program prerequisites we consider that these broad principles could be applied to most at risk programs in diverse settings. When making provision for at risk students we believe that the following key principles and underlying premises provide indicators of what would constitute good practice.

<i>Key Principles</i>	<i>Underlying premises</i>
Young people at risk can learn and want to be appreciated and successful.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Young people at risk are capable of learning, whether it's about themselves and others, about their world and about the requirements of the adult world and the workplace. • Young people at risk want to experience success and to be valued and appreciated. • Young people at risk respond when their learning and other positive achievements are formally and publicly recognised and rewarded
Young people at risk must be provided with learning options both in and beyond the school.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • For some young people, traditional schooling –and its associated arrangements and requirements - is not seen as a viable option for furthering education. • Learning can take place in a variety of contexts and circumstances. • The quality of the environment, relationships and activities are what builds connections and commitments to a program
Young people at risk must be provided with programs that cater for their physical, social, psychological and intellectual development needs.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A sense of self-worth and confidence is usually a necessary precursor to gaining a commitment to making an effort to learn. • Activities that are enjoyable, and provide opportunities to socialise are generally needed to re-engage participants who have poor literacy skills and/or an aversion to 'school learning'. • Young people need sound role models, to be clear about expectations, to be given clear boundaries, and to receive guidance and support in developing positive, healthy and safe relationships with peers and adults.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The establishment of trust, mutual respect and concern for others in the program is often a precursor to gaining a commitment to making an effort to learn
Young people at risk must be provided with programs that are sufficiently flexible to respond to their individual needs and circumstances.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A needs assessment and case management approach is critical for meeting individual student's needs. • Commitment and connectedness is enhanced through engaging participants in all levels of program planning and decision-making. • Structure, ritual, consistency, high expectations and flexibility are necessary program elements. • Individual programs and targets based on a participant's capabilities, skills, needs and aspirations will need to be established. • Small program numbers and the capacity to work one-on-one are necessary to assist with building relationships and with promoting effort and learning.
Young people at risk must be provided with programs that are effectively linked to community agencies and vocational pathways.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Links to other community agencies and to workplaces are needed to expand support networks and learning opportunities. • Programs should seek to establish pathways to economic independence and security. • Programs need to provide young people with exit plans and conduct post-program monitoring of participant destinations.

A Best Practice Framework

Part of our research brief was to identify 'best practice' as it relates to programs in alternative settings. Identifying 'best practice' was somewhat daunting as the programs we encountered had significant differences in content and purpose. Program content, for example, ranged from accredited courses leading to a variety of qualifications and certificates within the AQF to what might be called 'self discovery' programs. The former programs are heavily vocational in emphasis and focus on the development of manual and other skills whereas the latter have a strong emphasis on promoting self-esteem and a positive sense of identity.

Although despite the programs having significant differences in content and purpose, all had certain design elements in common that taken together might constitute a best practice framework.

However, we consider that the term 'best practice' needs to be used with some caution as there is a tendency for frameworks of good practice to become almost check lists for approval of programs when their original intention might simply have been to identify some elements contributing to a program's overall success. That is our intention here. We simply want to articulate the design elements that appear to have contributed to the operation of some effective programs. It is not suggested that programs catering for the needs of disadvantaged young people should have all of these elements.

- Staff quality and selection. Effective programs are staffed by people who are able to relate to young people at risk. These members of staff are flexible; able to treat young people as adults; willing to negotiate but to be clear about the non-negotiables; and clear about the responsibilities as well as the rights of all involved in the program. As one program coordinator put it: "This is no place for command and control freaks or for bleeding hearts. The young people are to be treated with respect but expected to face up to their responsibilities." All coordinators were very clear about the importance of being able to choose their own staff using criteria appropriate to their students and the nature of their programs.

- Small numbers. Young people at risk usually require individual responses from the institutions they attend. They often exhibit difficult behaviours; many have personal and psychological problems; they often lack adequate literacy and numeracy skills; and they have low self-esteem. Standard school student-teacher ratios are inadequate in these circumstances. Many of these young people require multiple supports, from teachers, social workers, health professionals, drug and alcohol counsellors and so on. That is why the resourcing needs of alternative settings are so complex and not able to be met through 'normal' budget and staffing formulae.
- Clear expectations. Effective programs appear to have clear expectations of the young people involved in them. These expectations are tailored to the needs of individual students and usually take the form of a requirement to develop individual goals and a plan to achieve them. Goals might, with some damaged young people with a history of involvement in the juvenile justice system, be related to regular attendance and the development of social skills; with others, goals might relate to successful completion of educational activities or participation in a work placement program.
- Participant involvement in decision-making. Effective programs negotiate goals and the methods for achieving those goals with their students. These negotiations involve a realistic assessment of the student's current skill level and the issues that have led to difficulties with previous educational experiences. The programs have processes in place for monitoring achievement against the goals. Some programs assess students' willingness to commit to goals before accepting them into the program. In several programs, students are involved in making decisions about day to day affairs in the program and have to negotiate with other students and staff to reach agreement. However the decision-making processes operate, they are seen as an essential element in breaking down negative attitudes to learning.
- Case management. Related to these expectations, individual case management is a feature of several programs. Students are entitled to expect that they will receive a considerable amount of individual attention and to participate in a program tailored as far as possible to their needs. The involvement of youth workers and people with specific skills is important to the success of the case management approach.
- Literacy and numeracy. In several programs, all students are expected to participate in literacy and numeracy studies each day. Coordinators identified inadequate literacy and numeracy skills as central to the problems encountered by many of their students and built literacy and numeracy skills into all aspects of individual learning plans.
- Destinations. Program coordinators negotiate possible post program destinations with students as part of their personal goals. In the short-term programs, these destinations are about returning successfully to school. Some programs we observed provided ongoing support to individual students for 18 months to 2 years after a return to school, helping to resolve problems, negotiating relationships with parents and teachers and encouraging students to continue with their education. In other programs, destinations are related to achieving qualifications and seeking employment. In all cases, students are expected to build destinations or outcomes into their personal goals.
- Links to health and other welfare professionals. Some programs have formal links with DE&T guidance officers and social workers; others with DHS staff; still others with alcohol and drug counsellors and with juvenile justice officers. Most programs are making an attempt to integrate health and welfare issues with their education programs. Integrated and holistic approaches are amongst the aims of almost all the programs observed.

- Links to parents and carers. While links to parents were sometimes difficult, program coordinators generally attempt to establish such links and make their relationships with parents as positive as possible. One program, for example, involved parents in developing a positive narrative about their child's life; a narrative which can help the young person develop a positive attitude towards himself or herself and his/her achievements. All the students at another program were in some form of residential or foster care and relationships were established with their carers. Carers often provide the link to health professionals involved in addressing substance abuse and related problems.

5 Issues and some ways forward

Lack of a statewide strategy

Our research highlighted the lack of a statewide policy and strategic framework for the operation of alternative settings and programs. Whilst there was some local cooperation between agencies and providers, this was not always evident, and it certainly was not evident at the system level. The exceptions to this general observation about interagency cooperation being the recently signed agreements/MOUs referred to earlier in this paper. However, they do not constitute a statewide strategy of support for alternative settings.

We also observed that how students learn about the existence of alternative settings and programs could often be explained more by serendipity than by broad community and client awareness. And as was previously stated, there is no overall strategy that considers the location and placement of alternative settings within the community. Programs tend to emerge as a consequence of a local response to funding becoming available.

All senior government officials we talked acknowledged the need to programs in alternative settings. They conceded that despite the best efforts of schools, there would probably always be a small proportion of school-aged students for whom school was inappropriate. Yet, alternative settings providing programs for at risk young people are not part of stable, ongoing, well-resourced and highly recognised service.

It is our contention that there is a clear need for adequately resourced alternative settings and programs if the Government's targets for education and training are to be met. Many young people, for a variety of reasons to do with their family lives, their involvement in substance abuse or in the juvenile justice system or their experiences at school are not able to be catered for in mainstream educational settings. They are often difficult people to deal with and are usually unable to cope with the organisational necessities of school life.

We believe that an integrated strategy to support these programs as integral elements in the achievement of the Government's goals and targets for education and training should be developed and promulgated.

Legitimacy and recognition

People working in alternative settings want their work acknowledged and their operations legitimised by authorities. Whilst providers do not generally want to come too closely under the influence of 'the bureaucracy', they do want its patronage. They also want to be seen as a necessary and important component of the Government's provision for young people of school age and to be considered in the overall strategy for improving the learning outcomes of young people.

We also discovered that many program providers believe that the Department has a disapproving attitude towards their work or is at best prepared to tolerate them. There is a need to counter this myth through the release of a clear statement indicating the valuable role

these programs play in addressing the needs of very disadvantaged young people and in meeting the Government's goals and targets.

We contend that as part of the strategy proposed above, a statement outlining the role of alternative programs and settings in the overall strategy for Victorian education and training should be prepared and released.

Resourcing

What is generally neglected in studies of at risk programs in schools and is a primary concern for program providers in alternative settings is program funding – both in terms of adequacy and guaranteed continuity. Schools have an infrastructure – staff, equipment, and buildings – and a guarantee of on-going funding. Alternative settings are generally reliant on program specific, short-term grants and may not be able to guarantee young people program continuity from one year to the next. Indeed, it would appear that our most vulnerable young people are often in our most financially fragile programs.

Staff in alternative settings are dealing with the young people that schools are no longer able to reach or that schools are no longer able to cope with. The young people in alternative settings tend to present with multiple problems and with significant barriers that seriously impede their social, personal and academic development. Many are difficult to teach and to develop a rapport with, are emotionally unstable and erratic in behaviour. They need significant and intense assistance, and assistance with multiple concerns. Normal resource provision will not suffice to enable program staff to meet these students' needs. Links to other community support agencies and families is not a 'nice to have' but an essential survival and support strategy.

Attracting and holding those students that schools don't want and who do not want schools is a very difficult task. Whilst word-of-mouth and referrals may be sufficient to attract those at risk young people looking for a new start, this is less likely to attract 'hard-core' and disillusioned school resisters engaging in high risk behaviour. In these cases, outreach services and other pro-active approaches that enable the provider to go and discuss possibilities with potential clients may also be necessary. Such approaches have resource implications and go beyond what schools typically are willing to do in order to re-engage at risk young people in education and training.

Current programs tend to rely on a variety of fund raising activities and resource seeking. Many have established relationships with employers, small businesses, charitable organisations and local service organisations who donate basic equipment like furniture, pens, books, video and ICT equipment and so on.

While the people engaged in these resource seeking activities value the opportunity to network and to publicise their programs, many are worn out by the effort. They would like the authorities to provide greater support but they do not want to be faced with a providing multiple submissions for funding or an inflexible funding formula that does not meet their needs.

We contend that resourcing of alternative programs needs to be flexible, administratively simple and responsive to individual program needs. A formulaic approach is unlikely to meet these criteria, but it is recognised that funds will always be limited and demand is likely to increase. Accordingly we believe that additional funds need to be provided to support alternative program activities, that funding sources should be consolidated, that funds for alternative settings and programs should be part of the annual budget processes, and that the funding of programs should be based on the following principles:

- public departmental support for alternative programs for 'at risk' young people

- a demonstrated basis of need for each program
- maximum local program flexibility in responding to need
- administrative simplicity
- adequate, negotiated and highly flexible resourcing
- clear, yet flexible, program standards
- clear expectations of and accountability for program outcomes.

Staffing

The quality of the personnel and of the relationships developed between staff and students are the most critical factors in determining program success. Staff need to be committed and highly skilled in delivering educational content, handling interpersonal issues and developing good quality relationships with at risk students.

Through our discussions with providers of alternative programs we were made aware of some issues associated with program staffing. Alternative settings need:

- to attract staff with a diverse mix of skills and attributes – good program staff are not always easy to find or to hold on to
- to provide staff with performance and development support – but the pressures on staff and their ‘marginalised’ status often means that they do not participate in professional development or cannot find programs that address their developmental needs and are not party to system performance feedback processes

We also observed that several alternative settings appeared to be reliant upon an exceptional individual who generally was the program leader. This reliance on the ‘exceptional’ makes some programs vulnerable should these persons leave without an adequate replacement being found.

We contend that training and development needs to be provided at the system level to prepare staff for working alternative settings and to sustain those already working in what can be very stressful/taxing work situations.

Accountability

We did not find programs that were not well managed and dedicated to improved outcomes for young people. There is nevertheless the danger that program quality will deteriorate and although funding processes could help to detect program weaknesses, there also is a need for a simple accountability framework based on the outcomes achieved by students.

Most of the programs we saw had conducted an evaluation at some stage and were concerned to adjust their practice in the line with the findings of that evaluation. All monitored or, in the case of very new programs, were intending to monitor the outcomes achieved by their students. Accountability for many funding initiatives is focussed in how program funds are actually spent. We believe this is inappropriate for these programs and would recommend an outcomes based accountability process be developed in which outcomes would be negotiated with the program provider at the time of funding and would be reviewed annually in the light of progress.