

Response to discussion paper: Youth Transitions System – ‘Stronger futures for all young Victorians’

June 2010

Introduction

YMCA Victoria welcomes the opportunity to provide a response to the ‘Stronger Futures for all young Victorians: Discussion paper on the youth transitions system’ as developed by the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) and the Department of Innovation, Industry and Regional Development (DIIRD). YMCA Youth Services are committed to providing real and meaningful pathways to young people and contribute to the development of their personal assets.

The review of the youth transitions system is timely and necessary to ensure there are real options and opportunities for all young people. Our comments are based on our extensive experience in the provision of youth services across the state, and in particular our experience in the delivery of supporting disengaged young people through programming, support and creating meaningful pathways that are tailored to their needs, interests and strengths both in-schools and in community-based service delivery.

About YMCA Victoria

YMCA Victoria is a community-based organisation that delivers programs and services to build strong people, strong families and strong communities across Victoria. We have been working in the Victorian community for over 155 years in the areas of accommodation, recreation, camping, youth and community services.

As a non-profit organisation, YMCA Victoria’s work is supported by over 1,950 volunteers, who dedicate more than 54,000 hours of service each year. We employ in excess of 5,000 staff members.

The YMCA works with the community, commercial providers, government and strategic partners. We see our partnerships as a means for bringing together a diversity of skills and resources in seeking to attain the best possible outcomes for all members of the communities in which we work.

Within Victoria the YMCA manages a diverse range of programs and facilities including:

- Accommodation facilities
- Community Recreation Centres (including Health Clubs, Sports Stadiums & pools)
- Accommodation facilities
- Youth Justice Centres
- Campsites
- Child Care Centres
- Skate Parks
- Youth Services

We have operations in over 120 locations throughout Victoria which makes the YMCA one of the most prominent not-for-profit organisations in the State.

YMCA Victoria Youth Services



We build strong **PEOPLE**
strong **FAMILIES**
strong **COMMUNITIES**

YMCA Youth Services aims to build resilient young people across Victoria through the provision of place-based and statewide programs and services. Each year, over 100,000 young people access the YMCA, with programs and services intentionally developed to build their personal assets and capacity. YMCA Youth Services is underpinned by research and evidence outlined in frameworks of:

- Developmental Assets
- Community Strengthening
- Vulnerable Youth Framework (Victorian Government)
- Code of Ethical Practice (YACVic)
- Youth Participation
- Social Development model.

Current programs and services are provided through the provision of local Council contracts (generalist youth services), skate park management and skate services, services for young people in and exiting custody, camping programs, and volunteering opportunities.

YMCA Youth Services are provided through five key focus areas:

- Health and wellness
- Education, training and employment,
- Leadership and mentoring,
- Youth housing (including College Square student accommodation); and
- Community building.

Developing a youth transitions system that supports all young people

YMCA Youth Services believes that young people require support and empowerment as key components to their successful transitions. Each individual requires tailored responses to their needs in order to remain engaged in vocational pursuits (via education or training and into employment). We believe that, in line with the recent Vulnerable Youth Framework, early intervention and targeted responses will help build the resilience of young people and result in positive educational and employment outcomes. In regards to the youth transitions system, YMCA Youth Services recommends:

- Early identification and responses should begin in primary school. Disengagement can emerge in the transition between Grade 6 and Year 7, and is often presented in 'challenging' behaviours such as truancy, and low level literacy and numeracy skills. We have seen instances whereby the actual capacity – or ability for a young person to learn – is not identified until they reach post-compulsory years of schooling, at which stage they have responded to their capacity through challenging behaviours and responses.
- Individual assessment and tracking should occur to identify risk factors contributing to disengagement. There needs to be realistic assessment of individual circumstance as well as academic capacity, social capacity (family situation and background) and personal motivation. Additional support and programming may be required, and should be made available.
- Prevention and early intervention strategies need to be identified and implemented. YMCA Victoria believes that youth workers should be available within the school environment to provide relevant programming to address needs. Youth Workers, trained and supported in youth-centred practises, should be employed by external agencies to ensure that the outcomes best support the needs of students – and not the school. This will also serve to encourage community partnerships, linking young people into services and programs within the local community.

- Challenging behaviours during compulsory years of schooling should be identified as opportunities to address deficits within the academic, social or personal motivation areas. Youth Workers should be available to support the development of an approach to such behaviours.
- A comprehensive approach in planning interventions and responses for young people should consider the individual (their development and individual characteristics), the family (parental skills and strengthening relationships) and the local community (addressing disadvantage)¹. This holistic approach can have significant benefits for young people in health, safety and fostering a sense of belonging, and result in better life outcomes. Support for teachers, as mentioned in the discussion paper (p.14), should be highlighted as a significant approach to addressing the successful transition of young people.
- “Alternative” pathways such as the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL) is recognised as a positive step by the Education sector to addressing the strengths of young people. However, more needs to be done to remove the stigma associated with this qualification, and in fact, all pathways should be marketed as ‘mainstream’ options within the schooling environment. Young people need to feel connected to their schooling communities and not judged based on their skills and capabilities, or choices.
- Awareness of ‘options and choices should be factored into the curriculum for all young people. The YMCA’s HOPE Program (Year 9) and CHALLENGE Program (Year 10+) have respectively shown that with the right support, young people are better able to make decisions and explore alternatives that match their strengths. Career exploration focuses on three levels – engagement, involvement and decisions. The HOPE and CHALLENGE programs build awareness within students and helps them to identify their values, dreams and pieces together a range of suitable options through industry visits and workshops. This helps expand the idea of ‘career’ for young people – seeking to encourage vocational pursuits, not just jobs or employment. These programs are school-based, working alongside teachers to help young people connect with their school community and build their commitment to learning towards achieving career goals.
- Any process needs to be youth-friendly, and move beyond our own outcomes. Young people don’t necessarily need a ‘Plan’ for their life - they need to learn the strategies for planning and skills for re-assessing their situations. The choices need to be attractive for the individual. The education system, comprised of a range of choices for young people, should focus on building their resilience and providing them with skills that support their preferences and decisions.
- Mentoring programs may assist in successful transitions for young people. The goal of YMCA School Based Mentoring is to establish a one-to-one relationship that results in improved self-esteem, attitude and behaviour for young people identified as having particular difficulty, poor attendance or not reaching their potential. Compelling evidence shows this model produces positive outcomes for young people. This includes improved academic performance and the quality of class work, increase in the number of assignments and homework submitted, and improved attendance and reduction in the number of suspensions and disciplinary referrals ^{2/3} This model rests on partnerships with business and community and has shown significant benefits for young people, mentors, business and teachers. It has also been shown to have significant impact on transitions from primary to secondary, and secondary to work/further education.

¹ Victorian Government Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (2008). *The State of Victoria’s young people: A report on how young people aged 12-24 are faring*

² Herrera, C (2004). *School-based mentoring: A closer look*. Philadelphia, PA: Public/Private Ventures

³ Karcher, M. (2005). The effects of developmental mentoring and high school mentors’ attendance on their younger mentees’ self-esteem, social skills and connectedness. *Psychology in the Schools*, 42 (1), p 65 - 77

- Community Strengthening occurs through the development of informal and formal networks which in turn generates social capital. In regards to a successful youth transitions system, this needs to include partnerships with industry, Youth Services providers, Community organisations & other support services.

Summary: Innovation, flexibility and youth-centred practice

YMCA Victoria is encouraged by the Youth Transitions System discussion paper and we believe the time to be realistic and innovative, and create real opportunity for young Victorians, is now.

In summary, we encourage DEECD and DIIRD to consider our recommendations that:

- Specialist Youth Workers play a pivotal role within the school context
- Support and relationship building for young people with their school is vital to creating positive connections – Mentoring programs must be a priority to support this structure
- Early intervention strategies and individual pathway planning need to be implemented through community-based partnerships between schools, local community and business
- Partnerships are strengthened by targeted program delivery and underpinned by research and experience.

YMCA Victoria proposes future directions of the youth transitions system which:

- Is youth-centred and addresses the needs of young people in terms of learning, social and personal capacity
- Incorporates industry, youth services and community organisations
- Includes in-school programming and services from community-based agencies to assist schools in better connecting to external links and building the resilience of young people.

Further Information

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