Submission Re: Stronger Futures for all Victorians: Discussion paper on the youth transitions system

Meeting the needs of young parents

We are writing to ask you to urgently consider our feedback in relation to a group of young people whose needs have not been mentioned in this discussion of transitions ... 

young people under the age of 25 who are parenting

For a young person who is transitioning to adulthood, the additional tasks involved in raising a family create another layer of complexity and another layer of dynamics. These can be effectively addressed, but only if these issues and dynamics are recognised, and effective provision is made for support that answers the needs and aspirations of this group.

Young parents sit amid multiple transition phases between youth, adulthood and raising family. The dynamics of this creates particular sets of issues, that may be compounded by disadvantage and other issues. As young parents tend to be a significant but relatively small cohort in relation to overall numbers in mainstream youth, adult, education and family services, they tend to sit on the margins of every mainstream agenda. This means that their specific needs are rarely identified as a group, nor consistently addressed and provided for.

As a result young parents are expected to fit into mainstream service delivery models, and castigated for not engaging when those services don’t meet their needs or aspirations. The responsibility for non-engagement is placed on the individual, when factors contributing to non-engagement often stem from universal services not being structured to recognise young parents particular sets of needs and aspirations.

In no case is this more obvious than in the sets of issues facing young parents who want to continue with their education, training or employment. Currently, support for young parents who want to reengage with education is only available through mainstream youth programs, who of course have no systemic provision for their unique needs or those of their families.
Unless this situation is addressed in a structural sense, we risk condemning all but the most resilient and resourceful of these young people to the margins of the education and employment opportunities that we offer in Australia.

In this marginalised position these young parents have no opportunity to increase social capital for themselves or their family. For those who come from backgrounds of disadvantage, this risks compounding any existing inequalities, and actively transferring any disadvantage to the next generation – their children.

By contrast, international opinion is that one of the shortest paths to addressing inequality and intergenerational disadvantage is to simultaneously address the learning and educational needs of parents and children – with parents in education and/or employment and children in quality early learning environments.

In our experience working with young parents we have consistently found:
• Over 50% to be interested in gaining a qualification ie further education and training
• Strong demand from parents 18 to 25 to re-enter education after a gap of a few years
• Long-term interest in providing well for their family ie employment
• The desire to maintain a connection with education being overwhelmed by the multiple impacts of parenting, family needs, transport issues, lack of affordable, accessible childcare in a trusted environment, and lack of self-confidence in relation to education
• Younger parents needing a period of adjustment to parenting during which education is likely to be seen as a less important priority
• The need for strongly supported easily access short-term courses to enable engagement with education whilst building perceptions of education as a realistic option

Research carried out in 2003-4 in Albury-Wodonga1 combined with anecdotal information and available evidence from other local sources suggests that there is an ongoing high level of young parents (15-25) in the Wodonga and surrounding districts2. These studies aimed to provide a better understanding of the issues related to antenatal, post-natal and early childhood care for young pregnant and parenting women, including those who face homelessness. These studies examined the life circumstances of these women and concluded that no single event contributed to their situation, and that disadvantage, discrimination and vulnerability were the barriers to social and economic equality.

In this context our feedback on the questions posed in the discussion paper are as follows:

**Strengthening literacy and numeracy in the post-compulsory years**
- **Issue** - For parents under 25 these issues will come to the fore when they are addressing the educational needs of their children through child-care, pre-school or primary schooling. At this point these parents are likely to want to address the issues in order to provide for the needs of their children.
  - **Response** - This desire can best be met through community based easy access short-term courses in known environments that create strong relationships and open up pathways to further opportunities.

**Support for making informed education and training choices**
- **Issue** – The fact that a young person under 25 may also be a parent is ignored in most discussions of youth education, training and employment.

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2 Teenage Pregnancy In Wodonga, UHCHS (2003)
Response - Recognition of parenting and raising a family as a valid option that these young people have chosen, that will impact on engagement with education/employment. Response - Long-term career planning for the young parents we work with can seem overwhelming given everything else that they are managing, particularly those who face disadvantage or complex issues, or those who are used to living from day to day. Therefore it is important that this group be systemically offered a series of ‘baby steps’ that recognise what they are managing, that build confidence, that meet their needs and aspirations, and that open up choices and paths to further opportunity.

Supporting young people to complete qualifications / reengage with education

- **Issue** – whilst we tend to have an idea of how many young people chose not to engage with education, we usually have no idea how many of these young people are parenting. In our experience we believe the number to be a sizeable percentage of those young people who are disengaged.
  - **Response** – require services to use the new transparency/accountability arrangements to track how many young people who are not engaged are young parents, and then require through funding arrangements that they then use these figures to identify, recognise and deliver the additional supports this group needs to recreate engagement.

- **Issue** – whilst youth is a sector that include those 0-25, many educational and training supports for young people cut out at 19. For a young parent who has had a child, got serious about education, and built up confidence to reengage, this cut off means they are denied opportunities they would have had, and make completion/reengage less likely.
  - **Response** - Bring the supports in line with the definitions of youth and support young parents who want to complete and/or reengage. Create an extension of opportunity that allows for their ‘maternity’ or ‘paternity’ leave from education as a natural part of their family life-cycle, and recognises their need to put their children and family first for a time.

- **Issue** – Becoming a parent naturally creates a disruption in relation to engagement with education and/or employment, and this is particularly so for the young parents who face multiple vulnerabilities and/or who have had a weak prior engagement with education.
  - **Response** - For many of the young parents that we work with, becoming a parent is an event that encourages them to think seriously about their future and available options. Most have unfinished qualifications, but tend to think of the VET sector rather than school as the educational provider that meets their needs. However if they are trying to complete as an individual, the multiple barriers can easily prove too overwhelming, the immediate needs of the family tend to take over, and disengagement from education becomes more permanent. What is needed is recognition of challenges faced by this group, and structural systemic support that works with community based services to support completion from a social health and social inclusion perspective.

- **Issue** – When young parents want to complete qualifications, the biggest challenge they can face is usually child-care that meets their needs. Many, particularly those without family support or from vulnerable backgrounds, have never left their child with someone else, most operate in the moment or the near future, and many make decisions at the last minute. All of these factors clash with current provision of child-care designed around a business model based on pre-booked, committed, long-day care settings.
  - **Response** – young parents are young people wanting education who also have children. What is needed in this situation is access to flexible, accessible, welcoming child-care in a setting that is next-door to their educational opportunities, that allow them to face their fears about educational competence whilst also satisfying their need to see their child well cared for. Once confidence has been build through educational engagement, we have found this confidence expands to leaving their children in a child-care setting.

NB – the ‘Caring for Kids’ course operated by Gateway in partnership with education, provides a model that demonstrates much of the above in practice. A published paper on Stage 1 developments in 2006-2007 is attached, and information about the latest stages of development with the local TAFE are available on request.