

# Views of Children and Young People in Foster Care Survey

## Education

This paper explores the educational experiences of children and young people living in foster care in Queensland. Findings are drawn from the responses of 845 children and 1180 young people to the 2011 *Views of Children and Young People in Foster Care* survey, which is a rich source of information about children's and young people's attitudes towards and perceptions of their own education. Findings relate to educational status, key markers of educational disadvantage including suspensions and exclusions, and specific problems children and young people experience at school, as well as children's and young people's enjoyment of school and aspirations for the future. Information about educational support, including Educational Support Plans and support provided by Child Safety Officers and Community Visitors are also presented. Where relevant, comparisons are made between the 2011 survey results and prior surveys conducted in 2006, 2007 and 2009. Relationships between key educational measures as well as relationships to other important measures of health and placement stability are also explored.

The findings suggest that children and young people continue to experience educational disadvantage, including high rates of suspension and exclusion and a range of problems at school including problems with schoolwork, bullying and behaviour and that these difficulties can be exacerbated by the child protection system, for example, through placement instability. However, there are reasons for optimism. Children and young people are overwhelmingly likely to report that they enjoy school, expect to complete Year 12 and that their teachers generally like their schoolwork. Furthermore, over time, the proportions of young people reporting that they have an Educational Support Plan have grown, and, importantly, they are more likely to report that these plans are helpful. Analyses in relation to a number of educational variables reveal that young people with a plan they consider to be helpful fare better. Children and young people were also positive about the important role that CSOs and CVs are able to play in supporting their education.


While educational disadvantage is an enduring problem, the survey findings provide evidence of progress in key areas and suggestions for how continued improvements may be made.

## Introduction

There is a large and growing body of literature that shows that, compared with their peers, children and young people in care often fare poorly when it comes to educational outcomes. Worldwide, numerous studies have revealed that students living in care are at risk of poor academic performance, grade retention and the need for special education services (Berlin, Vinnerljung, & Hjern, 2011; Fram & Altshuler, 2009; Havalchak, White, O'Brien, Pecora, & Sepulveda, 2009; Leiter & Johnsen, 1997). In Australia, recent research has confirmed that children in foster care are more likely to experience

significant difficulties at school in relation to attention, social interactions, anxiety, and aggression (Fernandez, 2008). In Queensland analysis of recent departmental data reveals that, compared with the general Queensland student population, children and young people in care are less likely to meet national benchmarks for literacy and numeracy and have higher rates of school suspensions and exclusions (CCYPCG, 2010).

School absenteeism, suspensions and exclusions also impact disproportionately on children and young people in care. In the United Kingdom, a recent report revealed that 0.9% of children in care were



permanently excluded from school compared to 0.1% of all children (Department for Education and Skills, 2007). In one study in Scotland, almost three quarters of care leavers reported having been temporarily or permanently excluded from school during their time in care. Truancy was also common with 83% claiming to have stayed away from school at some point and 51% claiming to have stayed away 'often' (Stein & Dixon, 2006). An Australian study of children in care with high needs found similar rates of school absenteeism with three quarters reporting having been suspended from school in the previous six months and 13% reporting having been permanently excluded (Osborn & Delfabbro, 2006).

Absences from school, including disciplinary absences, may be a marker of difficulty at school but are also associated with a number of negative consequences such as intensifying academic difficulties, disengaging from school, alienation, abuse of alcohol and drugs, and crime (Hemphill, Toumbourou, Smith, Kendall, Rowland, Freiberg & Williams, 2010).

Unsurprisingly, the educational disadvantage experienced by young people in care persists beyond secondary education. In one United States study, only 1.8% of care leavers continued to post-secondary education compared to 24% of the general population (Children's Administration Research, 2004; cited in Bruskas, 2008). In Queensland in 2007 (the most recent year for which relevant data are available), none of the 369 young people aged 17 to 18 years who were in the custody or guardianship of the Chief Executive of the then Department of Child Safety and living in care received, or were eligible for, an overall position (OP)<sup>1</sup>, which is used to rank students for the purpose of admission to tertiary studies (CCYPCG, 2009).

Poor educational attainment is likely to have ramifications for an individual's future earning capacity and general life trajectory as an adult (Chambers & Palmer, 2011). Results from the Stockholm Birth Cohort Study found substantial correlations between low school grades in the final year of primary school and crime, both in adolescence and adulthood, high mortality, need for social assistance and weak labour market participation (Hallerod, 2010; cited in Berlin, et al., 2012). Analysis of Swedish data examining the relationship between school performance and psychosocial problems among care leavers from long-term foster care found that 55% of the overrepresentation in future psychosocial problems

including suicide attempts, drug and alcohol use, serious criminality and welfare dependency could be explained by poor school performance (Berlin, et al., 2012). Similar psychosocial problems have been identified in Australian research with care leavers found to be more likely to terminate their education early, experience high rates of homelessness, become parents early, experience high unemployment levels and low levels of social support (Bromfield & Osborn, 2007; Paxman, 2007; cited in Creed, Tilbury, Buys & Crawford, 2011).

### **Factors contributing to poor outcomes**

When children and young people enter care, many have already been exposed to a range of factors likely to place them at heightened risk of poor educational outcomes. For example, where children have been abused or neglected, they may experience a range of physical, psychological, cognitive and behavioural difficulties (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2008) that can impact directly on academic achievement as well as indirectly through problems with relationships with both peers and school staff.

Apart from experiences of maltreatment, families involved in the child protection system are characterised by a number of demographic attributes that are also associated with poor educational outcomes. For example, children and young people in care experience higher rates of disability. Scherr (2007; cited in Ferguson & Wolkow, 2012) found across 31 studies from a number of countries that approximately one-third of foster children qualified or received special education services, almost five times the rate for their peers not in care. Additionally, families involved in child protection are disproportionately of lower socio-economic status (Walsh & Douglas, 2009), which, in itself, is a predictor of poor academic achievement.


While entering foster care may provide an opportunity to ameliorate some of the disadvantages children may have experienced in their families of origin, the child protection system itself can pose other challenges for children's and young people's educational progress.

Moving into care and subsequent placement changes while in care, apart from being personally disruptive, impact on school attendance with school days likely to be lost with each transition (Bruskas, 2008) and with school changes often associated with placement changes. A study of former foster children from the Pacific Northwest in the United States found that 65% had seven or more school changes from elementary through high school (Pecora et al., 2005, and Loftus, 2007; cited in Chambers & Palmer, 2011). Frequent school changes have a significant impact on educational achievement, with an estimated four to six months of educational progress lost with each school change (Pecora et al., 2005, and Loftus, 2007; cited in Chambers & Palmer, 2011). Children's social and emotional development

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<sup>1</sup> Due to limitations with the data collection and matching processes, the Commission for Children and Young People and Child Guardian was unable to identify the specific young people who were enrolled in Year 12 in 2007. Therefore, it is possible that not all of the 369 young people were enrolled at school.





can also be affected by frequent school changes, particularly for those children whose school routine and established relationships with peers and teachers have been their major source of stability (Chambers & Palmer, 2011).

Expectations of children and young people in care, and the influence that these expectations have on children's and young people's sense of efficacy, may also have a significant impact on educational achievement (Cheung, et al., 2012; O'Brien, 2012; Stone, 2007; cited in Stoddart, 2012). Expectations are also important within Bourdieu's cultural reproduction theory (cited in Johansson & Hojer, 2012; Jaeger, 2011). Growing up in a well-educated middle class family with particular reading habits and social connections means growing up in an environment where a good education is more or less assumed and children develop a strong educational identity. This cultural capital allows children to fit more easily into school settings, where a middle class way of interacting and socialising is reinforced.

Unfortunately, research suggests such positive adult attitudes and expectations may be lacking for many children in care. Swedish adult child protection professionals and carers were identified as having low expectations for young people in care being able to continue to higher education (Johansson & Hojer, 2012). These findings were mirrored in Canadian research which found carers were less likely to have aspirations for children to attend college or university and were also less likely to rate good grades as 'very important' when compared to Canadian parents responding in relation to biological children (Stoddart, 2012). Ferguson and Wolkow (2012), note that unhelpful attitudes about education for children in care extend beyond the home, describing a pervasive disregard for school issues among individuals and systems in charge of children in care. They suggest that the most frequently expressed barrier in the qualitative literature is interagency antagonism between education and child protection agencies who blame each other for children's poor educational outcomes (Ferguson & Wolkow, 2012).

Bullying at school has also been raised as a significant issue by children in care. In an Australian study of children in care over half the children reported being bullied in primary school and a third in high school with the four main reasons why they believed they were bullied being their appearance, their name, their care status, and their birth parents (Townsend, 2011).

Such is the complexity of and interaction between before-care and in-care factors related to children's and young people's educational disadvantage, it is difficult to discern whether out-of-home care has a net positive or negative effect on educational outcomes. Some research suggests that the impact of life events prior to coming into care cannot account entirely for the poor educational outcomes of children and young people in care and that being

removed from a birth family and the nature of the care experience itself also appear to have negative impacts for some children (Stoddart, 2012). On the other hand, researchers such as Berridge (2012) argue that the care system is not inherently damaging to children's education, but is generally beneficial. Whether before-care or in-care factors are most influential, it is clear that education for children and young people in care requires special attention and specific policy responses.


### **Improving educational outcomes for children and young people in care**

Recognising the complexity and multi-dimensionality of improving educational outcomes for children in care does not mean there is nothing that can be done to assist them to improve educational attainment.

One point of useful intervention is the out-of-home care system. The Casey National Alumni Study in the United States examined the early life experiences, educational progress and success as adults of more than one thousand foster care alumni between 1966 and 1998 and found that placement stability has one of the largest positive effects. This research highlighted that a consistent and stable environment, allowing young people to develop relationships with the foster family, stay in the same school and not have to cope with the anxiety, anger, and adjustment of changing homes and changing caseworkers are all factors associated with completing high school (Pecora, 2012). Further, an analyses of three large studies of children in care in the United States found that the provision of academic and tangible support networks (the very networks that can be disrupted by multiple school and placement moves), are associated with better educational results (Pecora, 2012). Carefully matched and appropriately supported placements are therefore critical to educational success for children and young people in care.

Research suggests changes within the education system can also be effective in improving educational outcomes. Education researcher, Hattie (2012), conducted a meta-analysis of more than 50,000 research articles, 150,000 effect sizes and 240 million students. Hattie concluded that there is no fixed recipe for ensuring that teaching has the maximum possible effect on student learning, and no set of universal principles that apply to all learning for all students. However, there is evidence that some teaching practices are effective, and many practices that are not (Hattie, 2012). It may well be the case that a suite of interventions may be necessary, some aiming to assist individual children, with others designed to influence systemic and attitudinal change.

A number of initiatives aimed at improving educational outcomes of individual children have yielded positive results (Stoddart, 2012). Initiatives such as the Letterbox Club in the United Kingdom,



which provides children in care with packages of educational materials including books, maths activities, stationery and library cards, were associated with improved standardised reading scores of some children in care, though not others (Griffiths, 2012). Direct instruction tutoring in the United States has also produced some promising preliminary results for a number of foster children (Harper & Schmidt, 2012). According to Flynn, Marquis, Paquet, Peeke and Aubry (2012), tutoring by supported and skilled foster parents has been shown to be successful in improving foster children's basic academic skills.

### **Educational support for children and young people in care in Queensland**

The primary mechanism for meeting the educational needs and providing appropriate support for children and young people in care in Queensland is the Educational Support Plan (ESP). An ESP is developed within schools in collaboration with the Department of Communities, Child Safety and Disability Services for all children on a Child Protection Order granting custody or guardianship to this department.

An ESP is a formal written document that identifies the educational goals of the child or young person in care. It includes the strategies needed to achieve these goals, the required and available resources, who is responsible for implementing the strategies, and processes for monitoring and reviewing the plan. There are a number of other plans not specific to children and young people in care that may be applicable to any given child or young person including Individual Education Plans for students with disabilities, Individual Behaviour Plans for students requiring individualised behaviour support, and Senior Education and Training plans for students in Years 10, 11 and 12. According to the Department of Education, Training and Employment (DETE), an ESP may not necessarily be written as a discrete plan but is more likely to be incorporated into one of these other educational plans where they exist.

Young people are able to participate in their ESP through a number of different avenues. They may attend a meeting and provide their views in person, they may provide their views indirectly for example by discussing their views with a teacher, carer or their CSO prior to the meeting, or they may provide a written statement. The Department of Communities' resources for young people suggests that young people identify their goals, what they are good at and enjoy, what they may need help with and what extra-curricular activities they may wish to participate in.

There are a number of reasons why young people's participation in planning is critical. Under the *Charter of rights for a child in care* enshrined in the *Child Protection Act (1999)*, children and young people in the custody or guardianship of the chief executive have a right "to be consulted about, and to take part

in making decisions affecting the child's life (having regard to the child's age or ability to understand), particularly decisions about where the child is living, contact with the child's family and the child's health and schooling." Given this, ESPs are a key mechanism for the state to meet this obligation. In addition, there are clear reasons for including children and young people in decision making. Participation in decision making not only builds young people's self-esteem and sense of agency it also enhances cooperation and leads to plans being implemented more effectively (Gilligan, 2000). For these benefits to be realised, it is necessary for young people to feel that their input is valued and that decision makers will follow through on promises (Cashmore & O'Brien, 2001).

Figures from DETE indicate that, at the end of Term 2 2011, 82.8% of children in the care of the state enrolled in Queensland schools had an ESP. An additional 10.9% had ESPs under development and the remaining 6.2% did not have an ESP (DETE, 2012).

### **The importance children's and young people's views**

Under its legislation the Commission for Children and Young People and Child Guardian is required to listen to, and seriously consider, the concerns, views and wishes of children and young people (*Commission for Children and Young People and Child Guardian Act 2000*). The right for children and young people to be consulted about important decisions is also enshrined in the *Child Protection Act 1999* and set out in Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Apart from these rights based justifications, there are strong pragmatic reasons for seeking the views of children and young people in care. The data generated by the Commission's Views surveys provide a window into the subjective experiences of children and young people. What children and young people think and feel about their lives and particularly their education are profoundly important. Whether children and young people enjoy and want to pursue their education, the kinds of problems that they struggle with and the important relationships between students, teachers and the broader child protection and education systems that are vital for educational success are best understood by talking directly to children and young people.

## **Views of Children and Young People in Foster Care Survey**

The *Views of Children and Young People in Foster Care* is the largest study of its kind involving the direct participation of children and young people in care. The survey, conducted every second year, provides an opportunity for children and young



people in foster care to share their views and experiences of state care. The Commission's first *Views* survey was conducted in 2006. At this time, a total of 1703 children and young people participated. The second survey, conducted in 2007, attracted 1767 responses, while the third survey in 2009 attracted 2727 responses.

## Research design

A detailed description of the respondents, instruments, survey administration, and data analyses techniques can be found in the Commission's report *2011 Views of children and young people in foster care survey: Overview and selected findings*.

## Findings

The fourth *Views* foster care survey was administered by the Commission's Community Visitors between April and July 2011. A total of 2754 respondents responded. Of these, 1180 young people responded to the survey for young people, 829 children responded to the survey for children and 745 carers responded to a survey on behalf of young children.

The only question relating to school or education in the carers survey was one which asked carers *If not already attending school, is this child currently enrolled in a pre-prep program?* Of the carers with a child of pre-prep age, 60.3% reported that they were enrolled in a pre-prep program. As such, the findings reported in this paper are derived from the surveys returned from children and young people - a combined population of 2009.

Questions addressed in the paper focus on respondents' school experiences including numbers of schools attended, rates of repeating a year at school, rates of formal exclusion from school, problems experienced at school, enjoyment of school, and teachers' perceptions of their schoolwork. Young people were also asked about Education Support Plans, their aspirations for completing Year 12, and their participation in training, other education and regular employment.

## Respondents' characteristics

Table 1 shows that a high proportion of respondents were from some of the most densely populated zones of the state including Ipswich, the Gold Coast, Toowoomba, and the Brisbane region.

The mean age for the young people was 12 years and 9 months (median 12 years) while children averaged 7 years and 8 months of age (median 7 years). Slightly more females than males participated. Foster care was the most commonly reported placement type followed by kinship or relative care. Only 1% to 2% reported being in specialist foster care.

**Table 1. Survey returns by CV zone - total sample children and young people (n = 1998 of 2009)**

Community Visitor Zone	Number and percentage of total sample	
Far Northern	183	9.2%
Northern	148	7.4%
Central North	111	5.6%
Central South	209	10.5%
Ipswich	233	11.7%
Toowoomba & Western	266	13.3%
Brisbane North	95	4.8%
Sunshine Coast	112	5.6%
Brisbane South	125	6.3%
Gold Coast	204	10.2%
Moreton & South Burnett	117	5.9%
Logan	107	5.4%
Brisbane West	88	4.4%

Disability rates were high with 16.8% of young people and 15.5% of children reporting to have some kind of disability. A wide range of disabilities was mentioned, most commonly ADHD, autistic spectrum disorder, Aspergers syndrome, intellectual impairment and learning disorders.

Approximately 60% of respondents reported being of Caucasian Australian background, while around one third reported identifying as Aboriginal and or Torres Strait Islander. A small proportion of children (3.6%) and young people (7.2%) reported being from 'other' cultural background. These respondents indicated being from countries such as Malaysia, China, the Philippines, the Republic of Congo, and Sierra Leone.

More than three quarters of the children (75.3%) and young people (75.8%) reported having a carer of the same cultural background. Having a carer of the same cultural background was considerably less likely for children (46.0%) and young people (51.9%) of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander backgrounds.

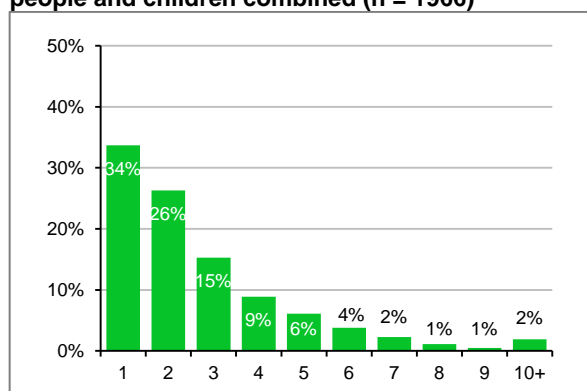
## Schools attended

### *How many primary schools have you attended?*

All but 53 (2.7%) of those who responded to the survey reported attending school. Analyses of responses revealed that taken together, children and young people had attended an average of 2.7 primary schools. This represents a significant decline since 2009 when the mean number of schools attended was 2.9.

Figure 1 presents the distribution for the number of primary schools attended. It shows that 662 (33.7%) children and young people reported having attended only one primary school and 517 (26.3%) reported having attended two primary schools. A further 746 (38.0%) reported having attended between three and nine schools while 37 (2.2%) reported attending between ten and twenty schools.

**Figure 1. Number of primary schools attended – young people and children combined (n = 1966)**

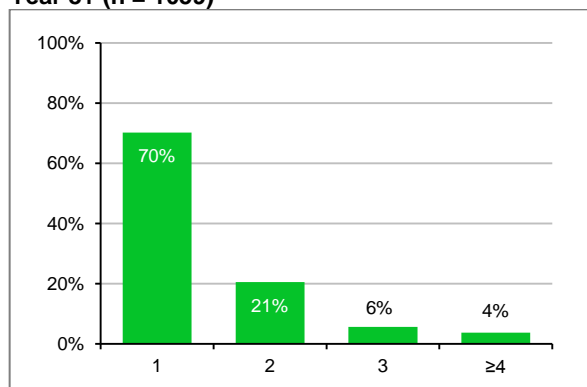


#### **How many secondary schools have you attended?**

Of the 1104 respondents enrolled in Years 8 to 12, 1059 indicated the number of secondary schools they had attended to date. The average number of secondary schools attended was 1.4, similar to the 2009 average of 1.5.

Figure 2 presents the distribution for the number of secondary schools attended. It shows that 70.2% (732) students had attended only one secondary school, 20.5% (214) had attended two secondary schools, and 5.6% (59) had attended three secondary schools. The remaining 3.7% (38) reported attending between four and nine secondary schools.

**Figure 2. Number of secondary schools attended – Year 8+ (n = 1059)**



### **Kept back a year at school**

#### **Have you ever been kept back at school? If so, how many times?**

Around one quarter (24.3%) of young people reported having been kept back a year at school, significantly less than the 28.1% reported in 2009.

The mean number of times young people reported having repeated a year at school is 1.1. Of those who reported repeating a year, 92.8% reported having been kept back only once, 6.4% twice and one young person each reported being kept back 6 and 7 times.

There has also been a significant decline from 15.8% in 2009 to 12.3% in 2011 in the proportion of children reporting to have repeated a year at school. The mean number of times that children reported

repeating a year is 1.0. Like the young people, the vast majority (95.7%) reported having been kept back only once. A further 3.3% had been kept back twice and one child (1.1%) reported being kept back 3 times.

### **Exclusions from school**

#### **Have you ever been suspended from a school?**

Almost four in 10 (38.6%) young people reported having been suspended from school at some time. This is slightly less than in 2009 when 42.2% of young people reported having been suspended from school. This difference, however, is not statistically significant.

#### **Have you ever been formally excluded (expelled) from a school?**

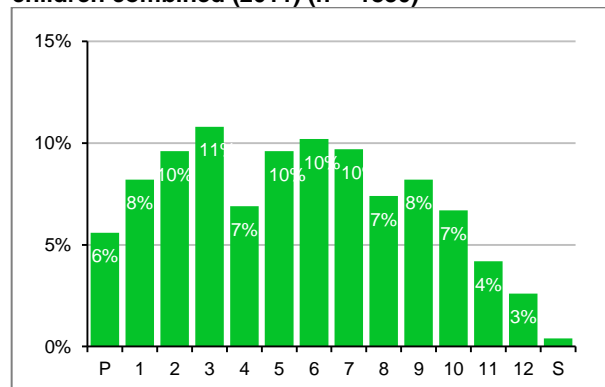
Seventy three (6.4%) young people reported having been formally excluded from school at some time. This represents a significant reduction, since 2009, when 9.3% (107) of young people indicated that they had been formally excluded.

### **Current experiences of school**

#### **Do you currently go to school? If yes, what year level?**

At the time of the survey, the vast majority of young people (96.0%) and children (99.3%) reported attending school. Figure 3 presents the frequency distribution for year enrolled at school for both groups combined.

**Figure 3. School year level – young people and children combined (2011) (n = 1830)**



As can be seen, the largest single group of respondents, accounting for 198 students or 10.8% of the group was enrolled in Year 3. In contrast, only 48 (2.6%) young people reported being enrolled in Year 12. A further 102 (6.0%) were enrolled in Prep (P) and seven (0.3%) in Special Education programs (S).

#### **Do you enjoy school most of the time?**

In response to this new question, 88.0% of young people and 89.1% of children who responded reported that they do.

#### **In general, are teachers happy with your schoolwork?**

Another new question sought children's and young people's views about their teacher's impressions of their schoolwork. Again, these findings were positive with 91.3% of young people reporting that teachers

were happy with their schoolwork all, or most, of the time. Only 8.7% felt that teachers were not often or never happy with their schoolwork. Similarly, when children were asked if their teachers were generally happy with their schoolwork, 93.1% responded 'Yes'.

Many commented further on why they felt teachers were happy with their schoolwork. Some spoke of doing well in class, others commented on the effort that they put into their schoolwork or their love of learning. For instance:

- *I'm the highest in the group in everything.*
- *Straight As usually.*
- *I get good report cards.*
- *I got an award for working hard on the computer.*
- *Student of the week. Student of the month.*
- *I'm usually the first to finish.*
- *The teachers can never stop smiling at my work.*
- *My teacher says I'm getting much better at my spelling and reading.*
- *I try my best all the time.*
- *I get all my maths tests right and I try hard.*
- *I have always liked school. I have a good teacher.*
- *I love learning and reading and writing.*
- *They are very kind and caring.*

Many respondents agreed that teachers are generally happy with their schoolwork but qualified their response with comments such as the following:

- *Sometimes and sometimes not.*
- *Some of the teachers are not very nice and yell.*
- *They say I talk too much.*
- *But they get cranky.*
- *But they don't listen very good to me.*
- *But not my English.*
- *Most of the time when I do it neat.*
- *Mostly with art.*
- *Not all the time, most of the time.*

Some of the children who indicated that that their teacher wasn't happy with their schoolwork also commented. These comments shed light on what children perceived to be the source of their teacher's dissatisfaction, or the consequences of the dissatisfaction.

- *Because I don't stay focused.*
- *Have trouble with everything.*
- *I get schoolwork wrong.*
- *Behaviour. Attention span.*
- *Cause I don't want to do it.*
- *Not really happy with my work. I do messy writing.*
- *Not really because I can't stay on the left page. I try to be neat but just get scribbles.*
- *If I don't get it right she normally gets angry.*
- *Make me go on time out.*

- *Teacher gets angry.*

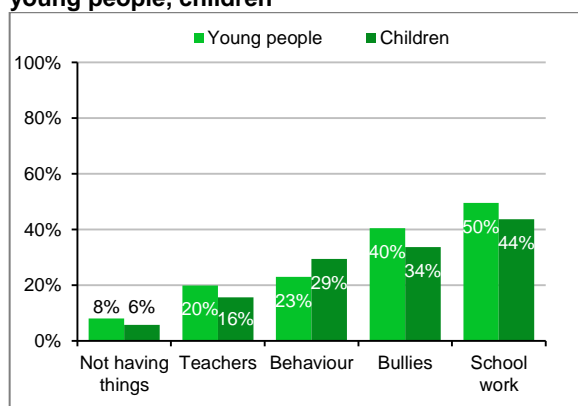
## Difficulties experienced at school

**Do you have any problems at school that you haven't been able to get help with? If yes, what sort of problems?**

More than one quarter of children (26.9%) and young people (25.6%) reported having a problem at school. Since 2009, there have been significant decreases in the proportions of young people and children reporting to experience problems at school. In 2009, these proportions were 29.3% and 33.8% respectively.

When asked to select from a range of options the types of problems they were experiencing, young people chose schoolwork more frequently than any other option. As seen in Figure 4, 49.5% of young people selected this, followed by bullying (40.4%), problems with behaviour (23.0%), problems with teachers (20.0%), and not having the things needed for school (8.0%).

**Figure 4. Types of problems experienced at school – young people, children**



There has been a significant decline from 59.5% in 2009 in the reporting schoolwork as a problem although the reporting of other problems remains unchanged.

Like young people, the most commonly reported problem for children was school work (43.6%). This was followed by bullying (33.6%) and problems with their behaviour (29.4%). A further 15.6% felt that teachers didn't listen or understand them and 5.7% reported not having all the things they needed for school (see Figure 4). The proportion of children reporting to have these problems is largely consistent with that of 2009.

A small number of respondents also identified 'other' problems. These included:

- *The school hates me.*
- *Problem with parents.*
- *Concentration.*
- *Need help with cultural stuff because I don't know my background.*
- *I want to go to another school.*
- *My weight.*



- Kids not wanting to play with me.
- Missed a lot of school.
- Not having friends.
- They ask stupid questions about my family.
- Problems with making friends.
- I just don't really like school.

Further analyses revealed that more than half the children and young people reported experiencing multiple problems at school. Almost one-third (32.1%) of young people and 34.2% of children indicated they were experiencing two problems, while a further 18.7% of young people and 18.3% of children reported experiencing three or more problems.

Responses to a survey question about worrying shed further light on young people's perceptions of school. Of the 31.2% of young people who reported worrying about things 'all' or 'most of the time', a considerable proportion appear to worry about school related matters. When asked to comment on what they worry about most, 112 of the 570 young people who responded referred to school issues. Comments included concerns about homework, assignments and exams, getting work done on time, and getting good grades. Some also commented on being picked on or bullied at school, getting into trouble, not having anyone to play with or starting at new school. Examples of these comments are:

- Getting assignments done.
- Worry about whether I get an A or B. I like A+s.
- Maths.
- School report.
- My Naplan test.
- Assignments, exams at school.
- School, homework getting harder.
- Grades at school.
- Being sick and when I can go back to school.
- If I do well in school.
- If I don't bring my homework.
- Getting into trouble at school.
- Not having friends at school.
- About getting bashed at school.
- Going to high school.
- Starting a new school.

In contrast, only 20 of the 304 comments made by children about the things that worry them concerned school.

Experiences at school also figured prominently among responses to a question that asked young people if they are made to feel different because they are in care. Although only 18.5% indicated that they are made to feel different, the vast majority of comments made by this group identified school as the environment in which they feel different. Some of the comments below pinpoint teasing by peers at

school as the reason for feeling different to those who are not in care.

- Only @ school, kids tease.
- Kids at school treat you different as do teachers.
- At school – people tease me and exclude me.
- I don't like it being mentioned at school because people that aren't my close friends don't know about it.
- People at school make me feel different.
- When I'm with my friends at school.
- Other children at school can tease me at times about being in care.
- Kids asking me questions at school.
- When they send stupid things to school, embarrassing.

School related matters were also highlighted by children and young people in their responses to the question *Do you miss out on things because you are in care?* In addition to sleepovers (by far the most commonly noted), social events (such as parties and trips) and extracurricular sports, many young people mentioned missing out on school activities such as excursions, camps and sporting events. Some children and young people also explained why they missed out on these activities. For instance:

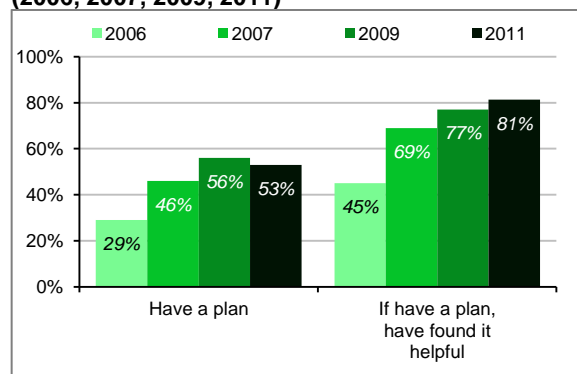
- Pizza days at school because of the money.
- I remember a couple of times missing out on a camp because the dept forgot to sign the forms.
- School excursions because sometimes Nan doesn't want to pay or if just going over the border the dept won't let me.
- Interschool sport because of CSO.
- Heaps of excursions because carers won't pay and Mum and Dad won't sign permission forms and CSOs won't.
- Dept has made me miss a couple of camps.

## Education support plans

**Has an education plan been developed for you because you are in care? (also called an Education Support Plan). If so, has it been helpful to you?**

More than half (53.2%) the young people reported having an ESP and of these 81.3% indicated that their plan had been helpful.

**Figure 5. Education Support Plans – young people (2006, 2007, 2009, 2011)**








Figure 5 shows that these proportions are not dissimilar to those of 2009, but represent a significant improvement since 2006 and 2007 when reports of having an ESP were only 29.0% and 46.0% respectively.

## Completing school

### ***Do you think you will finish Year 12?***

Another new question in the 2011 survey sought information on young people's expectations of completing school. Of the 1025 young people who responded to the question, 88.3% indicated that they expect to complete Year 12. Only 11.7% anticipated that they would not. In addition to these young people, around 30 wrote on the survey "maybe", "don't know", or "undecided". Proportions of young people indicating that they believed they will complete Year 12 were consistent across age groups. Notably, no changes in expectations were evident amongst students approaching school completion age.

## Other education, training and work

### ***Are you doing any other training or education? If yes, what type?***

One hundred and forty six (13.0%) young people indicated that they were participating in some form of training or education. Many were undertaking courses at TAFE (such as certificates in child care, hospitality, hairdressing, horticulture), doing apprenticeships (hairdressing, car mechanic), traineeships (such as at McDonalds), and participating in work experience. Some were also undertaking training in sports (netball, boxing, karate, dancing), learning to play a musical instrument or learning a language. Other types of training or education included university studies and voluntary activities such as the rural fire brigade.

### ***Do you do any regular paid work?***

One hundred and twenty nine (11.4%) young people reported participating in regular employment. The vast majority of these young people were engaged in retail (shops) or hospitality work (fast food outlets). Some also mentioned work related to their apprenticeships or traineeships, helping out at the school tuckshop, while other work included fencing, seasonal picking, child care assistance and babysitting.

## Support from CSOs and CVs

Many comments in response to questions throughout the survey underscore the vital role that CSOs and CVs play in supporting children and young people at school. When asked *What has your CSO helped you with?* 21.3% of comments from young people and 16.6% of comments from children referred to school related matters.

Many comments focused on CSOs organising or providing learning or subject matter support. For instance:

- *Tutoring.*
- *Homework*
- *Schoolwork.*
- *Help at school with maths.*
- *Talked to school about my schoolwork.*
- *Helped me get a lot more help from school – came to a meeting and helped me with that.*

CSOs were also noted as having helped organise funding for school related resources or equipment. For example:

- *Laptop.*
- *Getting a lap top, clarinet.*
- *Getting a musical instrument and music theory.*
- *Schooling gear.*

Some children and young people also referred to CSOs making participation in school related activities possible:

- *Camps, school photos.*
- *School camps, excursions.*
- *Paying for camp.*

Some indicated that CSOs had intervened when they experienced bullying or required counselling:

- *Bullying.*
- *See a counsellor school.*
- *Troubles at school.*

Other ways in which CSOs have reportedly helped include:

- *Take to school.*
- *She's helped me with school fees.*
- *Helping me go to boarding school next year as there is no high school.*
- *Helped me change schools.*
- *Got our report cards from last school.*

When asked about the things that their CV has helped with, 15.2% of young people and 10.6% of children highlighted school issues. Comments from children and young people regarding the types of help that CVs provided were similar to those comments about the help received from CSOs. These comments include:

- *Help get a tutor. Helped not get bullied at school.*
- *Contacted teacher when I was bullied.*
- *Homework.*
- *My laptop.*
- *ESP.*
- *Sign camp forms.*
- *Getting into my current school.*
- *Boarding school.*

## Associations between variables

Further analyses were conducted to shed light on the factors associated with school experiences.

## Associations with placement and school stability

Analyses revealed a positive correlation between the total number of schools attended and the number of placements experienced indicating that children and young people who had experienced more placement changes were also more likely to have experienced more school changes (see Table 5). It should be noted, however, that many school changes took place in the absence of placement changes with more than half (52.2%) the children and young people experiencing more school changes than placement changes. Only a minority (27.5%) of children and young people experienced more placement changes than school changes. The remaining 20.4% of children and young people had the same number of school and placement changes.

Reports of exclusions from school were also found to be related to both school and placement stability. Table 5 also shows that the average placement length for young people who had been suspended (3.8 years) or excluded (3.1 years) was significantly shorter than for young people who had never been suspended or excluded (4.4 years). Young people who had never been suspended or excluded also experienced fewer placements (3.0) compared to young people who had been suspended (4.3), while young people who had been excluded experienced, on average, more than twice as many placements as young people who had never been suspended or excluded (6.5). Young people who had been subject to disciplinary absences also attended more schools on average (4.7 schools for young people who had been suspended and 5.4 for those who had been expelled) than young people who had never been suspended or excluded (3.6) (Table 5).

**Table 5. Young people's placement and school stability by disciplinary absence status**

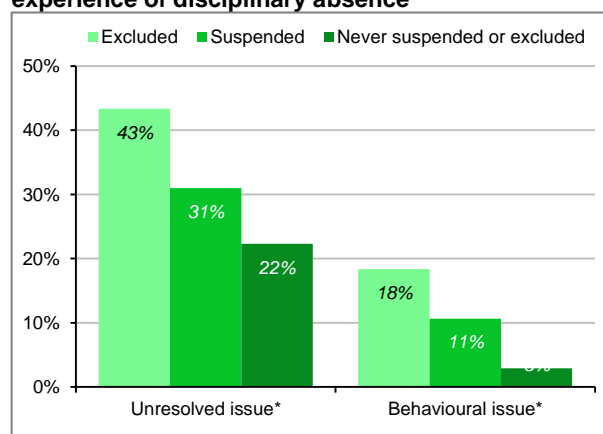
	Placement length	Total Placements	Schools attended
Suspended <sup>a</sup>	3.8(4.0)*	4.3(4.9)*	4.7(3.0)*
Excluded <sup>a</sup>	3.1(3.4)*	6.5(8.0)*	5.4(2.6)*
Never suspended / excluded	4.4(4.0)*	3.0(3.0)*	3.6(2.6)*
All young people	4.1(4.0)	3.5(3.9)	4.1 (2.8)

a) Categories are not mutually exclusive

\* Significant difference by disciplinary absence status ( $p < 0.05$ )

Young people who reported experiencing disciplinary absences in the past were more likely to report experiencing current problems at school that they hadn't been able to get help with. As can be seen in Figure 6, almost half (43.3%) of young people who had been formally excluded from school reported unresolved problems at school as did just under one third (31.0%) of young people who had been suspended.

**Figure 6. Young people reporting unresolved school issues and unresolved behavioural issues by experience of disciplinary absence<sup>a</sup>**



a) "Excluded" and "Suspended" are not mutually exclusive categories

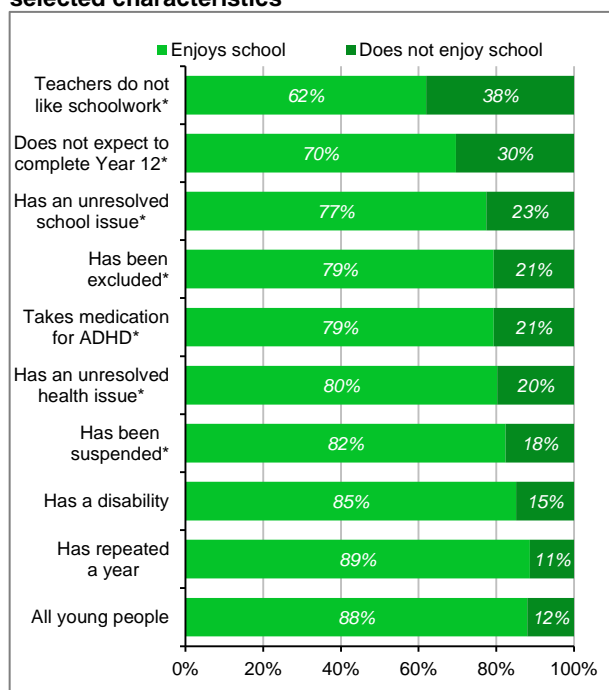
\* Significant difference in reporting of issues ( $p < 0.05$ )

The proportion of young people who had never been suspended or excluded who were experiencing current problems at school was significantly lower at just 22.3%. Disparities in relation to unresolved behavioural problems were even more apparent. Of young people who had been excluded, almost one in five (18.3%) reported current unresolved problems with their own behaviour. Just over one in ten (10.6%) young people who had been suspended reported unresolved behavioural issues at school. In comparison, very few young people who had never been suspended or excluded from school reported their own behaviour as problematic, with only 2.9% of these young people reporting that their own behaviour was a problem. No clear patterns in relation to other specific school problems (for example problems with schoolwork or not having the necessary things for school) were evident in relation to disciplinary absences.

## Associations with enjoyment of school

As noted earlier, 88.0% young people and 89.1% children reported enjoying school most of the time. Further analyses revealed that a range of factors were significantly associated with enjoyment of school. Figure 7 shows that young people who reported that their teachers were not very often or never happy with their schoolwork were least likely to enjoy school most of the time (62.0%). Lower than average proportions of young people who did not to anticipate completing Year 12 (69.6%), reported having problems at school (77.5%), have been formally excluded from school at some time (79.3%), reported taking medication for ADHD (79.4%), reported a health issue (80.2%), and who had been suspended from school (82.4%) reported enjoying school most of the time. Young people's enjoyment of school did not appear to be associated with having repeated a year or having a disability.

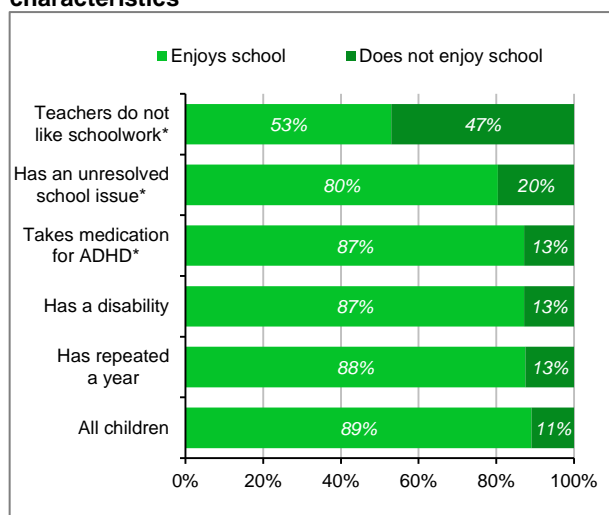
**Figure 7 Young people's enjoyment of school by selected characteristics<sup>a</sup>**



a) Categories are not mutually exclusive  
\*Significant difference in reporting of enjoyment of school ( $p < 0.05$ )

Where children were asked equivalent questions, results were largely consistent with those for young people. As can be seen in Figure 8, children were less likely to report enjoying school most of the time if they felt that teachers were not happy with their schoolwork (52.9%), and when they had problems at school (80.4%).

**Figure 8. Children's enjoyment of school by selected characteristics<sup>a</sup>**

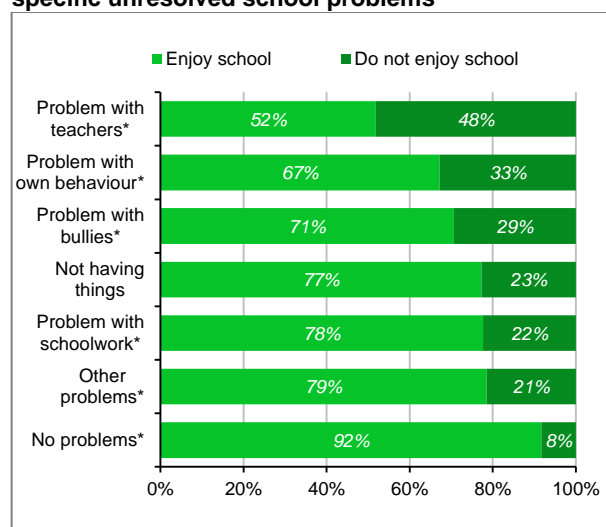


a) Categories are not mutually exclusive  
\*Significant difference in reporting of enjoyment of school ( $p < 0.05$ )

In contrast to young people, there was no association between children's enjoyment of school and taking medication for ADHD (87.2% enjoy school most of the time). As with young people, enjoyment of school did not appear to be affected by having a disability or repeating a year (87.2% and 87.5%, respectively reported enjoying school most of the time).

Further analyses revealed significant relationships between enjoyment of school and the various types of problems identified by children and young people. Figure 9 shows that teachers not listening or understanding had the greatest impact. Only half (51.9%) the young people who reported this problem indicated that they enjoyed school most of the time. Enjoyment of school was also significantly less likely among young people reporting problems with their own behaviour (67.2%), bullying (70.6%), not having things needed for school (77.3%), having problems with schoolwork (77.7%) or having "other" problems (78.5%). In comparison, 91.7% young people who reported no unresolved problems at school reported enjoying school most of the time.

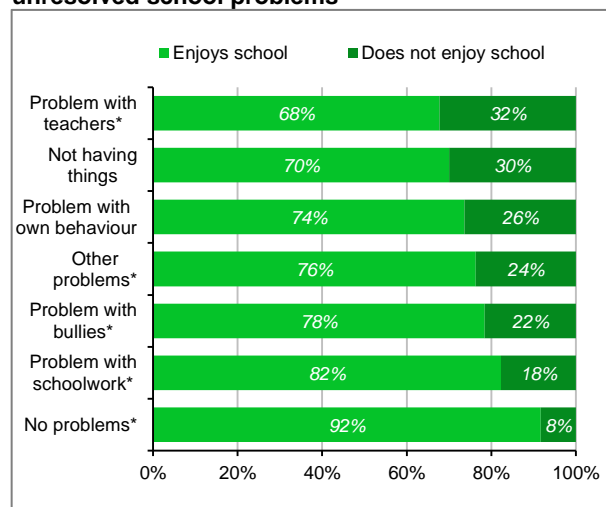
**Figure 9. Young people's enjoyment of school by specific unresolved school problems<sup>a</sup>**



a) Children may report multiple problems and therefore may be included in more than one category  
\*Significant difference in reporting of enjoyment of school ( $p < 0.05$ )

Similar patterns emerged for children with those reporting problems with teachers the least likely to report enjoying school (67.7%).

**Figure 10. Children's enjoyment of school by specific unresolved school problems<sup>a</sup>**



a) Children may report multiple problems and therefore may be included in more than one category  
\*Significant difference in reporting of enjoyment of school ( $p < 0.05$ )

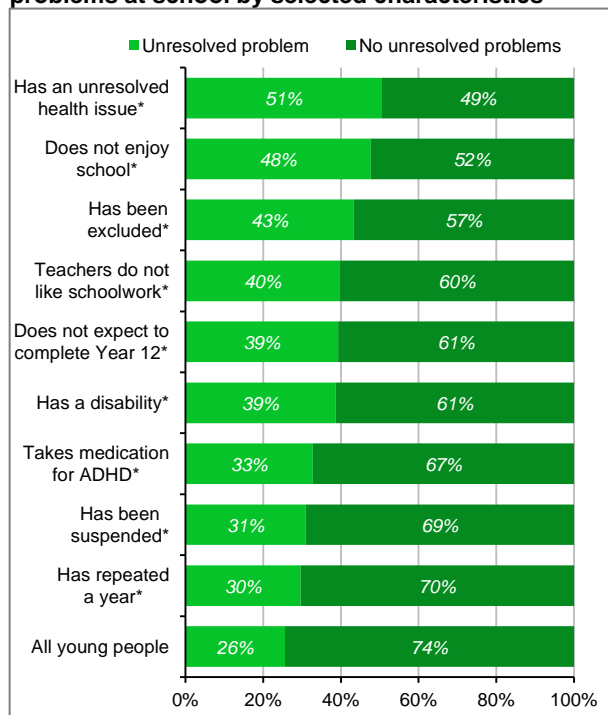


Enjoyment of school was also less likely among children who reported problems with their behaviour (73.7%), “other” problems (76.3%) and problems with being bullied or teased (78.5%). While statistically significant, having a problem with schoolwork was a weaker predictor of enjoyment of school with 82.3% of children reporting this problem enjoying school most of the time. Only 70.0% who reported not having things for school enjoyed school most of the time, however, due to the small number of children reporting this problem, this difference did not reach statistical significance ( $p = 0.051$ ). In comparison, 92.3% children not experiencing any problems at school reported enjoying school most of the time.

### Associations with problems at school

Several factors were associated with reports of unresolved problems at school (Figure 11). For instance, more than half (50.5%) the young people who reported unresolved health issues also reported problems at school compared to 25.6% of young people overall. Significantly higher rates of unresolved school problems were also evident for young people who reported not enjoying school most of the time (47.7%), having been excluded (43.3%) or suspended (31.0%) from school, teachers not liking their schoolwork (39.8%), not expecting to complete Year 12 (39.3%), having a disability (38.6%), and taking medication for ADHD (32.8%).

**Figure 11. Young people reporting unresolved problems at school by selected characteristics<sup>a</sup>**

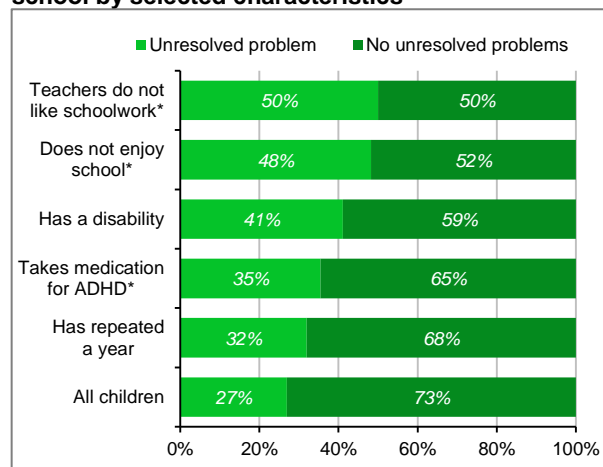


a) Categories are not mutually exclusive  
\*Significant difference in reporting of problems at school ( $p < 0.05$ )

For children, the strongest predictor of unresolved problems at school was the belief that teachers are not happy with their schoolwork (Figure 12). Half (50.0%) of the children who reported that their

teachers are not generally happy with their schoolwork reported unresolved problems.

**Figure 12. Children reporting unresolved problems at school by selected characteristics<sup>a</sup>**



a) Categories are not mutually exclusive  
\*Significant difference in reporting of problems at school ( $p < 0.05$ )

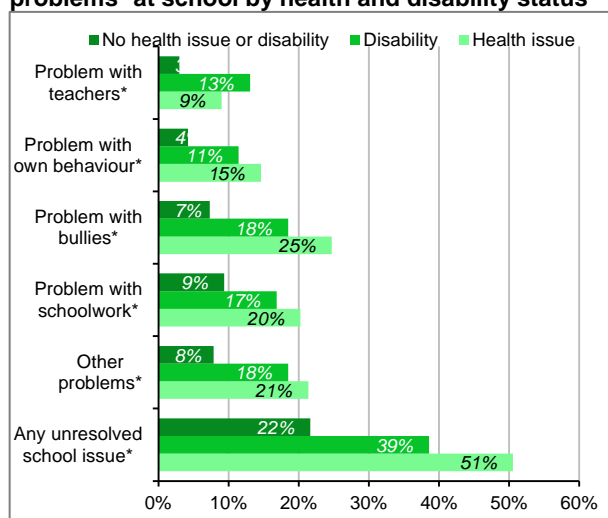
As with young people, just under half (48.2%) of the children who reported not enjoying school reported unresolved problems, as did 41.1% of the children reporting to have a disability and 35.5% of the children who reported taking medication for ADHD. As with young people, there was no statistical relationship between unresolved problems and having repeated a year with 31.9% of children who had repeated a year identifying unresolved problems compared to 26.9% of children overall.

Given the strong relationship between health issues and problems at school, further analyses were conducted to test relationships between self-reported health issues and the various school problems. As noted earlier, 8.5% young people reported having a health problem of concern to them and 16.8% reported having a disability.

Significant statistical relationships were identified between health issues and each of the school problems. The exception was not having the things needed for school for which analysis could not be conducted due to small cell sizes. Analyses revealed that having a health concern was a stronger predictor of most school problems, including problems with schoolwork, bullying, behaviour and “other” problems, while disability was a stronger predictor of problems with teachers (Figure 13).

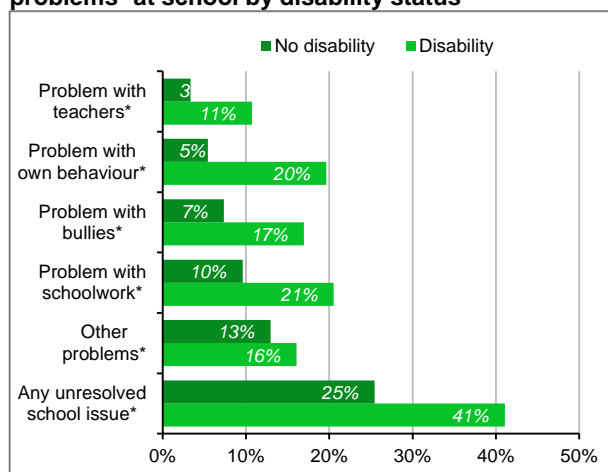
As reported previously, 15.5% of children indicated having a disability (children were not asked about unresolved health issues). Again, due to small cell sizes, not having things necessary for school was excluded from the analysis but all other school problems were significantly more common amongst children with a disability. For children with a disability, problems with schoolwork (20.5%) and behaviour (19.6%) figured most prominently followed by bullying (17.0%), “other” problems (16.1%) and problems with teachers not listening or understanding (10.7%) (Figure 14).

**Figure 13. Young people reporting specific unresolved problems<sup>a</sup> at school by health and disability status<sup>b</sup>**



a) Children may report multiple problems and therefore may be included in more than one category  
b) "Disability" and "Health issue" are not mutually exclusive categories  
\* Significant difference in reporting of issues ( $p < 0.05$ )

**Figure 14. Children reporting specific unresolved problems<sup>a</sup> at school by disability status**



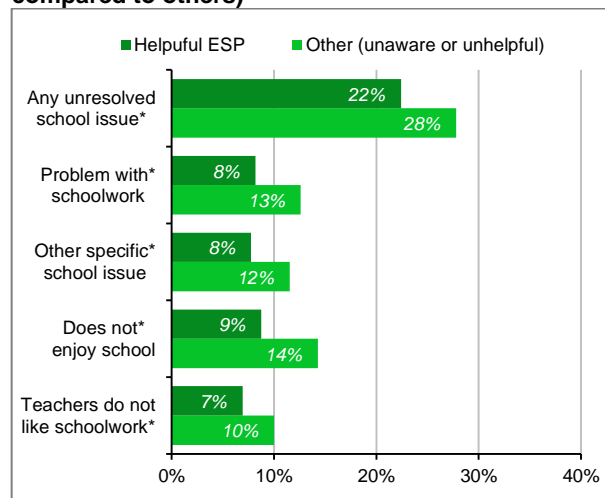
a) Children may report multiple problems and therefore may be included in more than one category  
\* Significant difference in reporting of issues ( $p < 0.05$ )

### Associations with education plans

Analyses revealed that having or not having an ESP appears to have little impact on the educational experiences of young people. What does make a difference, however, is the perception that the ESP is helpful.

As noted, 81.3% of young people with an ESP considered it to be helpful. Further analyses confirmed that those with a 'helpful' ESP were significantly less likely to report experiencing problems at school (22.4% compared to 27.8%); problems with schoolwork (8.2% compared to 12.6%) and "other" problems (7.8% compared to 11.6%). Furthermore, young people with a helpful ESP were less likely to report not enjoying school (8.8% compared to 14.3%) and teachers not being happy with their schoolwork (6.9% compared to 10.0%) (see Figure 15).

**Figure 15. Young people experiencing selected difficulties at school<sup>a</sup> (young people with a helpful ESP compared to others)**

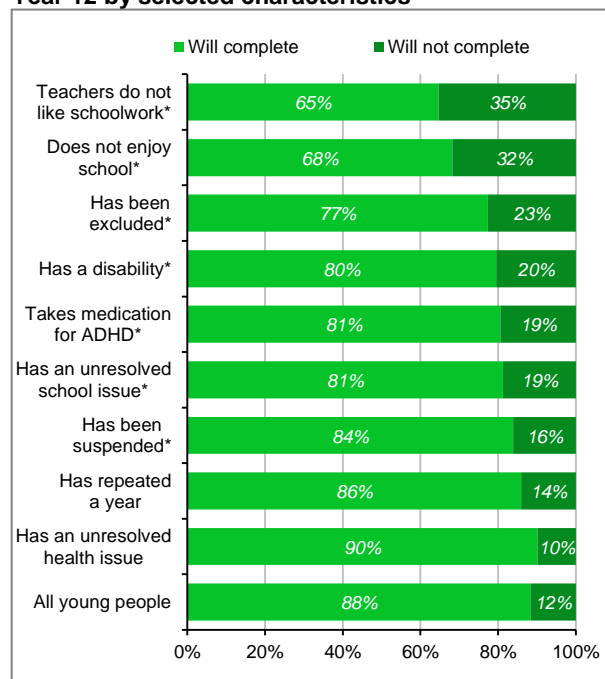


a) Children may report multiple problems and therefore may be included in more than one category  
\* Significant difference in reporting of issues ( $p < 0.05$ )

### Associations with expectation of completing Year 12

Almost nine in ten (88.3%) young people anticipated completing Year 12. Analyses revealed that this expectation was significantly associated with a range of factors. As can be seen in Figure 16, young people who reported that their teachers were not often or never happy with their schoolwork were least likely to anticipate completing Year 12 (65.0%).

**Figure 16. Young people's expectations of completing Year 12 by selected characteristics<sup>a</sup>**



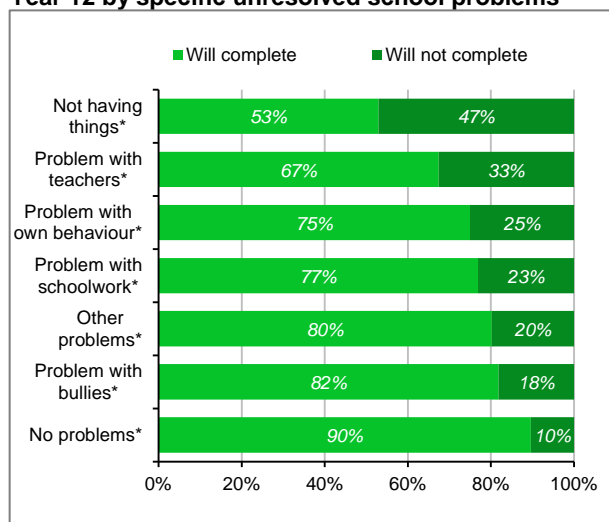
a) Categories are not mutually exclusive  
\* Significant difference in reporting of expectations ( $p < 0.05$ )

Expectations were also significantly reduced among young people who did not enjoy school most of the time (68.2%), had been excluded (77.4%) or suspended (83.8%), take medication for ADHD (80.6%) and experience unresolved problems at

school (81.2%). Having repeated a year at school or having a health problem of concern did not appear to impact on expectations of completing Year 12.

An expectation of completing school was also found to be significantly associated with the various types of school problems (Figure 17). Young people who reported having problems with needing things were least likely to anticipate completing Year 12 (52.9%). In addition, 67.3% young people having problems with teachers and 75.0% of those having problems with behaviour expected to complete Year 12. Similar proportions of young people who reported problems with schoolwork (76.9%), “other” problems (80.2%) and bullying (81.8%) believed they will complete Year 12. Young people reporting no unresolved problems at school were most likely to think they will complete Year 12 (89.6%).

**Figure 17. Young people’s expectations of completing Year 12 by specific unresolved school problems<sup>a</sup>**



a) Young people may report multiple problems and therefore may be included in more than one category

\* Significant difference in reporting of expectations ( $p < 0.05$ )

## Discussion

### Markers of educational disadvantage

As expected, a number of markers of educational disadvantage were evident in the survey results. Considerable proportions of children and young people reported frequent school changes, being kept back a year and having problems at school, particularly with their schoolwork.

Suspensions and exclusions, which are both a marker of educational disadvantage and a barrier to educational progress, were also reported. As noted, almost four in ten young people reported being suspended at some time, while almost one in fifteen reported having been excluded – a significant decline since the previous survey in which almost one in ten young people reported having been excluded. According to DETE in 2011-2012 there were a total of 55,054 short suspensions of 5 or fewer days (27.0 per 1000 students per term), 7,022 long suspensions (3.5 per 1000 students per term) of up to 20 days and 1,176 exclusions (0.6 per 1000


students per term) (Department of Education, Training and Employment, 2012).

While it is clear that a substantial minority of young people in care have experienced disciplinary absences, these survey data are not directly comparable to official departmental data. It is therefore not possible to discern the extent or nature of any overrepresentation in Queensland, although the literature provides ample evidence that, in general, children and young people in care are at heightened risk of being excluded from education (Department for Education and Skills, 2007; Stein & Dixon, 2006; Osborn & Delfabbro, 2006). This knowledge gap could be substantially filled by more fully utilising data that are already available. Enhancing linkages between existing sources, for example between DETE’s OneSchool database and DCCSDS’s Integrated Client Management System (ICMS), could unlock considerable potential to report on a whole range of educational experiences and outcomes for children and young people in care, including disciplinary absences. The Commission therefore remains strongly supportive of interdepartmental collaboration and the sharing of de-identified data to further advance research.

Policy changes allowing principals greater authority to exclude students have been implemented since the previous *Views of Children and Young People in Foster Care* conducted in 2009. Over this time, the rates of exclusion in the general student population have risen considerably (from 981 in 2009-10 to 1,176 in 2011-12) with an even more dramatic growth in the number of students whose enrolments were cancelled (from 681 in 2009-10 representing 69.4% of exclusions to 1,176 in 2011-12 representing 100% of exclusions) (DETE, 2010; DETE, 2012). While the recent increase in disciplinary absences is concerning, there is currently no evidence to suggest that they have translated to more exclusions for children and young people in foster care. However, the impact of recent and ongoing changes to policies on disciplinary absences will need to be monitored to ensure changes do not disproportionately affect children and young people in care who are already amongst the most vulnerable students.

While educational disadvantage was evident in the sample, a number of positive findings were also apparent. Some of the most encouraging findings from the survey related to children’s and young people’s enjoyment of school and aspirations to continue with their schooling through to the end of Year 12. Slightly fewer than nine out of ten children and young people indicated that they enjoy school most of the time and a similar proportion of young people indicated that they believe that they will complete Year 12. It is worth noting that the proportion of young people intending to complete Year 12 is consistent across ages and there is no evidence of diminishing aspirations as young people approached the end of their secondary schooling.





This level of enthusiasm for education amongst children and young people in care is very encouraging.

Notwithstanding young people's reported enjoyment of school and aspirations to complete Year 12, the literature suggests that these aspirations are not being translated into academic achievement or further education. It is worth noting again that in 2007, not one of the 369 young people aged 17 to 18 who were in the custody or guardianship of the Chief Executive of the then Department of Child Safety was eligible for an OP, which is required for admission to most university programs (CCYPCG, 2009). This is consistent with previous findings that poor educational outcomes are often evident, even when individual children demonstrate a desire and motivation to excel academically (Ontario Association of Children's Aid Societies, 2008; cited in Stoddart, 2012; Townsend, 2011). Clearly, enthusiasm for and engagement with education alone is not sufficient for academic success.

This does not mean, however, that the value and importance of positive engagement and aspirations should be discounted. While it may be true that high expectations alone cannot guarantee educational progress, there is ample evidence that they can make a difference. According to Hattie (2012) who conducted a meta-analysis of over 50,000 research articles, 150,000 effect sizes and 240 million students, high student expectations are a key factor shown to influence educational outcomes. The aspirations and enthusiasm for education that are evident in the foster care population are a considerable strength for further interventions to build on.

### **Relationships between educational factors**

Educational disadvantage is a complex and multifaceted issue. It is not surprising, therefore, that associations between many of the survey variables were observed. Young people experiencing disciplinary absences in the past, including both suspensions and exclusions, were more likely to report experiencing unresolved issues at school, particularly problems with their own behaviour. As might be expected, the disparity was greater for young people who had been formally excluded. These young people were twice as likely to report unresolved problems at school and were more than six times as likely to report unresolved problems with their own behaviour. Both children and young people who thought their teachers were less often happy with their schoolwork were also significantly more likely to report problems at school for which they had not been able to get help.


It is also not surprising that reports of unresolved problems were linked strongly to young people's attitudes towards school. Children and young people who felt that teachers were not often happy with their schoolwork were the least likely to report enjoying school most of the time. This was also a leading

predictor for young people to report that they did not expect to complete Year 12. Enjoyment of school and expectations of completing Year 12 were also strongly associated with each other and both were strongly inversely associated with unresolved issues at school. Young people who do not enjoy school most of the time were almost twice as likely to report unresolved issues at school and young people who did not expect to complete Year 12 were just over one and a half times as likely to report such problems.

Each of the five specific types of unresolved problems included in the survey was associated with not enjoying school most of the time. Problems that relate to relationships were the strongest predictors of not enjoying school, followed by problems with teachers, problems with behaviour and problems with bullying. Lacking material resources and problems with schoolwork, while still statistically linked, were comparatively weaker predictors of not enjoying school. While schoolwork and academic achievement may be a central focus of school life, it is clear that even where young people identify that they are struggling in this regard, the majority still report that they enjoy school most of the time. This is encouraging because it suggests, once again, that there is a positive foundation of engagement with school to build on. It also suggests that school can make a positive contribution to psycho-social wellbeing even where young people might be experiencing difficulties with their studies.

Likewise, each type of unresolved problem identified by young people was associated with young people's expectation of completing Year 12. However, the relative predictive value of the unresolved problems differed somewhat compared to enjoyment of school. Young people who indicated not having the things they need for school (such as uniforms, books, computers, excursion money) were the least likely to anticipate completing Year 12 (around half this group compared to almost nine out of ten young people overall). Thankfully, only a relatively small number of young people in foster care indicated lacking material resources for school, however, financial hardship is all too common amongst young people once they transition to independence. While a lack of material resources may only affect relatively few young people's expectations of completing Year 12, as long as support for young people post-transition remains limited, educational opportunities for young people who have been in care will also remain limited.

It was interesting to note that repeating a year at school was statistically unrelated to the other educational variables analysed. These children and young people were no more likely to report problems at school, no less likely to report enjoying school and were just as likely to expect to complete Year 12. It is indeed possible that repeating a year might be beneficial for children and young people in care as it may provide an opportunity to catch up on or



consolidate learnings that, for a variety of reasons, have been missed or disrupted.

### **Factors related to educational disadvantage and progress**

The survey findings also confirmed expected relationships between a number of broader factors and specific markers of educational disadvantage.

Health and disability, for instance, were found to be strong predictors of educational experiences. For young people, having a health problem of concern was the strongest predictor of experiencing problems at school. More than half the young people who identified a health problem also reported problems at school, which meant they were 2.3 times more likely to report an unresolved school problem when compared to young people who did not have a health issue or disability. While all of the specific problems listed in the survey were more common amongst young people with a health issue (with the exception of not having things required for school, which was excluded from analysis due to small cell sizes) overrepresentation amongst some problems was much higher. Young people with a health issue were approximately three and a half times more likely to report problems with their own behaviour or problems with bullying. Young people with a health issue were also significantly less likely to say that they enjoy school most of the time.

Although disability was a weaker predictor of problems at school overall, almost four in ten young people with a disability reported unresolved school issues making them 1.8 times more likely to report school problems compared to those with no health issue or disability. Most notable was problems with teachers which young people with a disability experienced at almost four and a half times the rate for those without a disability. Young people with a disability were also significantly less likely to expect to complete Year 12.

Disability was also a strong predictor of school problems for children. Children with a disability reported experiencing problems at 1.6 times the rate of those without a disability. Problems with behaviour, followed by problems with teachers were most notable for these children.

Placement stability was also related to a number of educational factors. As might be expected, school changes were associated with placement changes, however, the correlation, while statistically significant, was only of moderate size. It was also interesting to note that more than half the children and young people reported more school changes than placement changes.

So, while it is likely that in some cases placement changes lead to school changes, this does not entirely explain the number of school changes reported by children and young people. A possible reason is that family mobility or instability prior to a child entering care has already contributed to school

changes. Being able to track school stability for children and young people in care through departmental administrative data would be useful to disentangle the pre-care and in-care factors involved.

Placement and school stability are also both linked strongly to disciplinary absences. Obviously, young people who have been formally excluded from one school will record, on average, a greater number of schools attended overall as they are then likely to be subsequently enrolled in another school. This is borne out in the data with young people experiencing an exclusion reporting, on average, 1.3 more schools attended compared to the sample overall. However, school instability is not only related to formal exclusions; young people who have been suspended also reported attending, on average, 0.6 more schools than the sample overall. Young people who have never been suspended or excluded had significantly better school stability, attending 0.5 fewer schools on average when compared to the total sample.


While young people experiencing disciplinary absences reported significantly less school stability, the relationship between disciplinary absences and placement stability was even more pronounced. As noted earlier, young people who had experienced a formal exclusion reported, on average, more than twice as many placements as those who had never experienced a disciplinary absence. Similarly, those reporting to have been suspended also experienced a higher number of placements and shorter placement lengths.

While the data show links between disciplinary absences, school instability and placement instability, it is not clear precisely how these factors are related to each other. Simple and direct causal relationships are unlikely to be at play. Instead, it is likely that instability at home and at school and the kinds of behavioural difficulties that lead to disciplinary action at school are all mutually reinforcing and are all supported by the underlying pre-care and in-care challenges many young people in foster care face.

One underlying factor, which itself is likely to be reflective of deeper issues, is behaviour. While data in relation to behaviour at home and placement breakdown were not gathered in this survey, it is clear from the literature that that behavioural problems precipitate placement breakdown (Gilbertson & Barber, 2003; Brown, Bednar & Sigvaldason, 2007).

The relationship between behavioural difficulties and disciplinary absences is perhaps obvious, but it is worth noting the extent to which young people who have been suspended or excluded in the past report that they continue to experience problems with behaviour for which they are not getting help. Compared to students who have never experienced a disciplinary absence, young people who have been





excluded are more than six times as likely to report that they are not getting sufficient help with current behavioural problems and likewise, young people who have been suspended are more than three times as likely to report not being able to get help with a behavioural problem.

What this suggests is that, for children and young people in foster care, behavioural difficulties at school are often part of a broader set of factors impacting on their life both inside and outside of school. Therefore, disciplinary responses need to be informed by this broader context. For example, suspensions, exclusions and school changes may have far more serious ramifications for young people in care, who may already be experiencing instability and uncertainty in their home environment. In fact, those young people having the most difficulty with their behaviour at school are likely to be at an even greater risk of instability at home. While exclusion is always regarded as a last resort for dealing with behaviour, the decision to exclude a young person in care should warrant an added degree of caution.

These findings also suggest that it is unlikely that schools and teachers alone can improve educational outcomes for children and young people in care. Questions of health, disability and placement instability require action from a range of stakeholders and service systems and these need to be coordinated effectively. This must begin with appropriate and inclusive case planning that feeds into and is responsive to educational planning taking place at the school level.

### **Educational support for children and young people in care**

As described earlier, Education Support Plans (ESPs) are the primary mode of educational support for children and young people in care with every child in attending a state school in the custody or guardianship of the chief executive of the Department of Communities, Child Safety and Disability Services. While departmental data indicate that more than nine in ten students have an ESP either completed or under development, only around half the young people responding to the survey reported having one. Comparison of these figures suggests that considerable numbers of young people who responded to the survey may indeed have an ESP but are not necessarily aware of this. Young people's perspectives, as gathered through the surveys, provide important insights into ESPs not otherwise available, on the extent to which young people are engaged with and involved in the planning process.

Bivariate analyses across a range of measures indicate no significant differences between young people who are aware of their ESP and those who are not. This is not to suggest that ESPs are not helpful. Indeed, most young people who are aware of their ESP report that it is helpful. What these findings


suggest is that simply being aware of an ESP does not appear to make it any more (or less) effective.

What does seem to be influential, however, is whether or not an ESP is considered by a young person to be helpful. Young people who have an ESP and describe it as helpful report fewer unresolved school issues overall, particularly in relation to schoolwork. Reduced likelihood of unresolved problems with teachers also approached significance. Helpful ESPs were also significantly associated with greater likelihood of enjoyment of school and teachers being happy with schoolwork. This suggests that while simply being aware of an ESP has little impact on the effectiveness of the plan, a deeper engagement may be beneficial. It also suggests that young people's own assessments about the helpfulness of their plan are crucial and that young people have an important contribution to make to planning around educational needs.

Given these positive findings in relation to ESPs, it is encouraging that indicators relating to ESPs have improved considerably since 2006 when the *Views* surveys commenced. For instance, the proportion of young people indicating that they have an ESP has grown from less than three in ten to more than half during this time. Furthermore, the proportion of young people reporting that their plan is useful has grown from less than half to more than eight in ten. Alongside these figures, is a recent decline in the proportion of young people reporting problems at school. While there is insufficient evidence to suggest that the reduction in reported school problems is linked to improvements in engagement with ESPs, the notable relationships between having a helpful ESP and lower rates of school problems suggest that further investigation on the effects of ESPs on overall functioning at school is warranted.

Apart from support offered through ESPs, the data indicate other relationships may have a positive influence on educational progress for many children and young people. Factors relating to departmental decisions have already been described above (e.g. better outcomes for children and young people experiencing better placement stability). In addition to these statistical associations, children's and young people's comments shed light on the vital role that CSOs play in supporting educational outcomes for children and young people in care. Children and young people described numerous ways in which their CSO had directly contributed to their education from help with resourcing for activities and equipment (such as computers and musical instruments) to support with interpersonal relationships with teachers and peers. On the other hand, where children and young people reported missing out on things such as school events and excursions, a number referred specifically to difficulties with CSOs and the department in terms of gaining financial support and processing permissions for activities.





Comments about CVs also indicate that they have assisted a considerable proportion of respondents with school related matters. According to children and young people, CVs were able to assist directly with homework and schoolwork as well as advocating for resources, advocating around relationships at school, including bullying, helping to organise permissions and providing support with ESPs.

These comments highlight the very practical ways that people outside of the school environment can influence the educational experiences of children and young people in care and the inter-related nature of experiences within school, within a placement and within the broader system.

## Summary and conclusions

Children and young people in care fare poorly across a range of educational measures. They are less likely to meet national benchmarks for numeracy and literacy, are more likely to be subject to disciplinary absences including suspensions and exclusions and are less likely to progress to higher education. The effects of educational disadvantage are felt well into adulthood placing these young people at heightened risk of a variety of negative outcomes including poor employment prospects, high rates of welfare dependence, drug and alcohol abuse and interactions with the criminal justice systems.

Educational disadvantage for children and young people in care is a complex problem that is impacted by both pre-care and in-care experiences. While there is a lack of consensus in relation to the influence foster care has on educational outcomes, it is clear that foster care poses a number of unique challenges for children and young people. Issues confronted by children and young people in care include placement instability, low expectations from adults, stigmatisation and bullying, and service systems that are often fragmented and disjointed.

The findings presented in this paper, which draw on the views and experiences of more than two thousand children and young people in foster care in Queensland, reveal some encouraging trends. Most notably, children and young people in foster care overwhelmingly report that they enjoy school and that they intend to pursue their education at least through to the completion of Year 12. While significant proportions of students reported being suspended or formally excluded from school, the proportion reporting being suspended remained stable while the proportion reporting being excluded has declined significantly, even as exclusions became more common amongst the general school population.

The findings also highlight a number of areas of concern. Considerable proportions of children and young people reported experiencing problems at school that they have not been able to get help with including problems with schoolwork, bullying, teachers, behaviour and not having necessary

resources for school. Furthermore, significant minorities of children and young people reported being kept back a year and that their teachers were not generally happy with their schoolwork.

The relationships between these markers of educational disadvantage are numerous and clear. Not enjoying school is associated with reduced low expectations for completing Year 12 and experiencing unresolved problems at school which are in turn related to disciplinary absences which are themselves predictors of enjoyment of school and students' perceptions of their teachers' satisfaction with their schoolwork. While these findings underscore the complexity of educational disadvantage, the data also confirm that the drivers of educational disadvantage do not stop at the school gate. Health, disability and placement stability have profound effects on the experiences children and young people have at school. Addressing educational disadvantage for children and young people in care requires a cooperative effort that begins with appropriate and inclusive planning that addresses needs at home, in the child protection system and in the broader community as well as at school.

ESPs are an important vehicle for this planning, especially if they flow from and inform case planning. A number of positive trends were identified in the survey results. Over the four successive surveys of children and young people in foster care, improvements have been observed in awareness of ESPs and, importantly, the proportions of young people who find their ESPs helpful. When young people are appropriately involved in their ESP and are able to see it as helpful, tangible results across a range of measures can be observed including reduced reporting of unresolved problems at school and greater likelihood of enjoying school most of the time. Young people with a helpful ESP were also more likely to say that their teachers are happy with their schoolwork most or all of the time. Greater and more active involvement in ESPs, linked to more active involvement in case planning, should be strongly encouraged.

While educational disadvantage for children and young people in care is an enduring problem, there are clear indicators of progress and opportunities to build on into the future, including the considerable enthusiasm, strengths and insights of the children and young people themselves.

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