

## **NESB Communities and School Suspensions**

**By John Owen**

### **Parents and Suspensions**

In order to understand the impact of suspensions on NESB Parents we need to look at a number of broader and more complex issues. The most significant of these relates to the phenomena of migration. This in itself gives rise to long term social disruption and impacts on individuals and communities in a variety of ways throughout the period of settlement, attainment of proficiency in language of host country, relocation, and overall orientation to a new set of social, cultural, political and quite often, economic systems.

These new pressures not only affect the way that families interact with the larger social body, but also affect the ways in which families form and interact within themselves. Family members under the strain of new cultural systems and changed economic conditions and opportunities, often project expectations on one another in order to survive for both the short and long term. These changed social roles are often unfamiliar to both the original culture and the mainstream culture they now find themselves surrounded by.

Young people, though often recently arrived themselves, not only take on the role of translator, but the larger and more significant responsibility of an involvement with institutions they would never have been exposed to in their previous homes. As the parents can not move as freely as they once did due to their language difficulties, children are seen to be main vehicle for the family's success in their new country.

Whether it be that families see the new school system as comparably easy, as some eastern European and Balkan peoples do, or whether it is a matter of being the first literate family member, the success of their child's education underpins in many family's minds the future success of that family in Australia.

Without dampening the success of many students, we see that these expectations are sometimes unrealistic and that they do not always take into account the individual dilemmas that young migrants face in their own lives. From the observation of many agencies in this area, parents do not want to face up to idea of potential failings in their child's education, and suspensions often confront parents in such a way that they choose to ignore the problem rather than to address it. The general understanding is that suspensions are not mechanisms for improving a student's school experience, but a formalized banishing from school grounds. Though many parents are not informed on school processes and procedures, they do understand what they see, that their child has been asked not to return to the school for a given period of time, regardless of the complexity of the matter, this can only be perceived as essentially 'bad'. It is after all difficult to perform at an institution at which you are not present. This is considered shameful for not only the young person, but the parents as well, it in fact reflects upon the entire family unit.

It is crucial that all aspects of a young persons education are understood by parents, regardless of their language barriers, though this may take some additional work by schools, the additional support and clarity over the activities of schools would certainly justify the expenses.

### **Alternatives to Suspensions.**

This discussion takes as its point of departure the idea that suspensions are tools of last resort. In the past, schools have not had a wide variety of options to combat disruptive or unfavorable behavior by their students, and as like all good managers, have sought to protect their schools from any possible disturbance or potentially dangerous incidence. From our end, we don't debate the need to treat dangerous behavior seriously and we accept the argument that principals are faced with physically confronting incidents that by their very nature require the removal of that student from the school to prevent any further damage or threat to school, staff or students. However, not all incidents that result in suspensions are of this nature, and the phrase 'when the only tool you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail' seems to fit the utility of suspensions as a cross-purpose tool.

From the community's perspective, we would like to see schools thinking more broadly about how to manage difficult situations with their students. At present the department funds Links to Learning Programs and administers a Gateways project that targets at-risk youth. And while these programs are run in conjunction with community resources, it really only scrapes the surface when you consider that our district has perhaps the highest saturation of community and social services anywhere in the state, and maybe even the entire country. A significant portion of these services are youth specific, and are funded to service the exact same target group that attend schools.

Given the importance of education in a young person's life, and the impact that experience has on their future, it would be negligent for community services not to take an active interest in the affairs of schools and the performance of local youth in our schools. By the same token, given that young people do not live in schools, but in communities, it would make sense that if a young person is not performing well at school, that some consideration of their broader world be examined.

If suspensions are to be administered, we would like to see them used in such a way that some consideration can be made of how best to support and engage a young person both in terms of their schooling, and in relation to their 'outside' lives. Should suspensions be viewed and more importantly, **USED** as a *time-out* option, both schools, parents and communities start to look at ways in which to prevent our young people from falling through the cracks seeing them miss out on an education in which they are ultimately entitled to.

The concept of co-case management or joint service delivery is common place in the community sector and works well where agencies have a shared interest in a client, in our case *young people*. It is an option where a number of services can be used optimally and where organizations can jointly strategize how best to resource their client groups based on their individual service interests, eg. Provision of education and training, alongside with ensuring a continuity of service outside the bounds of an organisation's service limits. It is an option that has been at work in the Fairfield area for sometime and is not only used by community based organizations, but also local government, state and federal departments operating in the area. Some examples include:

- Centrelink
- Department of Housing
- Premiers Department
- Department of Transport and Regional Services
- Department of Health
- Department of Juvenile Justice and so on....

Co-servicing or jointly developing programmes to service emerging needs could be one way of reducing the incidence of suspensions while benefiting from a wide range of government funded projects that operate in the local area. As most organizations are resourced to provide localized services, the majority are relatively flexible in their program delivery so as not to isolate themselves from responding to emerging needs at the community level.

We do recognize that tapping into these resources can be seen as a time consuming exercise, however local service interagencies exist whereby a multitude of community and government agencies can be resourced in a single meeting. This has been a valuable instrument for cross-sector problem solving. The two most significant interagencies are the Fairfield Youth Worker's Network and the Fairfield Migrant Interagency, both have memberships in excess of 50 agencies. The following resource directory is a list of agencies and services represented under the banner of the Fairfield Youth Worker's Network. The listing includes information on service types, contact details, target group, hours of operation and service limitations. This would be a good starting place to begin developing stronger community linkages and resources for current and potential students.