

Australian Education Union Victorian Branch submission to the DEECD Review of Alternative Education Programs

The Australian Education Union Victorian Branch welcomes the opportunity to provide input into the review of Alternative Education Programs (AEP) in Victoria to inform the development of a policy framework with a view to their ongoing provision, funding and expansion.

The decision to review the delivery of AEPs is important in the context of the Government's development of a Vulnerable Youth Framework and the long term need for the DEECD to have a coordinated policy to effectively support students who are disengaged or at risk of becoming disengaged from school. Such a policy needs to reflect the complex educational and social reasons why some students need additional support.

Funding and Structures

The AEU supports a model of provision for Public Education in Victoria that ensures every student is able to achieve the best they can academically and socially. This is best delivered through adequately resourced, comprehensive education settings. The capacity for mainstream schools to cater for the needs of all students is essential, but especially so for those students who are disengaged or 'at risk'. The AEU notes that the current funding arrangements go some way to ensuring that schools can provide the support and opportunity for these students but that additional programs and settings are necessary to provide a quality education for all students. Any policy framework which seeks to abandon AEPs and withdrawal settings in preference for inadequately resourced mainstream schools will not provide the support that these students require. Moreover, some students simply require alternative schooling arrangements to succeed. The policy framework must aim at a more coordinated and consistent funding structure that assures ongoing funding to effective and successful programs. Funding should be available to reflect the needs of students and schools on a regional basis and form part of the provision planning for each network.

It is clear that without additional and ongoing funding of a range of AEPs we risk not doing all that can be done to provide equitable access to education.

Timing of Intervention

Some programs provide 'early intervention' support for students often in the Primary years. Many programs seek to 'intervene' at a time which enables a student to get back on track. Such intervention often provides some respite for staff and students at the mainstream setting. Whilst the purpose of AEPs is to provide the necessary support and environment that variously enables students to alter behaviour, improve wellbeing and academic success it is clear that the educational opportunities of those students who may have their learning effected by disruptive behaviour must be taken into account. In this sense, the policy framework must lead to a systemic approach to dealing with students whose behaviour negatively impacts on other students. The need for such an approach is amplified if government schools are to address the movement of students to the non-government sector. The AEU recognises the benefits that can be gained through an 'early intervention' approach and seeks a policy that develops early intervention programs whilst maintaining and growing those programs that are aimed to support students in Secondary school.

Program Diversity

AEPs are as diverse in their objectives and strategies as they are in number which reflects the history of localised responses to support the students and schools that utilise these programs.

Much of the success of existing programs comes from developing models that reflect the real needs of students on a day to day and longer term basis often in the context of preparing students for a return, where possible, to mainstream schools or on to other pathways. The desire for such diversity should be viewed as a key element of any policy framework. Importantly many programs support students by developing individual learning plans with goals that variously seek to improve academic performance, behaviour and social and emotional well-being. The variety of programs also reflects the need for different students to be supported over short or longer periods of time. The framework needs to recognise that programs may need to vary individual student attendance and in some cases extend the duration of their placements to ensure that they are best placed for ongoing success. It goes without saying that one size does not fit all.

Staffing

Currently AEPs are delivered and funded in a range of different ways at the school, network, regional and state-wide level. Programs which have been developed to support students with specific issues demonstrate the highest levels of student success, an important aspect of which is the size of the group of students in the program. Maintaining or reducing student-teacher ratios in successful programs will promote quality outcomes for students.

The capacity for staff to develop meaningful and ongoing relationships with students is an essential aspect of the success of AEPs. In most instances, staff seek to work with students, their families, schools and other agencies to rebuild trust in an environment that affirms the ability for all students to achieve, which ultimately allows for reengagement with learning. The number of students involved in an AEP at any one time needs to be small enough to develop effective relationships. The development of such relationships is essential for student achievement in the program itself but also in any attempt to transition students back to mainstream schools, employment or other training opportunities. High quality and effective transition is resource intensive requiring teachers and education support staff to spend significant time with individual students, families (or carers) and in many cases the student's original school and teachers. The ongoing success of students in AEPs often depends upon successful transition and post AEP follow up; it is unfortunate that current funding arrangements often mean that not enough resources are available to deliver in this area. The AEU considers that any policy framework should seek to increase the allocation of resources to support the transition of students, however this must come in the context of an overall increase in the funding of AEPs. Indeed the review provides for an opportunity to enhance the organisational and funding capacity of mainstream schools to provide support for students 'at risk' before, during and after any intervention and involvement in an AEP.

The time and opportunity for staff within and across AEPs to work collaboratively is an important aspect of the state-wide provision of these programs. Equally important is collaboration with staff from mainstream schools and other agencies and organisations. The development of the policy framework must reflect the ways in which teachers and education support staff work. The ability for staff in AEPs to learn from each other and build and develop their strategies relies on structured opportunities to share successful approaches that may be adaptable from one program or setting to the next. This necessarily involves a coordinated approach involving individual schools and settings, networks and regions. An example of an effective approach for the sharing of ideas and promoting a 'best practice' approach is

the Community Schools, Teaching Units and Alternative Settings Conference run by the staff at Caulfield Park Community School. However, the current lack of broader regional and state-wide coordination of AEPs means that the system is unable to facilitate such conferences.

Staff in AEPs are employed in ongoing and fixed term modes, with the often precarious funding of programs the reason for contracted staff. The offering of contracts means that many programs find it difficult to attract and retain suitably experienced staff. Of further issue is lack of a clear career structure for staff employed in AEPs. The policy framework needs to account for the requirement under various industrial agreements that the primary mode of employment be ongoing.

Whilst most staff have some access to professional development opportunities, the limited funding and consequent lack of flexibility when staffing programs means that such opportunities are inconstant. The specialised nature of much of the work in AEPs means that much available PD is not appropriate.

Facilities

High quality support for disengaged and 'at risk' students requires properly designed and built facilities. The provision of such buildings should be considered as part of regional priorities through the *Building Futures* process. Commonly AEPs are housed in portable classrooms which inadequately cater for the programs that operate.

Access to adequate resources, including ICT hardware and readily available technological support requires significant improvement.

Access

The ways in which students access AEPs need to reflect the nature of the program and individual needs of the students involved. This is best facilitated at the regional level with decisions about which students should access which programs made in concert with students, teachers, families and the staff of individual AEPs. The AEU is concerned that access to information about what AEPs are available (including the details of the programs) often relies on informal networks rather being available in a co-ordinated way for schools, parents and agencies. Currently, access to many programs is limited due the lack of available places.

Priority Areas

The AEU recognises that the development of a policy framework provides for a long term strategy to support disengaged and 'at risk' students and builds upon the success of existing AEPs by:

- promoting program diversity that have clearly defined
 - educational and/or behavioural objectives and measures,
 - program specific access criteria,
 - and incorporated individual learning and behavioural plans;
- recognising the need to provide additional funding to resource the transitioning of students into AEPs and back into mainstream schools, employment or further training;

- securing funding and the employment of staff in ongoing positions;
- building dedicated facilities;
- providing greater opportunity to develop networks and share strategies and approaches across AEPs and to feed these back into mainstream schools in a structured way;
- establishing an AEP advisory group (consisting of central, regional, school, agency and AEP members) to better co-ordinate AEP provision on a state-wide basis guided by the policy framework;
- enhancing career and professional development opportunities for staff;
- creating student support 'hubs' to better integrate the variety of services that students who utilise AEPs require.