

# Report on educational disengagement of young people under 15 years of age in the Northern region.

*This project was initiated by the Combined Northern Region Youth Connections Consortia.*

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**Title: Report on educational disengagement of young people U15 in the Northern Region November 2010**

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*The information and development of this report was completed by Eliza Beck and edited by Jane McNally from NMIT on behalf of the combined Northern Region Youth Connections Consortia.*

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## 1. Background

Youth Connections is a Commonwealth Government initiative available to young people aged 13-19 who are disengaged or at risk of disengaging from school, family and/or the community. NMIT is the Lead Agent for Youth Connections consortia, Banyule Nillumbik Youth Connections (BNYC), Inner Northern Youth Connections (INYC) and the Hume Whittlesea Youth Connections (HWYC) in the Northern region.

The Banyule Nillumbik Youth Connections (BNYC) has 5 Service Delivery Members (SDM) plus non service delivery organisations such as BNLEN, council representatives from Nillumbik and Banyule and two community education/training providers. The Inner Northern Youth Connections (INYC) has 6 SDMs plus INLEN, council representatives from Moreland, Yarra and Darebin. The Hume Whittlesea Youth Connections (HWYC) has 7 SDMs plus several community organisations, HWLEN and council representatives from Hume and Whittlesea

NMIT is the Lead Agent for each of the 3 contracts in the Northern Region. NMIT has facilitated the development of one Operational team of case workers across the region. All case workers use common referral processes, assessment forms and plans and meet monthly to discuss issues.

Each consortium meets quarterly and there are 3 combined meetings each year.

This project arose from the combined consortia meeting in May 2010 where members identified that across the Northern region there were significant numbers of young people disengaging from education who were under 15 years old and that SDMs were reporting that there were insufficient options/activities/programs available to assist with their re-engagement to education.

Following the May meeting, Youth Connections met with the 3 Northern LEN EOs where it was decided the combined consortia should take the issue to Northern Metropolitan Region (NMR) of the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) to work towards some systemic changes that would increase re-engagement of under 15s. In order to do this, a more substantial and accurate overview of the current situation was thought necessary which would involve collection and collation of regional data.

## 2. Disengaged young people under 15 years project

### 2.1 Purpose

The purpose of this project was to:

- Undertake a brief literature review of current research on disengagement of under 15s
- Investigate the extent of disengagement of young people under 15 years in the Northern Region
- Develop a list of current programs for young people under 15 years who are disengaged from education
- Identify and link in with any other groups undertaking similar investigations to maximise effectiveness and to avoid duplication.

### 2.3 Methodology

Data was collected from the following sources:

- Statistics from the Youth Attainment and Transitions Management Information System (YATMIS), a database used by Youth Connections case workers to record participant details, assessment of needs, assistance provided, outcomes (both progressive and final ) achieved.
- Surveys of Youth Connection Consortia members within the LGAs of Banyule/Nillumbik, Inner Northern, and Hume/Whittlesea.
- Phone/ Internet interviews with community organisations, school welfare co-ordinators, teaching units, and alternative and non mainstream school settings within the local government areas (LGAs) of Banyule/Nillumbik, Inner Northern, and Hume/Whittlesea.

## 3. Literature Review

### 3.1 Current research

In undertaking this literature review, it became apparent that some gaps exist in current literature. A report published by the Student Wellbeing Division of the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) Melbourne (2010) identifies disengagement as the disconnection of youth (6-17 years old) from school during the years of compulsory education (DEECD, 2010).

Extensive research has been conducted investigating the issue of such youth disengagement, however, it predominantly focuses on youth aged 15 and older. For example, official figures released by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) in the report *Educational Attainment: Early School Leavers* only provide engagement statistics on youth aged 15 and above (ABS website, 2010). A further example of this is the *Mission Australia Victorian Youth Survey 2009* which included questions about the study and employment status of respondents, however, results for 11 to 14 year olds were excluded from this section "as the compulsory age for secondary education in Australia is around 16 years of age" (Mission Australia, 2009, p.8). In conducting this research, it became apparent that as the legal school leaving age in Victoria is 17, statistics identifying disengaged youth under the age of 15 have not been recorded.

*The Re-engaging Our Kids Framework for Education Provision to Children and Young People at Risk of Disengaging or Disengaged from School* (2009) prepared by KPMG for the DEECD identified not

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only issues regarding the underreporting of disengaged youth but a number of other gaps in research in this area. This paper identified that ‘concurrently there is limited capacity to track children and young people, who are not enrolled or attending school or quantify the numbers of children attending non-school based (community run) programs’ (DEECD, 2009, p.98). This document highlights that the current regional data collection system is limited and is unable to provide adequate understanding of:

- the extent of youth disengagement
- disengagement risk patterns
- support needs of disengaged children and young people
- effectiveness of response by the education system to disengaged youth and
- opportunities for improvement within the education system in their response to youth disengagement (DEECD, 2009).

The recently released *Positive pathways for Victoria’s vulnerable young people – a policy framework so support vulnerable youth (2010)* was prepared by Department of Human Services, Department of Planning and Community Development, Department of Education and Early Childhood Development and Victoria Police. The paper acknowledges ‘...there is a small but significant number of young people aged 10-25 years, who, through a combination of their circumstances, stage of development and barriers to participation, are at risk of not achieving positive life outcomes (DHS 2010, p 3)

### **3.2 Factors linked to early school leaving**

Research has identified that young people become disengaged due to a complex mix of reasons. The *Pathways to Re-engagement Through Flexible Learning Options* paper published by the Student Wellbeing Division DEECD Melbourne April 2010 reported that ‘children and young people are at risk of disengaging from school when their life circumstances, learning experiences and/or behaviours impede learning, reduce school success and discourage participation’ (DEECD, 2010, p.7). Other government sources (Department of Human Services, The House of Representatives Standing Committee) have identified the following as school risk factors for Victorian students as;

- academic failure
- homelessness
- illiteracy
- low socio-economic status
- abuse (as perpetrator and/or victim)
- family conflict
- drug and alcohol abuse and
- disability

(DHS in Wheatley & Spillane, 2001).

### **3.3 Who is leaving early?**

Research (Wheatley & Spillane, 2001) has identified that individuals at risk of disengaging from school prior to completing their education include those:

- from a low socio-economic background
- from a culturally and linguistically diverse background
- from non-nuclear families
- whose parents worked in blue-collar occupations or were not university educated
- who are Indigenous
- from regional areas
- attending government schools
- who are homeless
- who are in care
- in child protection and
- who are juvenile justice clients

(Wheatley & Spillane, 2001 & Curtis & McMillan, 2008).

### **3.4 Reasons for leaving early**

Curtis and McMillan (2008) identified two common reasons given by disengaged youth for leaving school prior to the completion of Year 12. These reasons include:

- Wanting to enter the workforce or gain an apprenticeship; or
- Disliking school.

Generally those who finish school prior to the completion of year 12 for 'positive' reasons, such as taking up a job or gaining an apprenticeship, are more likely to have a successful transition from school than those who finish their education early for 'negative' reasons i.e. leaving because they dislike school (Curtis & McMillan, 2008).

### **3.5 Consequences of leaving school early**

Research indicates that leaving school prior to the completion of Year 12 can have negative consequences for both individuals and society. Individual costs for those who leave school early include difficulty in gaining and maintaining employment, lack of earnings and a comparatively lower standard of living to the general population (Porter, 2000). Social costs include:

- increased crime rates with evidence that 'students who fail, or behave disruptively at school, or who are persistently truant are more likely to offend than those who do not; and most repeat juvenile offenders have a background of truancy' (Brooks et al, 1996, p.29)
- increased provision of welfare and unemployment allowances with research indicating an association between early school leaving and poverty, homelessness and unemployment (Brooks et al, 1996)
- increased health care costs with a higher risk of early school leavers pertaining to poor mental and/or physical health caused by factors such as low income, lack of employment, etc. (Brooks et al, 1996) and
- lowered state tax proceeds due to decreased productivity (Catteral in Porter, 2000).

## 4. Findings – Youth Connections

### 4.1. YATMIS Statistics

Youth Connections data is maintained on YATMIS and records details on all young people registered in Youth Connections.

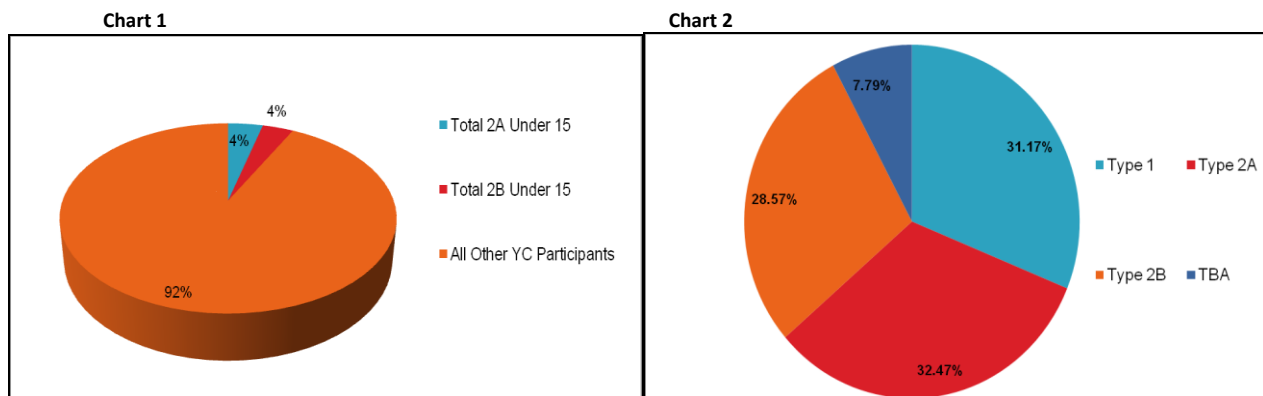
- Type 1 are those still in school but at severe risk of leaving
- Type 2a includes those who have left school less than 3 months or at imminent risk of leaving
- Type 2b are those who have left school more than 3 months.

#### **Chart 1: Percentage of 2A and 2B Youth Connection participants under the age of 15**

The chart below identifies the proportion of young people under the age of 15 identified as type 2A and 2B Youth Connection clients.

Overall, disengaged young people under the age of 15 represent 8% of all Youth Connection clients.

- Total number of 660 young people registered with Youth Connections as at 31 August 2010
- 77 young people aged under 15 at time of registration
- 47 of these have left school or at imminent risk of leaving



#### **Chart 2: Breakdown by Type of all Youth Connection participants under the age of 15**

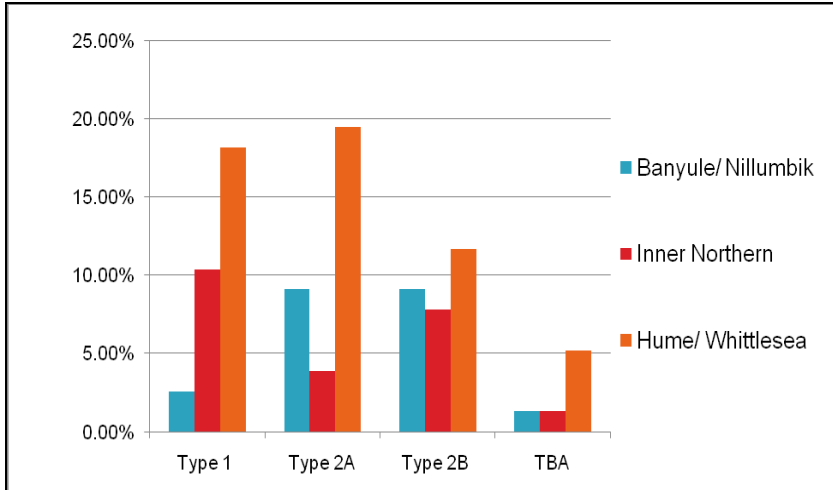
The chart below shows the breakdown of Youth Connections participants according to Type.

As at 31 August, YATMIS data showed:

- 24 are Type 1 (in school, at severe risk of leaving)
- 24 are Type 2a (left school < than 3 months or imminent risk)
- 23 are Type 2b (left school > than 3 months)
- 6 not yet assessed at this date

**Chart 3: Percentage of Youth Connection Clients by Region**

The following chart identifies the distribution of all Youth Connection clients under the age of 15 by region.



- Banyule Nillumbik – 17
- Inner Northern - 18
- Hume Whittlesea - 42

**4.2 Youth Connections Survey – case workers**

**4.2.1 Survey questions (see Appendix 1.)**

A survey developed by INLLEN was distributed to 27 Youth Connection case workers across the three consortia - 13 responses were received. Survey questions asked for information about:

- number of young people under the age of 15 at time of referral who were disengaged from education (included in YATMIS data above)
- assistance provided by Youth Connection case workers
- Issues faced by case workers when assisting these young people.

**4.2.2 Assistance provided to young people under the age of 15**

Responses to this question demonstrated a wide range of assistance was provided and assistance included;

- settlement services
- assistance to engage in education, for example support to enrol in English language courses
- outreach support
- skills development
- pathways planning/provision of information regarding education options;
- referrals to external services, programs, etc
- advocacy
- promotion of positive self-talk & motivation

- identification and assistance in addressing barriers to attending school, i.e. homelessness, family conflict, financial stress, lack of positive mentors, Centrelink concerns, family mediation, etc
- counselling
- encouragement to improve school attendance/behaviour/work performance and
- development and implementation of short term and long term plans.

#### **4.2.3 Issues Youth Connection case workers face in working with disengaged young people under the age of 15**

Youth Connection case workers reported a number of issues when working with disengaged young people under 15. Answers predominantly referred to factors related to family conflict, behavioural issues and difficulties faced at school and included:

- lack of family support
- family conflict
- lack of programs that target under 15 year olds
- reluctance from mainstream schools to take on disengaged young people with complex issues
- school refusal
- drug and alcohol issues
- mental health issues
- motivational issues/lack of career aspirations
- behavioural issues
- anger management issues/physical fighting
- involvement with the justice system
- socialisation factors
- transition from primary to secondary school issues
- truancy/non-attendance
- lack of confidence/self-esteem
- learning disabilities
- low work performance
- low literacy/numeracy skills- falling through the gaps in the education system
- at school but disconnected with learning; poor behaviour, in danger of expulsion
- experience of trauma
- school issues- bullying at school (perpetrator or victim), conflict with teachers
- cultural issues and
- curriculum not stimulating.

Youth Connections case workers have also reported at Operational Team meetings the difficulties often met when trying to re-engage young people back into schools. They reported many instances where schools had refused to accept disengaged young people and the need for case workers to refer these issues to the Northern Region Director. In other instances young people have indicated that they do not want to return to a school.

## 5. Surveys of other organisations

### 5.1 Survey questions (see Appendix 2)

46 community based organisations in the Northern region, 7 alternative education settings, and 6 school welfare co-ordinators based in the regions of Banyule/Nilumbik, Inner Northern and Hume/Whittlesea were contacted and asked to complete a questionnaire either on-line or over the phone on:

- types of programs provided to youth under the age of 15 in the Northern region; this included a description of services, age criteria and referral process for each program
- estimate of the number of youth under the age of 15 in the Northern region disengaged from school
- reasons they saw for disengagement of young people under the age of 15
- whether they felt current range and number of programs in the Northern region for young people under the age of 15 were adequate
- A sense of what other programs, if any, might be beneficial for this group.

It is relevant to also discuss current definitions of 'alternative education settings' as in the course of this project, some variation on definitions was identified. DEECD use the term 'alternative education settings' to refer to DEECD funded settings including specialist teaching units and the social integration unit. Other views suggest an alternative school 'is an educational setting designed to accommodate educational, behavioral, and/or medical needs of children and adolescents that cannot be adequately addressed in a traditional school environment' (Children's Health website, 2010). Others are inclined to use the term 'non mainstream setting for schools, although funded by DEECD, which take in students who are disengaged from education or severely at risk of doing so.

Of the 59 organisations located in the Northern region that were contacted, 41 provided responses to the questionnaire, either via the phone or electronically. Information on programs, referral processes and age restrictions (Respondents able to assist youth under the age of 15 are listed below in section 5.4).

### 5.2 Reasons for youth disengagement

Responses to this question identified a variety of reasons, with a number of organisations identifying that issues for disengaged youth varied from individual to individual. Respondents predominantly reported the following issues commonly related to youth disengagement:

- family conflict
- experiences of trauma
- mental illness
- substance abuse
- homelessness
- school refusal/ anxiety
- issues at school, i.e. bullying, peer pressure, teacher conflict, school not offering broad enough curricular and/ or limited understanding of students from a CALD background;
- poor literacy/numeracy skills
- behavioural issues

- social dislocation
- poverty
- lack of parental support and
- disability.

### 5.3 Extent of young people under the age of 15 disengaged from mainstream schools

Services were asked to provide the numbers of young people under the age of 15 disengaged from mainstream school accessing their programs and whether any waiting lists existed. Of the 41 organisations that responded to the questionnaire, 16 services provided the information summarised in the table below:

**Table 1.**

<b>Non Mainstream Schools</b>	<b>U 15</b>	<b>Waiting lists</b>
Doxa School	80	approx 40 on wait list
Collingwood Alternative School	70	Waiting list - numbers not provided
The Pavilion	12	Waiting list
Lynall Hall	40	
Heidelberg Teaching Unit	23	23
CAMHS- REV	16	
<b>Sub Total</b>	<b>241</b>	
<b>Mainstream schools</b>		
Secondary Schools (3 responded)	5	
<b>Community based programs</b>		
The Salvation Army Crossroads	61	
Operation Newstart	8	8 + a wait list
Merri Community Health	11	
Spectrum	2	
North Richmond Community Health Centre	1	
Jesuit Social Services	1	7
Finding my place - Glenroy Library	15	15 year 9 students
<b>Sub total</b>	<b>99</b>	

While the above data provides some insight into the extent young people under the age of 15 disengaging from mainstream school in the Northern region, several limitations to this data have been identified:

- the possibility of data being duplicated as no individual details sought
- some figures provided were rough estimates as actual data on these young people was generally not tracked by organisations because it was too difficult to record such information due to the transient nature of this group of young people; and
- data provided was not taken from exact time periods, for example some organisations provided figures across a two year time frame, some from across one year whilst others were only able to provide statistics from the start of 2010.

#### **5.4 Adequacy of programs available to youth under the age of 15 disengaged from school and perceived service gaps**

There was general consensus that services were limited and often excluded young people under the age of 15, with many programs restricted to youth 15 and older due to funding guidelines.

#### **5.5 Identification of programs that would benefit to young people under the age of 15**

Responses to this question were varied. Several organisations indicated that some no longer funded programs should be re-implemented.

The following list shows areas indicated by survey respondents as gaps in current services to disengaged young people under the age of 15:

- transitional programs
- early intervention, outreach services
- family work/involvement
- drug and alcohol prevention programs
- hands on studies, i.e. focus on trades, outdoor recreation, becoming job ready
- longer term teaching unit programs
- programs that allowed interaction with positive role models and peer groups
- a service that could provide advocacy for young people
- programs that link learning of alternative schools to mainstream schools, similar to the now defunct Wyndham Learning Community Centre Alternative Setting which assisted young people aged 10-14 who were becoming disengaged from their education with intensive support to encourage connectedness to schooling (Slingshot Youth Self Employment Website, 2005)
- alternative schools that focus on youth aged 12-14
- engagement programs similar to PRAISE (which has now ceased due to funding), which was a service tailored for youth aged 10-14 with the aim of re-integrating participants into formal education, training or employment (Moger & Lanyon, 2006)
- services similar to the Early School Leavers program (ceased due to lack of funding), which worked with youth (12-15 years old) referred by the Juvenile Justice system to assist them with re-engagement with learning/ training (The Salvation Army website, 2010)
- parent support programs
- counselling assistance
- individual/small group tuition
- welfare and personal development assistance and
- conflict management workshops

## 6. Current options for disengaged young people under 15

Programs that are available for young people under the age of 15 situated within the Northern region can be categorised into the following areas:

### 6.1 Education settings off-site from mainstream schools

The settings below are funded through a combination of sources including Commonwealth Government, State Government and community welfare organisations (cited from School Focused Youth Services website, 2010). Generally alternative schools have more varied curricula than mainstream schools with a focus on enhancing social skills, student self-esteem and personal growth (Children’s Health website, 2010).

Teaching Units also offer an alternative programs but differ to alternative schools in that they offer a ‘short term intervention program for a small group of students from a number of schools in a local region, who are having behavioural problems in their main stream school settings’ (Porter, 2000 p.92).

Within the Northern region the following non mainstream secondary education settings exist:

**Table 2**

Program	Description
Austin Hospital School CAMHS	Return to Education and Vocation Program – 8 week group activity 3 days pw for 14-17 year olds experiencing difficulties in mainstream school. Aims to re-engage student in positive learning environment & endeavours to establish pathways back into education/training, TAFE or workforce.
Baltara Integration Unit	The Baltara School is committed to providing success-based, individual educational programs for students with a wide range of challenging behaviours, social disadvantage and significant emotional fluctuations. This involves planning individual programs to cater for their immediate needs; encouraging and supporting students to participate in the education programs; and linking students (wherever possible) with continuing, community educational resources for post Baltara participation.
Central Teaching Unit	The Central Teaching Unit provides intensive help for students who are experiencing social & emotional difficulties at school. These difficulties may include school refusal, truancy, poor peer and adult relations, aggression or other behaviours that may risk their exclusion from school. The Unit aims to successfully reintegrate these students back in their schools. Students are accepted from all secondary schools in the Northern and Western Regions of the Department of Employment Education and Training. Students attend the Unit for four days a week in an eight to ten week program. On Wednesday they return to their home school. Unit staff are

	<p>available on these days to help develop an integration management plan.</p> <p>Eight students are placed in the program in each intake. Staff work with students and maintain involvement with students from the previous intake.</p>
Coburg Teaching Unit	<p>For students from NMR secondary colleges who are significantly at risk due to learning, social or behavioural difficulties. The aim is to better equip students to engage successfully in schools and in the broader school environment.</p> <p>The program provides intensive language, literacy, numeracy and social intervention over one term. Teaching and learning are structured in a range of styles, incorporated in classroom activities, personal development exercises, camps and excursions. An integrated curriculum approach is employed. Students attend their home school each Wednesday to enact positive change.</p>
Collingwood Alternative School	<p>Collingwood Alternative School, an annex of Collingwood College, provides a program that addresses the needs of secondary students who may have a history of school refusal, behavioural/social problems and may need literacy/numeracy support or development. Specifically, aims for students to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• attend school regularly</li> <li>• experience success</li> <li>• learn cooperatively with others</li> <li>• set and achieve goals</li> </ul>
Doxa – GAP program	<p>Alternative education for 11-14 who do not receive any government funding and who are experiencing difficulties maintaining their place in mainstream school. 6 mth program with 12 months outreach.</p>
Heidelberg Teaching Unit	<p>Aims for students to develop new and more productive behavioural strategies and responses to challenging situations.</p> <p>The program focuses on literacy and numeracy development, as well as linking students to the community through such programs as volunteer work, Police in schools initiative, Health Education and visiting speakers from various areas such as Centrelink, and the Victorian Institute of Sport.</p> <p>The program is one school term in duration with weekly written reports on each student as well as a four weekly review process involving both the parents and the referring school.</p>
Lynall Hall Community School	<p>Caters for students who for a variety of reasons are seeking an alternative to mainstream schooling. Enrolment is discretionary and takes place at the start of each school term. Lynall Hall and No. 1 provides alternative secondary education to an enrolment of approximately 120 students from across the metropolitan area.</p>
Sydney Road Community School	<p>For students looking for a supportive engaging small school environment. SRCS is committed to the idea of accessible education for all, which</p>

	<p>means they have no fees, no book lists, no uniforms and the cost of camps, excursions and senior subject materials are kept to a minimum. The school has a tradition of excellence in equality, diversity, individuality, community and student safety. They provide a setting for the close, respectful, supportive connections between students and staff and for our efforts to create a sense of belonging and success in every student.</p>
The Pavilion	<p>An educational setting for young people within the NMR are disengaged from education and/or training. Whilst all Pavilion students are enrolled at Charles – La Trobe College they attend the Pavilion settings which are located off the school site in East Preston(Darebin) and Mill Park (City of Whittlesea). The school is designed as a transition and/or re-integration centre for young people of secondary school age who wish to access educational support that is tailored to meet individual needs. There is a small staff team at the Pavilion that consists of student wellbeing and teachers and students attend in small classes of 8 – 12.</p> <p>The Pavilion provides a holistic approach to each young person’s needs, offering an intensive literacy, numeracy and personal development programme. Social work support is provided to each student which can include counselling, advice as well as referral and educational pathways support. The Pavilion staff provide a flexible, individualised form of education that maintains a strict adherence to both the Victorian Essential Learning Strands as well as the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning.</p>

These non mainstream settings generally provide small class sizes with a strong focus on individual needs. While not included in this report, it would be useful to compare the range of internal support available in the above educational settings with those provided to young people in mainstream school settings.

Although non mainstream education options exist for youth under the age of 15 within the Northern region, case workers, school welfare co-ordinators and teachers from alternative settings listed several issues related to these institutes. These include:

- due to demand, youth referred are often placed on a waiting list
- location of setting too far for students to travel
- length of time student is able to stay at a Teaching Unit is considered too short, with a number of Units only able to assist students for one term
- majority of alternative education schools having age criteria of 15 and older
- students attending Teaching Units needing to be enrolled at a school, thereby potentially excluding young people who have already disengaged from school (although teaching units contacted reported that the young person need only be noted as enrolled at a school and not actually attending to be accepted into the Unit) and
- potential for grouping ‘at risk’ young people in the same setting to ‘compound behavioural problems, thus placing young people further at risk’ (Murphy & MacLean, 2006, p.7).

## **6.2 Distance Education**

The Distance Education Centre Victoria (DECV) provides distance education courses for students from Preparatory to Year 12. It delivers programs to approximately 3000 part-time and full-time students each year. The Centre employs support workers including a Pastoral Care Teacher and Student Welfare Co-ordinator. Acting Principal John Voglis reports that the 'Distance Education Centre Victoria is increasingly providing respite for schools struggling to cope with severely disruptive students' and that school 'principals were "knocking down the door" to get students on the verge of expulsion into the 10-week circuit-breaker program offered at the Thornbury-based centre' which provides schools and students with a short-term break (Irwin, Northcote Leader Website, 2009).

In a Northcote Leader article (2009), Victorian Association of State Secondary Principals Brian Burgess said 'the centre was providing a useful service for students who had become disengaged in the system and required extra assistance'. However, Burgess highlighted that schools did require 'more options including higher teacher-to-student rations, modified curricular and specialist education units' (Irwin, Northcote Leader website, 2009). Burgess also stated that 'although the circuit breaker helped fill an important gap, it was primarily an online service and there was a shortage of programs offering face-to-face assistance for students who were disengaged and "acting up"' (Irwin, Northcote Leader website, 2009).

A further issue with distance education purportedly is the Centre's referral process. Youth Connection case workers reported that it involved a lengthy application procedure with 'any School wanting to enrol their students in a DECV program needing to get approval from the DEECD Regional General Manager' (Distance Education Centre Victoria website, 2010).

## **6.3 Adult and Community Education (ACE)**

ACE refers to 'organised adult learning in community settings' (Clemans, A, Hartley, R & Macrae, 2003). The DEECD and the Adult Community and Further Education (ACFE) 'have developed guidelines to assist schools with students below the age of 15, seeking to attend an educational program in an ACE setting' (DEECD website, 2010). Students under the age of 15 can only be referred as a last resort and can only be enrolled if they are:

- Refusing or unable to attend a mainstream school and
- 'All parties (namely the parents, student, school Principal and Regional Director) agree the individual requires a non-school environment in which to further their education' (DEECD website, 2010).

Although this agreement appears to offer young people disengaged from school an option to continue their education away from a mainstream school, there is some confusion expressed by providers as to whether youth under the age of 15 could attend an ACE setting. For example, when contacting ACFE North West Region to enquire further about this arrangement, no information could be provided. In addition, ACE providers contacted reported that they did not offer courses for youth under the age of 15 and did not have the resources to provide for this group of young people, listing such issues as the inability to provide an adequate duty of care to youth under the age of 15 as reasons why they could not support such enrolments.

### 6.4 Community programs

Although a variety of community programs are available for youth in the Northern region, Youth Connection case workers raised concerns that the majority are only able to assist youth aged 15 and above. This appears to be a common issue in other parts of Australia, with research conducted by the Youth Affairs Network of Queensland finding that '15 to 17 year olds are relatively well serviced compared to both younger and older age-groups. For example, 14 year olds have access to 37% fewer services than 15 year olds and 12 years olds have access to 55% fewer services when compared to 15 year olds' (Powell, D & Shafiq, T. 2009, p.27).

There is currently no central directory that details services for youth under the age of 15. In the process of this research, the following services were identified as either currently working with youth under the age of 15 or able to accommodate these young people. *(This list, however, is not exhaustive and by no means does it cover all services within the Northern region assisting youth under the age of 15)*

**Table 3**

Organisation/ Program	Description of main programs/activities for young people
Anglicare Youth Services	Adolescent community placement (teenage foster care) Adolescent Crisis accommodation for homeless youth , Foster care, Residential care, Adolescent support programs (case management) ,Youth mediation ,Family counselling, Integrated family services , Parent education , Multicultural support groups , Drug and alcohol services
Arabic Welfare	Arabic Welfare Inc (AW) is a non-political and non-sectarian body dedicated to serving the welfare needs of the Arabic speaking community. Youth Workers provide and develop youth programs through schools and the community for newly arrived young people The Arabic Speaking Families Learning Together in Moreland project aims to strengthen parenting skills of Arabic speaking parents of 'at risk' adolescents, Settlement support recreational and social group activities.
Associated Neighbourhood Houses & Learning Centres	Neighbourhood Houses and Learning Centres provide social, educational and recreational activities to the community
Banyule Community Health Services	Online Youth Health Information
Berry St Community Centre	Counselling, outreach, life skills, mentoring, accommodation and employment programs. Also provider of Youth Connections in BNYC
Berry St MATTERS	Mediation and family therapy- aims to resolve adolescent/parental conflict.
Brosnan Youth Services	Brosnan Youth Services is a holistic support service for young people exiting adult prisons and/or Youth Justice centres, who are assessed as high risk/need, with limited social and family networks, limited accommodation and post release support options and experiencing multiple and complex health problems. Services include: intensive outreach support, case management, supported accommodation, drug and alcohol counselling, recreation programs, employment/training programs, 24/7 after hours emergency assistance and duty work and referral service.
Centacare	School refusal focused programs – counselling with psychologist/family therapist

Centre For Multicultural Youth	CMY undertakes a range of programs, projects and policy initiatives aimed at enhancing the life opportunities of young people from culturally diverse backgrounds. Direct one-to-one support of young people, Policy advice Information provision and research, Youth leadership and mentoring programs, Training and professional development, Community education
Darebin Community Mental Health Service	Counselling and mental health services
Darebin Council - Northland Youth Centre	Drop in for 12-21 yrs, Summer camp, teenage holiday program 12-16 yrs, Plaza program (different activities on Mon evenings).
Dianella Community Health	SFYS, Settlement Grants Project targets newly arrived Refugees, Humanitarian and Migrant Young People, Adolescent counselling. Youth Connections in HWYC
Typo Station	Evolve - Outdoor education set in schools (Diamond Valley, Eltham HS, Montmorency) and the bush for students with social disadvantage/personal issues Go Girl – 13-20 who have dropped out of school and have experience some form of trauma.
Finding my place - Glenroy Library	Aims to motivate students to remain in education. Students are provided with intensive career guidance and are able to explore careers and traineeships in art, music, sport & fitness and makeup.
Foundation House	Refugee assistance – Rainbow program for 9-12 year olds attending ESL centres or schools with significant enrolment of new arrivals Klassroom kaleidoscope – a program to facilitate connectedness & wellbeing Also provides school support program – working with teachers, ESL & SWC to develop whole school approach
Good Shepherd	Developing Independent Skills for Home (DISH)– life skills Adolescent Support Program (ASP)– for 12-17 – flexible & responsive service for young people with social & emotional difficulties Bringing Real Individual Develop through Group Education (BRIDGE) supports young people who have experienced severe disruptions in education. (based at Lynall Hall Community School)
Headspace	Mental Health- 12-25 yrs, screening, assessment, linkages to Allied Health & Welfare Services and Alcohol & Other Drugs Services
Hope St	Short term supported emergency accommodation for 16 - 25 year olds. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Outreach support for 16 - 25 year olds with links to the Northern region.</li> <li>• Youth Reconciliation - counselling &amp; support for young people &amp; families.</li> <li>• Advocacy, resource and referral services.</li> <li>• Independent accommodation &amp; transitional houses for young families.</li> </ul>
Hume Youth Commitment Moving Forward	Moving Forward targets disengaged young people 15-19 who live in or are associated with City of Hume. It is a 'hands on' style of program that includes life skills, work readiness and aims to build confidence and self esteem.
Jesuit Social Services	Start Over – early intervention crime prevention case management 10-15 Youth Justice Community Support program – yp in Juvenile Justice
Kildonan	Early intervention program with focus on engagement with education, addressing homelessness issues and family mediation. Information & referral for young people and their families. School based programs in partnership with other agencies eg Girls group, Pacific

	community recreational activities, Independent Living, Perr skills workshops and transitional programs. Youth Connections - HWYC
Linking Young People to Employment and Training	Mentoring for young people 15-21
Merri Community Health	Health oriented, Generalist youth counselling 12-25 yrs, SFYS
Mission Australia	Youth Connections – HWYC, BNCY & BNYC. Charcoal Lane – social enterprise and training program – provides employment pathways for disadvantaged Aboriginal young people
Moreland City Council	Youth Connections INYC Short term individual support for young people 11-25. Arts & community projects, holiday programs, Youth summits & committees
Nillumbik Community Health	Reconnect – 12-18 who are homeless or at risk of homelessness – mediation, counselling, practical support for family. Youth Connections – BNYC
North Richmond Community Health Centre	No specific youth program – yp can be referred to a Youth Worker for support/advocacy
North Yarra Community Health	Health oriented
Open House Ivanhoe	Offers support for young people, some of whom struggle with issues such as behavioural problems, relationships, social pressures and dysfunctional families etc. <i>Xtreme NRG (Extreme Energy)</i> is held for young teenagers (up to the age of 15) on alternate Fridays at Ivanhoe. Active games, outings and activities included. <i>OZone</i> is for youth over 15 years of age where a specific area has been set aside at Ivanhoe for their use. They can play video games, music or just chat
Operation Newstart Northern	Students at educational risk are engaged in outdoor adventure/life skills/vocational program for 7 weeks, 4 days pw.
Orana Family Services	Care for vulnerable children unable to live at home - residential and foster care programs. Early intervention and prevention programs to assist communities
Orygen	Orygen Youth Health (OYH) is Australia's largest youth-focused mental health organisation. Orygen Youth Health is: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A specialised youth mental health clinical service</li> <li>• An internationally renowned youth mental health research centre and</li> <li>• A youth mental health training and communications program</li> </ul>
Reach	Fused Workshops (2hr pw X 5 weeks) Collingwood - focus on challenging activities to enable better capacity to deal with life issues. Grounded – Yr 9 students who may be disengaged, conflict or bullying, low self esteem
Scope	Scope offers a wide range of services from services for people with a disability to services for carers, employers and other groups. Central to our service offering is the direct support offered through our Client Services, Disability Employment through Employment Futures, Packaging &

	Assembly, Communication Resource Centre and Scope Research.
Spectrum Migrant Resource Centre	Migrant and refugee focus – settlement, casework, holiday programs, family and parenting programs, leadership groups.
Sunbury Community Health Centre	Health oriented
The Salvation Army	Youth Connections HWYC, BNYC and INYC Reconnect Program – Individual and family case management, counselling, mediation & conflict resolution case work with young people 12 -18 and their families at risk of homelessness.
Victorian Arabic Social Services	Provides a range of programs and activities for young people which include: sporting activities, mentoring, leadership courses, social engagement activities, radio and television programs, camps and trips and activities which aim to strengthen relationships between young people, their communities and service providers.
Whitelion	ROAR workshops Mentoring
Youth Northern Outreach Team	YNOT provides education support and counselling for yp 12-21with drug and alcohol issue

### 6.5 Further local exploration of issue

It appears that currently there is no other research being conducted exploring the issue of disengaged youth under the age of 15 within the Northern region. However, the Pavilion, a non mainstream education setting working with young people who are disengaged from education/ training within the Northern Metropolitan Region, are developing strategies and options within their setting in the near future. Youth Connections will link and support these initiatives.

School attendance data could be utilized to identify young people at risk.

## 7. Discussion and conclusion

As stated in the introduction, Youth Connections consortia members in the Northern region identified that significant numbers of young people under the age of 15 were increasingly disengaging from school and that a lack of support options existed for these young people to re-engage with education.

Information provided by non mainstream schools supports Youth Connections data that significant numbers of young people under the age of 15 are leaving mainstream settings.

While this view was supported in feedback provided by other community agencies, the lack of formal tracking of this age group makes substantiation of the actual extent of the issue difficult. Only Youth Connections is required under its funding agreement to track and monitor participants by age however in Whittlesea, under the Whittlesea Youth Commitment, MIPs funding is used by 6 schools to employ Transition Brokers who track and monitor students predominantly from Year 10 and above but also offer some support to early school leavers in lower years.

Previous research conducted in the area of disengaged youth in compulsory school years has repeatedly highlighted the need to implement 'comprehensive data collection and planning process to better understand the level of demand for education services for children and young people at risk of disengaging or disengaged from school, and the nature of this demand' (DEECD, 2009, p.42).

Youth Connection case workers, community organisations, schools and alternative education providers listed a variety of risk factors related to youth disengagement. This is consistent with the majority of research undertaken identifying that disengagement is not the result of one single factor but is related to a number of complex, intertwined issues. External research indicates that disengagement is related to three key factors; individual student issues, family problems, and school matters.

As well as investigating key factors relating to disengagement, it would be useful to also look at and build on those elements that keep young people engaged in schools.

Although a number of services are provided for young people in the Northern region, case workers highlighted that a number of programs excluded youth under the age of 15. As VCAL (both TAFE and community based) is a senior level certificate it is only available to young people 15 and older. A number of community programs contacted also reported that they did not assist young people under the age of 15. This issue has been further explored by the Youth Affairs Network QLD who found that in Brisbane 'there was a general lack of services for young people under 15 and who were disengaged from learning' (YANQ, 2009, p.45).

Responses from Youth Connection case workers and community organisations alike identified the need for increased services for disengaged youth under the age of 15. One of the main concerns raised was that a number of options provided were not available for youth under the age of 15. For example, to enrol in VCAL programs and TAFE based courses, applicants need to be aged 15 and older. In addition, the *Education Provision to Children and Young People at Risk of Disengaging or Disengaged from School* report (KPMG on behalf of DEECD, 2009) identified that of the current education options available to disengaged young people under the age of 15 many are experiencing

an increase in demand. This could lead to current services not being able to assist young people being referred resulting in them falling through the gap.

Furthermore, some confusion exists as to whether certain services are able to provide assistance to this group of young people. For example, ACE providers contacted reported that they would not be able to provide programs to these young people, highlighting that they would not be unable to give adequate duty of care for individuals under the age of 15. This is despite an agreement existing between DEECD and the ACFE that a young person under 15 years old, as a last resort, can be referred to such an institution to complete some or all of their education.

The current level of confusion might be addressed with greater clarity around where responsibility rests for educational outcomes.

Responses from stakeholders indicated support for an increase in services for youth under the age of 15 and included a variety of suggestions for programs to be implemented. Predominantly proposals included “hands on programs”, parental support initiatives, and alternative education settings for young people under the age of 15.

## 8. Recommendations

The following recommendations are made:

1. That Youth Connections consortia (BNYC, INYC and HWYC) together with BNLEN, INLEN and HWLEN form a working group with representation from DEECD, Principals, RYAN, Victoria Police, LGAs and Mental Health practitioners to develop strategies to address issues related to young people under 15 years who are disengaged or at severe risk of disengaging from education.
2. That this working group develop an effective regional approach for the re-engagement of disengaged young people under 15 back into education.
3. That Youth Connections consortia support and participate in the implementation of the exit procedure recently developed by DEECD
4. That Youth Connections seeks further engagement and feedback from parents/significant adults of disengaged young people under 15.
5. That Youth Connections seeks information from young people’s perspective on the experiences of disengagement and their access to educational options.

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## 10. Appendices

### Appendix 1. Survey – Youth Connections Case Managers

This questionnaire is being undertaken to develop a clearer picture of how many young people 12 to under 15 years of age are being supported and serviced through Youth Connections.

<b>Name of Organisation</b>	
<b>Contact Person</b>	
<b>LGA you are servicing</b>	

#### Question 1

Do you provide support for young people 12 to Under 15 year old? Yes  No

If yes , what support do you provide?

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#### Question 2

How many 12 – 15 Year olds is your organisation servicing through Youth Connections by category type? How many are still engaged?

Service Type	No. of 12 to 15 year olds	Males	Females	No still engaged in school	Number not engaged in school
Type 1 - YC					
Type 2 (a) - YC					
Type 2 (b) - YC					
YTSI					

#### Question 3

What are the major issues you are dealing with? Please list

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Please return this survey to Eliza Beck [elizabeck@nmit.vic.edu.au](mailto:elizabeck@nmit.vic.edu.au) Youth Connections NMIT Ph: 9269 8648.

**Thank you for your time**

## **Appendix 2 Survey to schools**

### **Questions regarding disengaged youth under the age of 15**

Over a period of time it has been identified that across the Northern region there are increasing numbers of young people under the age of 15 disengaging from education. Youth Connections, a DEEWR funded program, works young people who are disengaged or at risk of disengaging.

While individual school details will not be recorded we are interested in gaining a school perspective on the extent of disengagement in region.

- 1) How many students under 15 (at time of exit) left your school last year? *(please do not count those students transferring to another school)*

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- 2) How many of these young people were referred to Youth Connections?

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Please return this survey to Eliza Beck [elizabeck@nmit.vic.edu.au](mailto:elizabeck@nmit.vic.edu.au) Youth Connections NMIT Ph: 9269 8648.

**Thank you for your time to complete this questionnaire**

**Thank you for your time**