



VICTORIAN GOVERNMENT ACCUSED OF FAILING TO ADDRESS EDUCATIONAL CHALLENGES FOR CHILDREN IN CARE

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In short:

A report has found that in 2023 children in out-of-home care were being expelled at five times the rate of other children and only a quarter were progressing from year 10 to year 12.

The Commission for Children and Young People made 47 recommendations to address the issue, but it says the Victorian government has not implemented any of them.

What's next?

The Victorian government says it accepts in full, part or principle the majority of the recommendations and is taking a staged approach to progressing responses.

Jackie was two years old when she first entered the child protection system.

Abuse, neglect and family violence disrupted her home life, and her education.

"Life was chaotic," she says.

"I was moving back and forth from different kinds of care.

"I faced a fair bit of trauma, so a lot of instability."

Jackie struggled to make it to school with any consistency, as she moved between her parents, kinship care, foster homes and emergency respite.

One year she changed schools three times.

"I liked school for the most part. I liked hanging out with my friends and everything, as most kids do. The only issue was getting there, and that was a barrier," she says.

It wasn't only her education that suffered. She was unable to sustain friendships and support networks, too.

"I would often just be taken and placed somewhere else, and my friends at school wouldn't know, I'd kind of just disappear," she says.

By the time Jackie reached high school she was living in residential care and spending significant time in mental health units.

"For the last couple of years, for year 12, I was in transitional housing, and then I'd moved out of care, so I'd kind of aged out into almost homelessness."

COMMISSIONER CALLS FOR URGENT ACTION

At any given time, about 9,000 Victorian children are in out-of-home care.

Victoria's Commissioner for Children and Young People, Liana Buchanan, says Jackie's experience is a common one.

"These are children who have experienced some terrible things in their childhood, the kind of trauma, harm, abuse that most of us don't even want to think about," she says.

"There's a lot of things about the care system that make it really hard for these children to go to school, to stay engaged at school.

"We can only imagine if a child is being moved from placement to placement, often without warning, often without even an explanation, then that has a massive impact on their capacity just to survive, let alone to go to school."

In November 2023, the Commission for Children and Young People, an independent statutory body, released the findings of its systemic inquiry into the educational experiences of children and young people in out-of-home care.

The "Let Us Learn" inquiry covered public schools, which 93 per cent of children in care attend.

It found children in care were being suspended or expelled at five times the rate of other children.



Liana Buchanan says she's seen no evidence the government is addressing the problem with urgency. (ABC News: Patrick Rocca)

Only a quarter of them were progressing from year 10 to year 12, compared to more than 80 per cent of students in the general population.

In 2022, only 12 students living in residential care were enrolled in year 12. None of them completed VCE.

Commissioner Liana Buchanan says the findings are deeply distressing.

"They're being failed by the care system that is moving them around too much, that is not providing them or their carers with the supports that they need," she says.

"But at the same time, they're being failed by the school system because they're being punished for behaviours connected to trauma. They're being met with low expectations. They're being met with stigma.

"It really is, from my point of view as children's commissioner, a pretty appalling and shameful state of affairs."

The inquiry made 47 recommendations, including training all educators in trauma-informed practices, better financial support and training for carers, and greater restrictions on the use of suspensions and expulsions for children in care.

But Ms Buchanan says none of the recommendations have been fully implemented by government.

"At this point, over a year after we tabled the report, I know that there's been a committee established to progress some of the work," she acknowledges.

"But I really do think this is an area that needs significant and urgent action. And to date, I have not seen that urgency."

The Victorian government says it accepts in full, part or

principle the majority of the recommendations and is taking a staged approach to progressing responses.

Ms Buchanan says the stakes couldn't be higher.

"Sadly, across a whole range of measures, the outcomes for young people who leave care are pretty terrible," she says.

"We know that if we don't get in early and provide these children and young people with better support generally ... that includes a better education, we know what will happen for many of them.

"The prospect for them is not looking good."

PRINCIPAL CALLS FOR SCHOOLS TO SHOW FLEXIBILITY

Flexibility, support and tenacity helped Jackie to become the first person in her immediate family to finish high school.

She graduated from Lynall Hall Community School aged 20, after completing her VCE over four years.

"We managed to find a way to get me through," she says.

"The school was really flexible ... like getting approval for me to stay an extra year over the age of 18, and adjusting my timetable to suit me."

Lynall Hall Principal Ralph Gotlib says all schools should be able to accommodate children in out-of-home care.

"I can't think of a more disadvantaged cohort of kids," he says.

"I think if you understand that, then you understand that the level of modification that they'll need in terms of their supports is really high."

Jackie knows the odds were stacked against her, but says she succeeded despite the system, not because of it.

Her time in mental health units inspired an interest in nursing, and she recently achieved that dream, finishing a nursing diploma.

She wants to specialise in paediatrics or adolescent psychology.

And she is determined to break the cycle of disadvantage.

"Everyone deserves the right to get an education, it's a basic human right and children and young people in out-of-home care deserve the same opportunities as their peers," she says.

"That's not what's happening ... the children and young people being affected are the future, we need to set them up to succeed, not fail."