



WHITELION YOUTH

BY  KIDS FIRST

*Commissioner for Children
& Young People WA*

**Discussion papers
submission 2024**

APRIL 2024

ABOUT KIDS FIRST AUSTRALIA

Kids First Australia (KFA) is an independent not-for-profit community services organisation for children, young people and families. In late 2023, Whitelion Youth – a critical youth support service in Western Australia – merged into KFA.

Whitelion's focus on youth justice and youth advocacy became a core strength recognised by governments, the youth sector, corporates and the general community as making a real difference to young people's lives. By integrating the programs delivered by Whitelion, KFA now offers support from (pre) birth to young people aged 24.

Our newly combined child, family and youth expertise and services enable us to provide a family-centred response to enhance the life trajectories of at-risk children and young people nationally. Our goal is for all young people to have every opportunity to be active citizens, with equitable access to support they need to reach their potential.

DISCUSSION PAPER: EDUCATION

Questions: Building strong foundations for learning in the early years

How might Western Australia build a more sustainable and accessible foundation to support children and families to engage in early education and care?

Adopting universal, trauma-informed models of education and care can support more families to engage in early years education. By prioritising trauma-informed practices in early childhood settings, educators and caregivers can create supportive environments that address the diverse needs of children, including those who have experienced adversity or trauma. These approaches foster resilience, promote positive relationships, and enhance children's social-emotional wellbeing, laying a strong foundation for future learning and development.

22% of Australian children arrive at their first year of full-time school developmentally vulnerable, and we know that prolonged exposure to physical, emotional and/or sexual abuse and traumatic experiences early in life has been established to cause profound long-term adverse effects on brain and physiological development.

KFA has created and trialled a model of early years education and care which addresses developmental vulnerability, while offering all children a holistic early years education experience that can, for those children who require it, address the impacts of trauma. Emerging evidence from our trial revealed that this kind of approach has a significant positive impact on children's cognitive and non-cognitive development, as well as improving language skills, and lowering psychological distress for children's caregivers. Models of education and care like ours, that view the child in a holistic way, should be the prioritised standard.

Co-locating early years centres with primary schools is another effective strategy to enhance accessibility and continuity of care. By establishing integrated hubs that offer seamless transitions from early childhood programs to primary education, families can benefit from streamlined services and increased support networks. Co-location facilitates collaboration between educators, enables shared resources and facilities, and promotes alignment of curriculum and pedagogical approaches across the early years and primary sectors. This integrated approach promotes smooth transitions for children and families, reduces fragmentation in service delivery, and enhances the overall quality and effectiveness of early years education.

Attracting and retaining high-quality teachers and educators to the early childhood sector is essential for building a sustainable foundation of support. This involves implementing targeted recruitment strategies, offering competitive salaries and benefits, and providing ongoing professional development opportunities. By investing in the professional growth and wellbeing of early childhood educators, Western Australia can ensure a skilled and motivated workforce that is equipped to meet the diverse needs of children and families. Moreover, fostering a supportive and inclusive work environment promotes job satisfaction and reduces turnover, contributing to the stability and sustainability of early education and care services

What more could be done to support vulnerable and disadvantaged children and families to engage in foundational learning and development activities?

Creating safe, accessible spaces for families to meet and engage with support and other services helps families to explore early years education and care for their children. Offering place-based connections to wrap-around supports, such as family coaches, Allied health, family violence support and recovery, mental health, and the NDIS encourages engagement and participation.

Mitchell Shire, within the Goulburn area of Victoria, is the fastest growth area in Australia. With this growth comes myriad challenges. This community is experiencing:

- the fourth highest rate of mortgage default;
- double the Australian average of domestic violence;
- higher parent-reported rates of childhood intellectual disability, developmental delay and learning disabilities; and
- the highest rate of child protection investigations in Victoria.

The Department of Families, Fairness and Housing has funded two 'Early Help Hubs', an evidence-informed model designed for families with emerging needs, with children aged from birth to 12 years, who are participating in universal services including early childhood education and care services, primary and secondary school, housing and maternal and child health (MCH) services. The Hub model is staffed with Family Coaches, and focuses on creating a safe connection to universal services including early years education and care.

After two years of operation, the emerging findings are promising for families who have engaged with the Hubs. Parents report they feel more capable and supported, know how to connect into the support they need, and have benefitted from the social programs the Hubs offer so parents can create connections in their community.

This model of early help is one that can be replicated across Australia in high growth areas and/or areas of elevated need.

Is there a structured approach to identifying, delivering and funding early education and care opportunities?

Structured approaches should involve collaboration between government agencies, non-profit organisations like KFA, educational institutions, and community stakeholders. The approach should incorporate:

- Needs assessment to identify gaps and areas of need in early education and care services; analysing demographic data, population trends, socio-economic indicators, and other relevant factors to understand the demand for early years services.
- Policy development to address needs, so we can improve access to early years education and care.
- Subsidies should be provided to eligible families to reduce the cost of childcare, thereby improving equity of access, while grants should be made available to support the establishment or expansion of early years centres.
- Quality standards should be regularly reviewed and updated to ensure that staff and services meet minimum standards for safety, curriculum, staff qualifications, and child-to-staff ratios. Regular (ideally unannounced) inspections and evaluations should be carried out to monitor compliance with these standards.
- Community engagement is an essential component to identify local needs, build support for early education initiatives, and fostering collaboration including consulting with parents, educators, employers, and community organisations to gather opinions and feedback on proposed policies and programs.

Should the WA Government continue to invest in Child and Parent Centres?

In our experience and as mentioned above, the 'community hub' type model is a cost-effective means of connecting with community, offering early help to families that need it, and encouraging uptake of early years services. KFA is in its second year of piloting a similar 'hub' style centre for families, offering family coaching, connection to supports, and community-building events such as family days. Locating these centres close to primary schools helps to smooth children's transition to primary school, as well as fostering a holistic, whole-of-family approach to educating children.

Continuing to invest in Child and Parent Centres in Western Australia is essential for promoting early childhood development, supporting families, and addressing disparities in educational outcomes.

These centres play a crucial role in providing a range of services and supports that benefit both children and parents: early learning programs, parenting support, health services, and community resources, all aimed at fostering the holistic development of children from birth to school age.

One of the key reasons the WA Government should continue investing in CPCs is their effectiveness in improving school readiness and educational outcomes, particularly for vulnerable populations. Research has shown that children who participate in high-quality early childhood programs are more likely to succeed academically, socially, and emotionally later in life. By investing in CPCs, the government can help bridge the gap in developmental outcomes, especially for children from disadvantaged backgrounds or those facing additional challenges.

CPCs also play a crucial role in promoting family engagement and empowerment. By offering parenting support programs, workshops, and resources, CPCs empower parents to become actively involved in their child's learning and development. Strong family-school partnerships established through CPCs contribute to better educational outcomes for children, as parents are better equipped to support their child's learning at home and advocate for their needs within the school system.

These accessible community places serve as important community hubs that provide access to essential services and resources for families. From health screenings to social services referrals, CPCs offer a one-stop shop for families to access the support they need to thrive. By investing in CPCs, the WA Government can strengthen communities, promote social inclusion, and improve the overall wellbeing of families across the state.

Continuing invest in Child and Parent Centres is not only beneficial but also necessary for the WA Government to fulfill its commitment to supporting early childhood development and family wellbeing. CPCs play a vital role in promoting school readiness, fostering family engagement, and providing essential services to communities. By prioritising investment in and the development of CPCs, the government can empower the children and families of Western Australia.

Given that Aboriginal children are more likely to be developmentally vulnerable upon school entry, what can we do to improve access to, and participation in, formal and informal learning opportunities to improve school readiness?

Improving access to and participation in formal and informal learning opportunities for Aboriginal children is crucial to enhancing school readiness and reducing developmental vulnerabilities. Recognising the disparities faced by Aboriginal children, targeted interventions and comprehensive strategies are essential to address these challenges.

A holistic approach is necessary, acknowledging the multifaceted nature of early childhood development. This includes not only academic readiness but also social, emotional, and cultural preparation. Culturally responsive early learning programs that incorporate Aboriginal languages, traditions, and knowledge systems can foster a sense of belonging and identity, facilitating smoother transitions to formal schooling.

Community engagement and collaboration are paramount. Working closely with Aboriginal communities to co-design and co-implement early learning initiatives ensures that programs are culturally appropriate and responsive to local needs. Building strong partnerships with Aboriginal community organisations, Elders, and leaders can provide invaluable insights and support in delivering effective early childhood education and care services.

Addressing barriers to access involves ensuring that early learning opportunities are geographically and financially accessible to Aboriginal families, particularly those in remote and disadvantaged areas. Providing transportation assistance, subsidising fees, and establishing mobile or community-based early childhood services can help overcome logistical and financial obstacles to participation.

Investing in workforce development is essential for delivering high-quality early childhood education and care. This includes recruiting and retaining Aboriginal teachers, educators and staff, as well as providing culturally relevant training and professional development opportunities. A diverse and culturally competent workforce can better meet the needs of Aboriginal children and families, fostering trust and engagement.

We must also focus in identifying developmental delays and disabilities early. Implementing screening programs and early intervention services can help identify children who may require additional support before they enter school. This should include place-based connections to wrap-around supports such as Allied Health professionals. Collaborating with health professionals, early intervention specialists, and family support services can ensure that Aboriginal children receive timely and appropriate assistance to address any developmental vulnerabilities, and appropriate support for any disability.

Supporting parents and caregivers as the child's first educators through parenting programs, family literacy initiatives, and culturally sensitive parenting resources can enhance the home learning environment and strengthen family-school partnerships. Empowering Aboriginal families to actively participate in their children's education fosters a sense of ownership and investment in their child's learning journey, ultimately improving school readiness and long-term educational outcomes.

Questions: learning and educational attainment

How can we improve school communities so that all children and young people feel connected, valued and supported?

We must prioritise the implementation of evidence-based programs and supports for children and young people. These programs should provide students with access to trained mentors and counsellors who can offer guidance, encouragement, and emotional support. By embedding these services within the school environment, we ensure that students have easy access to the resources they need to navigate challenges, build resilience, and develop positive coping strategies.

Quality early years education and care lays the foundation for positive school experiences. Early years education should be trauma-informed, offering a relational pedagogical approach, designed to promote social-emotional development, communication skills, and school readiness among young children. By providing high-quality early childhood education and care services, we equip children with the skills and confidence they need to thrive in school and beyond.

Prioritising collaboration and partnership with schools, families, and community organisations creates a cohesive support network for children and young people. By working together, we can identify and address the unique needs of each school community, implement targeted interventions, and leverage resources and expertise to maximise impact.

In addition to direct support services, we should promote a positive school culture that celebrates diversity, inclusivity, and respect. This involves implementing anti-bullying initiatives, promoting positive behaviour management strategies, and fostering a sense of belonging among students through extracurricular activities, peer support groups, and student leadership opportunities.

Quality, evidence-led consent and respectful relationships education should start with age-appropriate body safety in the early years, progressing to education on the biological aspects of sex as well as gender, consent and pornography into the teenage years.

We must also prioritise professional development and training for educators to enhance their capacity to support the social-emotional wellbeing of students, and create safe and inclusive learning environments. By equipping educators with the knowledge and skills they need to address the diverse needs of students, we can create a more supportive and responsive school community.

How can schools provide a more holistic education that balances the focus on academic achievement with a view to embedding foundational skills and supporting social and emotional wellbeing?

Schools can enhance their approach to education by incorporating a more holistic perspective that balances academic achievement with the development of foundational skills and supports social and emotional wellbeing.

One successful initiative in achieving this balance is the implementation of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) programs. For example, schools can adopt evidence-based SEL curricula like the 'Second Step' program, which teaches students skills such as self-awareness, empathy, and problem-solving. By integrating SEL into daily instruction, schools help students develop the emotional intelligence needed to succeed academically and navigate social situations effectively.

Another effective strategy is promoting student-centred learning approaches. Schools can implement project-based learning initiatives where students work collaboratively to solve real-world problems. For instance, a school might organise a community service project where students plan and execute initiatives to address local needs, fostering teamwork, critical thinking, and empathy.

By providing opportunities for student choice and autonomy, schools empower students to take ownership of their learning and develop essential skills beyond traditional academic subjects. Creating supportive learning environments is crucial for fostering holistic education. Schools can implement positive behaviour management strategies like the 'Positive Behavioural Interventions and Supports' (PBIS) framework, which establishes clear expectations and reinforces positive behaviours.

Fostering positive teacher-student relationships is essential. For example, schools can implement advisory or mentoring programs where students meet regularly with a staff member who serves as a mentor and advocate. These programs provide students with personalised support and guidance, contributing to their social and emotional wellbeing.

Comprehensive wellness programs are also an important component to a well-rounded educational experience. Schools can offer resources such as counselling services, mindfulness activities, and physical fitness programs to support students' overall wellbeing. For instance, some schools have implemented daily mindfulness practices, such as mindful breathing exercises or yoga, to help students manage stress and improve focus. By prioritising student wellness, schools create environments where students feel supported and empowered to thrive academically and personally.

Integrating real-world skills and experiences into the curriculum is another effective approach. Schools can offer opportunities for career exploration, internships, and community service projects that allow students to apply their learning in meaningful ways. Schools can partner with local businesses to provide internship opportunities for high school students, giving them hands-on experience in a professional setting. By connecting classroom learning to real-world contexts, schools prepare students for success beyond graduation and foster a sense of purpose in their education.

Finally, collaboration with families and community partners is essential to support holistic education. Schools can involve families in decision-making processes, provide resources and workshops on parenting skills, and partner with community organisations like KFA so connections to counselling, family violence supports, and programs for mentoring and connection are quick and easy to access. By building strong partnerships with families and community organisations, schools create a network of support that promotes holistic wellbeing of the student and their family.

What opportunities are there for alternative learning settings that are not just focused on managing students with complex needs?

Outdoor education programs such as the Outdoor Classroom initiative by Nature Play WA take learning beyond the traditional classroom setting and into the natural environment. Students engage in activities like bushwalking, camping, and wildlife observation, learning about ecology, sustainability, and indigenous culture while developing skills such as teamwork, resilience, and environmental stewardship.

Arts-based education programs also thrive in Western Australia, offering opportunities for students to explore their creativity while enhancing their academic learning. The Spare Parts Puppet Theatre in Fremantle, for instance, offers workshops and performances that integrate puppetry into various curriculum areas, from literacy and storytelling to science and technology. Through hands-on puppet-making activities and interactive performances, students not only deepen their understanding of academic concepts but also develop artistic skills and self-expression.

Technology-enabled learning is another avenue for alternative education. The Western Australian Virtual School of Science, for example, provides online resources and virtual laboratories that allow students to conduct science experiments and simulations from anywhere with an internet connection. Through virtual reality (VR) experiences, students can explore the natural world, visit historical sites, and engage in immersive learning experiences that enhance their understanding of scientific principles and phenomena.

Community-based learning initiatives also play a vital role in alternative education settings in Western Australia. The School Volunteer Program run by Volunteering WA connects schools with volunteers who provide support in areas such as literacy tutoring, mentoring, and community service projects. By engaging with volunteers from diverse backgrounds, students gain valuable insights, build meaningful connections, and develop essential life skills while making a positive impact in their local communities.

Youth Hubs such as Whitelion Youth by Kids First's The Dungeon in Ballajura and Balga Drop-in provide a safe, non-threatening afterschool drop-in-services for secondary school students, with a focus on those who may be experiencing disadvantage, family violence, or other adverse circumstances.

Designed to make the young people who use it feel comfortable, young people who attend can access professional youth workers, recreation services, meals and refreshments. The program allows young people to re-engage with the community and remain engaged with education by providing them with a safe space outside of school hours. Regular sporting activities, camps and life skill workshops are incorporated within the service to promote the engagement, inclusion and development of young people within the area. The centre is much loved by all those who use it and the dedicated staff who work there see how beneficial the program is to all those involved.

These centres can also offer brief intervention support services during drop-in times to young people who need short-term support with the challenges they are experiencing. Workers can facilitate linkages for young people into Whitelion's intensive case management service for those young people at-risk who require longer term support for a range of complexities.

Overall, alternative learning settings in Western Australia offer a rich tapestry of opportunities that go beyond addressing the needs of students with complex requirements. From outdoor education programs to arts-based initiatives, technology-enabled environments, and community-based support and learning experiences, these settings provide dynamic and engaging approaches to education that inspire curiosity, foster creativity, and empower students to thrive both personally and academically.

How can we better include children and young people in decision making in their school communities?

Creating processes and systems that embed the voice of children and young people into decision-making cultivates a sense of ownership and empowerment among children and young people.

The establishment of inclusive forums and councils where students can voice their perspectives, concerns, and aspirations is one such approach. Whitelion Youth by Kids First's Youth Council consists of eight young people with lived experience who meet every two months. Serving as a platform for open dialogue between and with young people, the Council facilitates collaborative decision-making for our organisation, as well as being a sounding board for new ideas and initiatives. Incorporating youth councils as platforms for open dialogue between students, teachers, and school leaders fosters a culture of transparency and accountability as well as allowing students an opportunity to take ownership of their educational setting.

Schools can empower students to initiate and lead projects that address issues relevant to their school community. By encouraging and rewarding proactivity, and providing support and resources, schools enable students to take ownership of their learning environment and enact positive change. For example, students may organise sustainability projects, cultural awareness campaigns, peer support programs, or political protests, demonstrating leadership and agency in shaping their school experience.

Incorporating student perspectives into curriculum design and policy development processes ensures that decisions are informed by the needs and interests of the student body.

Schools can involve students in curriculum committees, policy review panels, and strategic planning sessions, giving them a meaningful role in shaping the direction of their education. This collaborative approach not only enhances the relevance and effectiveness of educational programs but also fosters a sense of investment and engagement among students.

Peer mentoring and support programs offer another avenue for promoting student participation and leadership within school communities. By pairing older students with younger peers, schools create opportunities for mentorship, role modelling, and peer advocacy. Older students can serve as mentors, providing guidance, support, and encouragement to younger students as they navigate academic and social challenges. Through peer support initiatives, students develop leadership skills, empathy, and a sense of responsibility towards their peers.

Investing in student leadership development programs equips students with the skills and confidence to actively engage in decision-making processes. Schools can offer leadership training, workshops, and experiential learning opportunities that focus on communication, teamwork, problem-solving, and advocacy. By nurturing the leadership potential of students, schools empower them to become effective agents of change within their school communities and beyond.

Fostering meaningful student participation in decision-making processes within school communities is essential for promoting student agency, wellbeing, and academic success. By creating inclusive forums for dialogue, supporting student-led initiatives, incorporating student perspectives into decision-making processes, implementing peer mentoring programs, and investing in student leadership development, schools in Western Australia can empower students to actively shape their educational experience and contribute positively to their school community.

What can we do to support children and young people with all of their needs – social, physical, cultural and educational – that supports the education system and schools in improving outcomes?

Supporting children and young people comprehensively across their social, physical, cultural, and educational needs requires a multifaceted approach, involving collaboration between schools, families, communities, and government agencies.

Fostering a positive school environment is paramount. Schools should prioritise creating inclusive spaces where students feel safe, valued, and supported. This involves implementing effective anti-bullying policies, promoting diversity and cultural understanding, and providing resources for students with diverse learning needs.

Attracting, and investing in the professional development of teachers is crucial. Teachers play a central role in supporting students' holistic development. By offering competitive remuneration and benefits, and equipping educators with training in areas such as trauma-informed practice, cultural competency, and social-emotional learning strategies, schools can better address the diverse needs of their students.

Collaboration with families and communities is also essential. Establishing strong partnerships between schools and parents facilitates a more holistic approach to supporting students. This may involve regular communication channels, family engagement programs, and community outreach initiatives aimed at providing 'wrap-around' support and resources to students and their families. Integrating health and wellbeing initiatives into the curriculum can promote physical and mental wellbeing among students. Regular physical activity programs, access to nutritious meals, and mental health education and support services should be considered, based on the unique needs of the student body of each school.

Also, recognising and celebrating cultural diversity is vital, especially in Western Australia, which is home to a rich tapestry of cultures including a significant Aboriginal population, often located in rural and remote areas.

Schools can incorporate culturally responsive teaching practices, offer language and cultural programs, and provide opportunities for students to explore and celebrate their heritage.

Ensuring equitable access to educational resources and opportunities is essential for improving outcomes for all students. This includes addressing barriers to education such as socioeconomic disadvantage, geographic isolation, and systemic inequities. By implementing a comprehensive approach that addresses the social, physical, cultural, and educational needs of children and young people, we can create an environment that fosters holistic development and improves outcomes for all students.

Questions: Equity and inclusion

How do we ensure the National Child Safe Principles are embedded in all Western Australian Schools?

School leadership teams should establish clear policies and procedures prioritising the protection of children. They should conduct regular risk assessments of facilities, develop codes of conduct for staff and volunteers, and provide ongoing training on child protection protocols.

Empowering children to participate in decision-making processes and express their views is another crucial aspect of promoting child safety. Schools should establish student councils or forums where children can voice their opinions on matters affecting their safety and wellbeing. Age-appropriate education programs on topics such as personal safety and respectful relationships empower children to recognise and report unsafe situations.

Recognising and respecting cultural diversity is fundamental to promoting child safety in Western Australian schools. All schools should implement cultural competency training for both staff and volunteers to ensure they understand and respect the cultural backgrounds and traditions of the children they serve, with a focus on First Nations perspectives. Incorporating culturally sensitive policies and practices, such as providing language support services for non-English speaking families and acknowledging cultural holidays and celebrations, helps create a safe and inclusive environment for all children.

Continuous improvement is integral to maintaining and enhancing child safety standards. Schools should regularly review and evaluate their policies, procedures, and practices to identify areas for improvement. Regular feedback-seeking from children, families, and staff should be embedded into processes of continuous improvement, as well as conducting audits of child safety measures, and staying informed about evolving best practices in child protection.

Collaboration and partnership with families, communities, and relevant agencies are key aspects of promoting child safety. Schools should engage parents and caregivers through parent information sessions, workshops on child safety topics, and regular communication channels. Collaborating with external agencies, such as child protection services and police strengthens the network of support available to children and families in need.

By adhering to child safe principles and implementing specific strategies relevant to the Western Australian context, we create environments where children are protected, respected, and empowered.

What approaches are used to assess the implementation of the Aboriginal Cultural Standards Framework for Culturally Responsive Schools Framework and progress towards inclusivity?

One approach is to conduct regular evaluations that involve gathering feedback from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, families, Elders, and community members. This feedback can be collected through surveys, focus groups, and interviews to assess the extent to which the framework's principles are being effectively embedded in school practices and policies.

Using culturally appropriate assessment tools and indicators can help measure progress towards achieving the goals outlined in the framework. For example, schools can develop culturally responsive surveys that incorporate Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing to capture a holistic understanding of cultural inclusivity. These surveys may assess aspects such as the integration of Aboriginal perspectives in the curriculum, the promotion of Aboriginal languages and cultures, and the engagement of Aboriginal families and communities in decision-making processes.

Conducting regular self-assessments or audits using tools aligned with the framework's standards can provide valuable insights into areas of strength and areas needing improvement. Schools can adapt existing assessment frameworks, such as the "Reflect" tool developed by the Western Australian Department of Education, which helps schools evaluate their cultural responsiveness and identify areas for growth. By utilising these tools, schools can track their progress over time and identify specific strategies for enhancing cultural inclusivity.

Staff completing ongoing professional learning and capacity-building activities is also crucial for ensuring the effective implementation of the framework. Providing opportunities for staff to participate in cultural awareness training, workshops with Indigenous community members, and collaborative learning experiences can deepen their understanding of Aboriginal cultures and perspectives. Schools can then assess the impact of these initiatives on staff attitudes, knowledge, and practices through pre- and post-training evaluations and observations of classroom interactions.

Lastly, fostering partnerships with local Aboriginal communities and organisations can offer valuable insights and support in assessing the effectiveness of the framework. Collaborating with Elders, community leaders, and cultural advisors to co-design assessment processes and interpret findings ensures that evaluations are culturally relevant and respectful. By involving Aboriginal voices in the assessment process, schools demonstrate a commitment to genuine partnership and reconciliation.

How do we embed a framework for differing multicultural and culturally and linguistically diverse communities to ensure we celebrate their difference and address racism?

One effective strategy is integrating cultural diversity into the curriculum by incorporating content that reflects the experiences and contributions of diverse communities. For instance, schools can include texts by Indigenous authors, such as Kim Scott or Sally Morgan, in English classes, and teach about significant cultural events like NAIDOC Week or Harmony Week across various subjects.

Implementing culturally responsive teaching practices is essential for acknowledging and respecting the diverse backgrounds of students. For example, teachers can incorporate storytelling techniques from Aboriginal cultures into literacy lessons or use visual aids and hands-on activities to support students from non-English speaking backgrounds in understanding complex concepts. By tailoring teaching methods to students' cultural and linguistic needs, schools create inclusive learning environments where all students can thrive.

Addressing racism requires proactive measures to promote understanding and empathy among students. Schools should offer forums for discussions about racism using real-life examples relevant to the Western Australian context, such as the experiences of Indigenous Australians or incidents of racial discrimination in local communities. Implementing anti-racism education programs, such as the "Racism. It Stops With Me" campaign, empowers students to challenge stereotypes, advocate for social justice, and contribute to building a more inclusive society.

Creating a safe and supportive school environment is also essential for addressing racism. Schools can establish policies and procedures for responding to incidents of racism, ensuring that victims receive support and those displaying racist behaviours are appropriately counselled. For instance, schools may implement restorative justice practices, such as 'circle sentencing' or yarning circles inspired by Indigenous traditions, to facilitate dialogue, understanding, and reconciliation among affected parties.

Fostering partnerships with multicultural and community organisations enriches the school's efforts to promote inclusivity and address racism. Schools can collaborate with organisations like the Metropolitan Migrant Resource Centre or the Aboriginal Education and Training Council to access resources, guest speakers, and cultural events that celebrate diversity and raise awareness about racism. Engaging with Indigenous elders and leaders, through cultural awareness workshops or storytelling sessions, provides valuable insights and guidance on incorporating Indigenous perspectives into school practices.

How can children and young people be supported to express their views in culturally safe ways?

Providing opportunities for students to engage in culturally relevant and meaningful activities that encourage self-expression and communication is one way to support young people's self-expression. For example, schools can organise storytelling sessions where students can share stories from their cultural backgrounds, or participate in art projects that allow them to express their thoughts and feelings through creative means.

Schools can establish culturally responsive classrooms where students are encouraged to share their perspectives without fear of judgment or discrimination. This may involve incorporating culturally appropriate communication styles, with an emphasis on respectful listening without judgement, and sharing openly and vulnerably.

Promoting cross-cultural understanding and empathy among students helps create an environment where diverse viewpoints are valued and respected. Schools should promote intercultural dialogue and exchange events, such as cultural exchange days or buddy programs pairing students from different cultural backgrounds. By facilitating meaningful interactions and relationships across cultures, schools encourage empathy, tolerance, and mutual respect among students.

Providing access to language and translation services can support children and young people who may face barriers to expressing themselves due to language differences. Schools should offer language support services for students and families who speak languages other than English, ensuring that language does not become a barrier to communication and participation. Incorporating bilingual resources and materials into the learning environment promotes linguistic inclusivity and enables students to express themselves in their preferred language.

Engaging with families and communities is also crucial in supporting children and young people to express their views in culturally safe ways. Establishing partnerships with cultural and community organisations provides opportunities for students to connect with their cultural heritage and identity. This may involve inviting community members, such as Elders or cultural advisors to participate in school events or activities, providing students with role models and mentors who share their cultural background.

For children and young people with disability and complex needs, how can we ensure equitable access to a quality education?

In Finland, schools prioritise and invest in individualised support for students with disabilities, ensuring they receive the necessary accommodations, resources, and specialised instruction to participate fully in mainstream classrooms. This includes providing assistive technologies, employing special education teachers, and promoting collaboration between general and special educators to tailor instruction to each student's needs. By embracing inclusive education principles and providing comprehensive support systems a-la the Finnish example, we can support all students to reach their fullest potential, regardless of their abilities or challenges.

Questions: Connection to education

What initiatives are available in schools to foster children and young people's engagement with education? What initiatives are available to prevent their disengagement?

The Positive Behaviour Support (PBS) framework, which aims to create positive and inclusive school environments by promoting behaviours that enhance learning and wellbeing is one way to aid students in connecting to their educational experience and staying engaged. Schools implement PBS through strategies such as explicit teaching of behavioural expectations, recognition of students' positive behaviours through rewards and incentives, and importantly, timely and targeted early intervention for students at risk of disengagement. For example, schools can establish 'Student of the Week' programs, calling out both traditional recognised educational achievements (like high marks) and non-traditionally recognised achievements (like displays of empathy).

Prioritising early intervention and support for students who are at risk of disengagement should be a primary focus. The Student Support Services team, comprising school psychologists, social workers, and youth workers, should provide targeted interventions and support services to address barriers to engagement and promote positive mental health and wellbeing in each school. Schools should offer counselling services, social skills training, and academic support programs to help students develop coping strategies and build resilience in overcoming challenges.

To prevent disengagement, schools should also focus on creating supportive transitions between educational stages. For example, primary schools should collaborate with local high schools to facilitate orientation programs and transition support for students moving from primary to secondary education. This should include specialised support for those students identified as at-risk of disengaging, without judgement or stigmatisation. These initiatives help alleviate anxieties and challenges associated with transitions, ensuring continuity of support and engagement throughout students' educational journeys.

What systemic barriers to participation do children with complex needs experience, and how can they be addressed by the education sector?

The education sector can address lack of access to appropriate support services by increasing funding and resources for specialised support services within schools, and collaborating with external agencies and professionals to provide comprehensive support tailored to each child's needs.

When it comes to limited access to assistive technologies and accommodations, we can ensure that schools are equipped with necessary assistive technologies, such as screen readers or communication devices by prioritising funding for these items, and provide training for educators on how to effectively utilise assistive technologies to make the necessary accommodations in the classroom.

Inflexible curriculums and teaching methods can be combatted by championing flexible and inclusive teaching strategies that accommodate diverse learning styles and abilities, as well as offering individualised learning plans and tailored instruction to meet the unique needs of each child.

Students facing social isolation and exclusion can be supported by embedding inclusive practices that foster positive peer interactions and friendships into schools, like the Western Australian 'Inclusive Schools, Inclusive Communities' initiative. We can also offer opportunities for peer support and collaboration through buddy systems and inclusive extracurricular activities.

Lack of understanding and awareness among educators can be remedied by providing professional development and training on disability awareness and inclusive education practices, as well as ongoing communication and collaboration between educators, support staff, and families to ensure a shared understanding of each child's needs.

What support mechanisms can schools put into place to enable children to express their views, and raise issues or concerns about their education or wellbeing?

Schools should offer student representative councils and/or committees where students can voice their opinions and contribute to decision-making processes within the school. Schools should assign staff members, such as student support officers or counsellors who are trained to listen to students' concerns and provide appropriate assistance or referrals to additional support services if needed. Regular surveys or feedback mechanisms allows students to anonymously share their thoughts and experiences, ensuring that they have a safe way to share their opinions, and in doing so help shape school policies and practices. Perth Modern School has implemented student feedback surveys to gather insights on various aspects of school life, including teaching and learning, wellbeing support, and extracurricular activities, enabling students to actively participate in improving their educational experience.

What options are available to support children and young people with complex needs to participate in mainstream education, where doing so best suits their needs?

Individualised Education Plans (IEPs) tailored to each student's specific needs and abilities, outlining accommodations, modifications, and support services. In Australia, the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) provides funding for students with disabilities to access support services and resources to facilitate their participation in mainstream education.

Integration aides or support workers to provide one-on-one assistance and support in the classroom. In the United Kingdom, the 'Statement of Special Educational Needs' is a legal document that ensures each student with complex needs receives support from teaching assistants or specialist staff to help them access mainstream education.

Access to assistive technologies, such as communication devices or mobility aids facilitates learning and participation. The use of speech-to-text software or alternative keyboards enables students with communication difficulties to participate actively in classroom discussions and activities.

Peer support programs and buddy systems foster social inclusion and peer relationships. Inclusive schools across Australia have implemented buddy programs where students with complex needs are paired with peer buddies who provide friendship, support, and assistance throughout the school day.

Offering professional development and training for teachers and school staff on inclusive education practices and strategies. The industry-leading Inclusive Education Framework in Canada provides educators with training and resources to create inclusive learning environments that accommodate diverse needs and abilities.

Collaboration with external support services and community organisations provides holistic support for students and their families. Schools in Western Australia could partner with organisations like the Ability WA or Therapy Focus to access specialist support services and therapies for students with complex needs, ensuring their holistic wellbeing and development.

Should schools consider establishing advocacy services or advocate roles to better serve children and young people who are at risk of school exclusion or disconnection?

Yes, establishing advocacy services or advocate roles in schools can better serve children and young people at risk of school exclusion or disconnection. For example, VICSRC in Victoria provides training for students to become advocates at their schools, as well as supporting students facing challenges such as bullying, discrimination, or academic difficulties, helping them navigate school systems and access necessary support services.

Questions: Social and emotional wellbeing

How might a standard national dataset and monitoring approach for wellbeing assist schools to systematically prioritise social and emotional wellbeing?

This approach could assist schools in systematically prioritising social and emotional wellbeing by providing valuable insights into students' needs and trends over time. For instance, Finland's comprehensive Health Behaviour in School-aged Children survey collects data on various aspects of students' health and wellbeing, including social and emotional factors. This data informs national policies and school-based interventions aimed at promoting student wellbeing, resulting in improved mental health outcomes and academic performance.

Similarly, the United Kingdom's Children and Young People's Health Outcomes Forum monitors indicators of wellbeing across different age groups, informing targeted interventions and resource allocation to support social and emotional development in schools. By adopting a standardised approach to data collection and monitoring, Australia can identify areas of need, track progress, and implement evidence-based strategies to enhance social and emotional wellbeing outcomes for students nationwide.

How might schools be better supported to deliver evidence-based programs that help to develop students' social and emotional wellbeing?

- Allocate dedicated funding to support Western Australian schools in implementing evidence-based programs for social and emotional wellbeing.
- Provide comprehensive training and professional development opportunities for educators to effectively implement evidence-based programs.
- Ensure schools have access to resources, materials, and tools necessary for delivering evidence-based programs, such as curriculum materials, assessment tools, and training manuals.
- Facilitate collaboration and networking opportunities between schools, education professionals, and community organisations to share best practices, resources, and insights on implementing evidence-based programs.
- Establish mechanisms for evaluating the effectiveness of evidence-based programs and monitoring their implementation to ensure fidelity and quality.
- Offer tailored support and guidance to schools based on their specific needs and contexts, including ongoing mentoring, coaching, and technical assistance.

How might schools be better supported to deliver evidence-based programs that help to develop students' social and emotional wellbeing?

Schools should cultivate strong partnerships with local health providers and community organisations. Collaboration with allied health professionals such as psychologists, counsellors and Allied Health professionals can enhance the range and quality of support services available to students. Schools should establish formal referral pathways, where educators can easily connect students in need with appropriate allied health services, ensuring timely and comprehensive support. Also, schools should host regular health and wellness clinics and workshops, where students can access screenings, assessments, and consultations in a familiar and supportive environment.

Leveraging technology can help facilitate access to allied health services for students, particularly those in remote and/or underserved areas. This is especially important for Aboriginal students and families, who have greater adverse health outcomes for a range of reasons, one of which is limited access. Schools can explore telehealth options, where students can participate in virtual therapy sessions or consultations with Allied Health professionals via video conferencing platforms. This approach not only increases accessibility but also reduces barriers such as transportation and scheduling conflicts, ensuring that students receive the support they need when they need it.

Integrating and wellbeing education into curricula can empower students to take ownership of their health and seek appropriate support when needed. Schools should incorporate topics such as consent and respectful relationships, mental health awareness, stress management, and healthy lifestyle choices into their teaching programs, equipping students with knowledge and skills to advocate for their own wellbeing. Peer support programs and initiatives, where students receive training to provide peer counselling or support to their classmates, can complement formal Allied Health services and foster a culture of empathy, understanding, and support within the school community.

What might full implementation of the Aboriginal Cultural Standards Framework in schools look like?

Real-world examples highlight how schools have adopted and implemented elements of the framework, albeit with varying degrees of success.

For instance, in many schools across Australia, there has been a concerted effort to integrate Indigenous perspectives into the curriculum across subject areas. This involves incorporating Indigenous literature, artworks, music, and storytelling into lesson plans and learning materials. One example of this integration is the 'Songlines' program implemented in some Australian schools, where students learn about Indigenous culture and history through song and dance, connecting them with traditional knowledge and practices.

In addition to curriculum integration, professional development and training for educators play a crucial role in implementing the Aboriginal Cultural Standards Framework. Schools have invested in cultural competency training for staff to deepen their understanding of Indigenous cultures, histories, and protocols. For example, the Stronger Smarter approach, developed by Dr. Chris Sarra, has been widely adopted in Australian schools to empower educators to engage effectively with Indigenous students and communities, fostering high expectations and positive relationships.

Building meaningful partnerships with local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities is essential for the successful implementation of the framework. Schools have collaborated closely with Elders, community members, and organisations to seek guidance, support, and cultural knowledge. This collaborative approach can involve inviting community members to participate in school events, cultural celebrations, and educational programs, fostering mutual respect and understanding.

Despite progress in adopting elements of the Aboriginal Cultural Standards Framework, challenges remain in achieving full implementation. These challenges include addressing systemic barriers, such as resource constraints, lack of cultural awareness among staff, and historical biases within educational systems. Overcoming these challenges requires sustained commitment, ongoing collaboration, and a willingness to learn and adapt approaches based on feedback and experiences. Ultimately, the journey towards fully embracing Indigenous perspectives in schools needs dedication, humility, and a genuine commitment to reconciliation and respect.

What does a culturally responsive learning environment look like for students?

A culturally responsive learning environment is one that honours and values the diverse cultural backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives of all learners. Curriculum, teaching practices, and school policies should be inclusive and equitable, reflecting the cultural identities and histories of all students. Students should feel respected, validated, and empowered to express their identities and viewpoints, fostering a sense of belonging and engagement in their learning. Educators should actively incorporate culturally relevant materials, examples, and teaching strategies that connect with students' lived experiences, making learning meaningful and accessible to all. Additionally, the learning environment should promote critical thinking, empathy, and understanding of different cultures, preparing students to navigate and contribute to an increasingly diverse and interconnected world.

How might children and young people be consulted early and often as to what might best support their social and emotional wellbeing?

- Establishing regular forums or advisory groups where children and young people can share their thoughts, concerns, and ideas regarding their social and emotional wellbeing.
- Utilising surveys, questionnaires, or online platforms to gather feedback from children and young people about their experiences and preferences for support services.
- Incorporating student representatives into decision-making processes related to social and emotional wellbeing initiatives, ensuring their voices are heard and valued.
- Providing opportunities for individual consultations or peer support sessions where children and young people can discuss their needs and receive personalised support.
- Cultivating a culture of open communication and trust within the school or community environment, encouraging children and young people to express themselves freely and seek support when needed.
- Implementing regular check-ins or assessments to monitor children and young people's social and emotional wellbeing over time, identifying any emerging issues or areas for additional support.

How can teachers be better supported to meet the needs of children and young people with complex needs?

Offering ongoing professional development and training opportunities equips teachers with the necessary tools and strategies to effectively address diverse learning needs. One successful case study comes from Finland, where the Teacher Training School model has schools partnering with universities to provide teachers with practical training and mentorship in inclusive education practices, enabling them to effectively support students with complex needs in mainstream classrooms.

Providing access to specialised resources and materials, such as assistive technologies and adaptive learning materials, empowers teachers to create inclusive learning environments that cater to the diverse needs of all students.

Collaboration and teamwork among teachers, support staff, and specialists also play a crucial role in meeting the needs of children with complex needs. By working together to develop individualised support plans and implementing multi-disciplinary approaches, educators can provide comprehensive support that addresses the unique needs of each student.

Establishing clear policies and procedures for identifying, assessing, and supporting children with complex needs ensures consistency and equity in the provision of support services across different educational settings.

Finally, and arguably most importantly, adequate funding is essential to sustain and scale up efforts to support teachers, and in doing so meet the needs of children and young people with complex needs in schools for the long-term.

DISCUSSION PAPER: YOUTH JUSTICE

Youth Justice in Western Australia

Youth justice is a critical area that demands urgent attention. KFA commends the Commissioner's commitment to ensuring that young people involved in the justice system are treated fairly and provided with appropriate support and rehabilitation services. KFA encourage the adoption of policies and practices that prioritise diversion, rehabilitation, and restorative justice approaches, aiming to address the underlying factors contributing to young people involved with the youth justice system.

Several factors contribute to children's and young people's involvement in youth justice systems in Western Australia. An overarching factor is intergenerational poverty and trauma which means that the family is already engaging with services and systems, increasing the likelihood of young people coming into contact with the youth justice system. Young people might be already missing protective factors, which greatly increases their chances of being involved in multiple systems, including youth justice.

- **Family:** The family plays a crucial role in a child's development. When there are adverse family circumstances such as conflict, family or domestic violence, neglect, or substance abuse within a household, this can significantly impact on children's and young people's wellbeing and increase their likelihood of engaging with peers that may already be involved with youth justice. They might also seek a sense of belonging and therefore engage in criminal behaviours to gain acceptance. When a young person's family of origin, including siblings, parents and extended family members are engaged in criminal behaviours, this role models acceptable behaviour and increases young people's involvement in youth justice.
- **Education:** School disengagement can be a risk factor, and one that we see a lot within some of our programs at KFA. Schools that utilise suspension or school exclusion as a discipline method, increase the likelihood of young people's disengagement from school and thus, these young people can be more susceptible to negative influences and engage in behaviour that may result in criminal charges.
- **Involvement in other systems:** Young people that have already experienced family violence or have an out of home care experience have an increased risk of involvement with youth justice^[LG4] Within child protection systems this can be because once a young person reaches the age of 16 or 17, the support often drops off and they have often not had appropriate role modelling and are trying to survive with limited skills and support.
- **Mental Health:** Many young people that practitioners work with within KFA programs in WA include young people with Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders (FASDs) and mental health challenges, in particular ADHD. This can mean that they struggle to belong and potentially have educational challenges in mainstream schools.

It is important to note that these factors often intersect and influence each other, creating complex situations that contribute to children's and young people's involvement in the youth justice system in Western Australia and beyond. Addressing these factors requires a multifaceted approach, including early intervention, community support, access to education and mental health services, and efforts to reduce systemic inequities. These efforts must be tailored to the individual, be culturally responsive, and provide a holistic approach to ensure the best outcomes for young people. It is also essential to ensure the voices of children and young people are heard and that their rights are respected. Finally, it is important to create and maintain transparent and accountable systems to ensure youth at-risk get the support they need.

How can we improve approaches to holistic responses across the whole of government, and the service system, to children and young people at risk of offending?

Improving approaches to holistic responses across the whole of government and the service system for children and young people at risk of offending requires a complex and collaborative effort and should be considered a foundational principle. This can include numerous ways of facilitating collaboration and coordination among government agencies, including justice, education, health, social services, and community organisations.

Invest in early intervention programs that target at-risk children and young people before they become involved in the justice system, such as the Mobile Youth Service delivered by KFA in Perth. These programs should address underlying risk factors such as poverty, trauma, family challenges, and substance abuse through a combination of educational, mental health and social support services. These services should be wraparound service models that provide comprehensive, individualised support to children and young people at risk offending and their families. Target 120 that is also delivered by KFA is an across-government strategy to holistically support identified young people and families presenting with complex needs to achieve their goals, improve whole-of-life outcomes and reduce contact with the justice system.

Developing culturally responsive approaches that engage with Aboriginal communities and address the over representation of First Nations young people in the justice system. Collaborating with Aboriginal elders, community leaders, and organisations to develop and implement culturally appropriate interventions and restorative justice practices.

Expanding access to community-based diversion programs and restorative justice initiatives as alternatives to traditional detention for young offenders. A good example of this is KFA's program Deadly Diversions which prioritises rehabilitation, reintegration and accountability while minimising the negative impact of incarceration on young people's development. Developing relationships between youth workers/youth services and the police, like Deadly Diversions program, increase clear communication and be able to develop wrap-around support and potentially divert young people from the youth justice system to begin with. This has been key to the success of Deadly Diversions and is demonstrated in an independent evaluation by the University of Western Australia.

Establishing mechanisms for sharing data and evaluating the effectiveness of youth justice interventions across government agencies and service providers. Using data-driven insights allows services and government to identify areas for improvement, allocate resources strategically, and measure outcomes related to reducing recidivism and promoting positive youth development. Being able to proactively share information from diverse perspectives is essential to enable local collaboration to collectively identify and respond to young people's needs.

Early signs of potential involvement with the justice system frequently manifest beyond its immediate scope, for instance, in factors like school attendance or interactions with child protection services, as evidenced by the Target 120 program.

Connecting data across important agencies while adhering to appropriate privacy protocols can serve as a potent tool for facilitating timely and efficient early intervention. This enables the identification of specific groups and areas within our community requiring assistance, as well as the potential for targeted identification of individual young people in need of appropriate support at critical junctures. With young people, coordinated information sharing allows a more collaborative approach and to develop tailored supports to individual young people and their families. A good example of this happening is in Victoria, where there is the Child Information Sharing Scheme (CISS) which makes it easier for professionals who support children and young people to share their experience and knowledge about the young person to determine how to best offer support to them and their families.

Enhancing results in youth justice demands acknowledgment of community expertise and strategic investment in community-driven solutions. By fostering collaboration among local families, youth services, stakeholders, and government agencies, we can gain profound insights into the strengths of communities. Armed with this understanding, resources can be allocated to address pressing needs effectively, maximising impact. Existing services can synergise with fresh initiatives, promoting seamless integration and holistic support.

In reviewing the Young Offenders Act 1994 (WA), what consideration needs to be given to strengthening approaches for early intervention, prevention, diversion and support to reduce the numbers of children and young people coming into contact with the youth justice system?

In relation to reviewing the Young Offenders Act 1994 (WA), there needs to be an assessment regarding the Act's provisions regarding early intervention and determine whether they adequately address the underlying risk factors associated with young people coming into contact with the youth justice system.

Expanding the scope of early intervention programs to target at-risk children and young people before they become involved in criminal behaviour. Increasing the availability and accessibility of diversion programs that provide young people with opportunities to address their behaviour through community-based interventions, restorative justice practices and support services. Although the Act states that it preferences diversion over other tactics, there is a low diversion rate.

Having an Aboriginal led evaluation of the Act's responsiveness to the cultural and individual needs of First Nations children and young people would be one consideration to increasing the cultural responsiveness. Incorporating culturally appropriate approaches that could include Aboriginal Community Court like the Koori Court in Victoria, having Aboriginal led diversion programs that are facilitated by ACCOs and restorative justice practices, to reduce the overrepresentation of Aboriginal young people in the justice system and promote healing and reconciliation.

How do we develop and implement wrap-around holistic whole of family programs across the early intervention, prevention, diversion space to ensure continuity of care for at risk children and young people?

To support young people to be well and thrive, we must support their wider families and communities. By providing support in multiple areas simultaneously, programs could offer a more comprehensive approach to addressing the underlying issues contributing to young people's involvement with the justice system. A collaborative approach ensures that young people receive support from a diverse range of professionals and services, which can lead to more holistic and coordinated care.

By addressing risk factors and providing support early on, wrap-around programs can help prevent further involvement with the justice system. By intervening at an early stage, these programs can potentially divert young people away from the justice system altogether, leading to better long-term outcomes.

How can we co-design solutions with children and young people with lived experience of the youth justice system so that we better meet their needs?

Young people are experts in their own lives and possess firsthand knowledge of the challenges and barriers within the justice system. The right of young people to be meaningfully involved in the decisions that affect them is enshrined in various [human right treaties](#). Young people's insights provide a deep and authentic understanding of the issues that need to be addressed. By involving them in the co-design process, their perspectives can inform more effective and relevant solutions.

Co-designing solutions with children and young people with lived experience of the youth justice system is essential for ensuring that interventions and programs are responsive to their needs and preferences. However, co-design requires funding and for government to take steps to equalise power imbalances.

Young people who have been involved in meaningful co-design processes have often commented that the experience was highly positive and may act as a protective factor for wellbeing. KFA has a National Youth Council that has been embedded in many co-design processes since its inception. This National Youth Council has young people from WA participating and are all considered young people at-risk. Anecdotally from this project, has shown that supporting a cohort of young people at-risk to become actively involved in systems or organisational change, their wellbeing increased as did their educational and employment achievements.

Involving young people in the design of solutions gives them a sense of ownership and empowerment. It validates their experiences and voices, fostering a sense of agency and dignity. When young people feel heard and respected, they are more likely to engage with and invest in the solutions, leading to better outcomes.

Solutions co-designed with young people are more likely to be effective because they are informed by real-world experiences and insights. By incorporating the perspectives of those directly affected by the justice system, interventions can address root causes, prioritise relevant issues, and identify innovative approaches that may have been overlooked otherwise.

Co-designing solutions with young people fosters trust and strengthens relationships between them and the justice system stakeholders, including the WA government. It demonstrates a commitment to collaboration, transparency, and genuine partnership. Over time, this can help improve the overall relationship between young people and the justice system, leading to more positive interactions and outcomes.

Co-designing solutions with young people with lived experience of the justice system not only leads to more effective interventions but also promotes empowerment, trust, and meaningful engagement. By valuing their expertise and involving them as partners in the process, the justice system can become more responsive, inclusive, and ultimately better equipped to support the needs of young people.

How might community policing approaches be reimagined to incorporate principles of early intervention and whole of family support into diversion practices?

The Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody highlighted major structural issues with policing, including the impacts of bias within policing. The Royal Commission made several recommendations address this, including for police services to take all possible steps to address racism and violence against Aboriginal people, to prioritise diversion from custody, and to increase community policing approaches that involve Aboriginal people.

Reimagining community policing approaches to incorporate principles of early intervention and whole-of-family support into diversion practices requires a shift towards a more holistic and collaborative model of policing that prioritises prevention, community engagement, and support services. Fostering strong relationships between law enforcement officers and the communities they serve through community policing initiatives. This involves building trust, communication, and collaboration between police officers and community members to address underlying issues and concerns. By reimagining community policing approaches in this way, we can create a more proactive, preventative, and supportive system that promotes the well-being of children and families, reduces the likelihood of youth involvement in the justice system, and strengthens community resilience and cohesion.

Barriers/benefits to raising the age

There is overwhelming consensus that suggests that children should not be held criminally responsible, given their brain development. Children and young people who have come into contact with the criminal justice system are less likely to complete their education, which impacts on long-term outcomes.

Western Australia continues to hold children as young as 10 years old criminally responsible, despite overwhelming evidence that this is not appropriate. Raising the age of criminal responsibility to 14 across all states and territories in Australia will allow more diversion and a chance for those children and young people to not become entrenched in the youth justice system and would bring Australia in line with its obligations under the Convention of the Rights of the Child.

Raising the age of criminal responsibility is a simple legislative reform that can create lasting positive outcomes for children and young people. The reform would require amendment to s29 of the Criminal Code (WA) to raise the age from 10 to 14 years old.

Recommendations:

1. Invest in early intervention programs that target at-risk children and young people before they become involved in the justice system, such as the Mobile Youth Service and Target 120 delivered by KFA Australia in Perth.
2. Develop culturally responsive approaches that engage with Aboriginal communities and address the over representation of First Nations young people in the justice system.
3. Expand access to community-based diversion programs and restorative justice initiatives as alternatives to traditional detention for young offenders.
4. Establish mechanisms for sharing data and evaluating the effectiveness of youth justice interventions across government agencies and service providers.
5. Expand the scope of early intervention programs to target at-risk children and young people before they become involved in criminal behaviour. Increasing the availability and accessibility of diversion programs that provide young people with opportunities to address their behaviour through community-based interventions, restorative justice practices and support services.
6. Have an Aboriginal led evaluation of the Young Offenders Act 1994 (WA) responsiveness to the cultural and individual needs of First Nations children and young people to support young people to be well and thrive, we must support their wider families and communities.
7. Co-design solutions with children and young people with lived experience of the youth justice system is essential for ensuring that interventions and programs are responsive to their needs and preferences.
8. Redesign community policing approaches to incorporate principles of early intervention and whole-of-family support into diversion practices requires a shift towards a more holistic and collaborative model of policing that prioritises prevention, community engagement, and support services.
9. Raise the age of criminal responsibility to 14 across all states and territories in Australia will allow more diversion and a chance for those children and young people to not become entrenched in the youth justice system and would bring Australia in line with its obligations under the Convention of the Rights of the Child.

DISCUSSION PAPER: CHILD PROTECTION

Youth Voice

Empowering young people in out-of-home care in Western Australia to have their voices heard and inform decisions that affect them is crucial for creating policies and services that truly meet their needs.

Systemic approaches exist for engaging young individuals, such as the establishment of advisory groups pioneered by the Victorian Commissioner for Children and Young People (CYP). This initiative has facilitated the provision of insights, feedback, and recommendations regarding policies, programs, and services.

The appointment of an independent advocate like the WA Commissioner bolsters the connection between the Commissioner's office and children and young people in out-of-home care, exemplified by the effective implementation under the current Commissioner of CYP in Victoria.

Ensuring diverse avenues for young individuals to express their concerns, ideas, and feedback is crucial. It's imperative to recognise that feedback must be actioned or followed up; otherwise, there's a risk of diminishing young people's ongoing involvement.

Involving young individuals in decision-making processes regarding their own lives can be transformative. This entails their participation in care teams and decision-making meetings that directly impact them. Additionally, scheduling meetings according to young people's availability and prioritising their involvement in the process are essential steps.

To achieve this, we must provide training and capacity-building opportunities for government officials, child protection workers, and support agencies. These initiatives are aimed at enabling them to adapt their practices and policies effectively to better incorporate the voices of children and young people in out-of-home care.

Mentoring

Research shows that young people involved in mentoring programs experience a wide range of positive developmental outcomes including increased school attendance, improved educational performance, more positive views of the future. They are also less likely to misuse alcohol and drugs, and are less likely to engage in risk taking behaviour such as committing a crime or engaging in violence.

Mentoring programs typically pair a young person with a non-family adult volunteer mentor from the community, with the aim of building a relationship that will encourage the young person's positive development and wellbeing. Relationships with caring adults, such as mentors, can be protective in helping young people overcome adversity and help to compensate for those at risk of experiencing negative outcomes.

KFA offers multiple established mentoring programs catering to young individuals in out-of-home care across South Australia, Victoria, and New South Wales. The invaluable benefits of mentoring cannot be emphasized enough, and we have consistently expanded the number of mentoring connections within these three states.

Establishing peer mentoring programs where young people who have successfully transitioned from out-of-home care can mentor and support those currently in care. Peer support can be highly beneficial in empowering young people and providing them with guidance and encouragement. Well-designed peer mentoring programs have been shown to positively influence developmental outcomes for young people including academic engagement, feelings of social support and feelings of belonging.

In a meta-analysis completed by [Poon et al. 2021](#), mentoring programs offering near-peer mentors, which refers to mentors close in age with their mentees, were more than twice as effective as intergenerational mentors for youth involved in the foster care system.

Poon et al. 2021 also asserts that mentors who are close in age or have shared life experiences can help encourage positive outcomes and support the young person's transition out of the system into independent living.

Research indicates that peer mentors are more likely to experience increased motivation and satisfaction in their mentoring role, increased social support from other peer mentors, increased feelings of community engagement, improved social skills, and are more likely to engage in academic activities.

Recommendations:

1. The WA Commissioner for Children and Young People to develop their own Youth Council that prioritises the voices and experiences of young people with lived experience of youth justice and child protection.
2. Ensure policies and practices prioritise young people being involved in their own care experiences and providing training to ensure this happens.
3. To expand KFA's out of home care mentoring program to be delivered in WA and funding KFA to do so.
4. To investigate the appropriateness of a peer mentoring model in WA.



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Kids First Australia acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of the land and recognises their continuing connection to land, waters and culture. We pay our respects to Elders past and present and recognise that sovereignty has never been ceded. Always was, always will be, Aboriginal land.



We celebrate and value diversity. Kids First Australia is proud to provide support to the community in the most inclusive manner.