

# Submission to the Ombudsman investigation into Expulsions at Victorian Government Schools

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*“I literally had more than 200 days off last year. Throughout that whole time, they didn’t even call my parents and tell them I wasn’t going to school. I didn’t get called into meetings – nothing. That’s what annoyed me the most. They didn’t even try. And then when I tried to tell them that I’d try my hardest, no, they didn’t want to hear that. They just wanted me gone.”*

*(Melbourne Academy student, 2016)*

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## Introduction

### About Melbourne City Mission

Melbourne City Mission is one of Victoria's oldest and largest community services organisations, with a broad service platform encompassing early years, education and employment, homelessness and justice services, early childhood intervention and disability services, and palliative care services. Our vision is to create a fair and just community where people have equal access to opportunities and resources.

A strategic focus for Melbourne City Mission is education and vocational training<sup>1</sup> - research consistently shows that education is a key enabler for social and economic mobility.

### About Melbourne City Mission's education programs

Melbourne City Mission's flagship education program, The Melbourne Academy<sup>2</sup>, was established to provide supportive, flexible education to young people who are disengaged from education and to reconnect them with schooling<sup>3</sup>.

It currently comprises eight classrooms at five different locations in metropolitan Melbourne (please refer to Appendix (i) for further details about the student cohort and education provision at each site). In 2016, the Melbourne Academy had 209 students enrolled, making Melbourne City Mission one of Victoria's leading providers of Community VCAL.

The Melbourne Academy curriculum enables young people to work towards the attainment of an accredited qualification, namely:

- the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL) – Melbourne Academy educators deliver foundation, intermediate and senior VCAL
- VET certificates – as a Registered Training Organisation (RTO) we are also able to directly provide the following Certificate II courses to our VCAL students as a component of their VCAL qualification:
  - Cert II in Community Services (delivered in Sunshine)
  - Cert II in Creative Industries (delivered at Frontyard Youth Services in Melbourne CBD)
  - Cert II in Music (delivered in North Fitzroy and auspiced by Collarts RTO)
  - Cert II in Printing and Graphic Arts (delivered in South Melbourne).

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<sup>1</sup> Melbourne City Mission is a Registered Training Organisation. We are also an accredited Non-School Senior Secondary Provider in Victoria, delivering the recognised alternative Year 12 qualification, the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL).

<sup>2</sup> The VRQA has recently approved Melbourne City Mission's application to establish the Melbourne Academy as an independent school. From 2017, the Melbourne Academy will be known as The Hester Hornbrook Academy.

<sup>3</sup> More detailed information about the student cohort sample is provided under 'Methodology'.

Additionally, Melbourne Academy students can undertake Certificate II courses provided by other TAFEs or RTOs (for example, some students have previously undertaken a Certificate II in Automotive or Animal Studies).

Melbourne City Mission seeks to place students with third-party RTOs that are able to offer strong student support, and we establish strong lines of communication to ensure our students are attending and completing what is required to keep them on track.

When students finish their last year at the Academy, they exit at a Certificate II level of education, which enables them to move on to other education pathways.

**The Melbourne Academy is part of a broader education provision and education support platform at Melbourne City Mission. This broader education platform also includes:**

- **School-based early intervention** – for example, mentoring and tutoring programs for school students with risk factors for disengagement (such as students at schools with high identified rates of truancy or early school leaving). Melbourne City Mission’s work in this space includes delivery of the ***School Focused Youth Service*** in the western metropolitan region.
- **Community-based re-engagement programs that provide pathways back to mainstream school or on to flexible learning settings** – for example, the State-funded ***Springboard*** program (which provides education case management to young people who are transitioning from the Out-of-Home-Care system). A Melbourne City Mission innovation in this space is a program we have developed called ***Connect Youth***. Connect Youth sits under the broad Melbourne Academy umbrella as an outreach education program targeted to young people aged between 15 and 20, who are severely disengaged from education and who have predominantly come from care or have been linked into out-of-home care. The Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) refers young people to the program and has 10 spots allocated to them per calendar year. The remaining vacancies in the program are filled by non-DHHS referrals. Connect Youth is currently in its second year of operation and has become a sustainable program model. Connect Youth provides outreach education, it is a client-seeking, assertive outreach education model. Workers are in the community actively identifying and fostering relationships and referral pathways with young people who are disengaged from education and, in some cases, community support. In the first two years of the program, Connect Youth has supported approximately 75 young people who would have otherwise fallen through the cracks of a variety of different support services (e.g. education, mental health, family breakdown).
- **Online enhanced engagement and delivery.** Our VCAL online program (not a pure online program, but a program that facilitates outreach education) offers a flexible and individualised model of learning for students who are moving into, or through, a VCAL certificate and are not always able to access a classroom. Online enhanced delivery is an effective re-engagement strategy for students with mental health challenges, such as anxiety. It is used to facilitate early engagement in learning and allows a student to develop their confidence before moving into an Academy classroom or into another education setting. Blended learning is an important feature of this program and lessons can be delivered in a number of ways, including via Moodle’s ‘Virtual lesson’ tool, small face-to-face workshops and excursions. Online enhanced learning also benefits students who are combining study commitments with work or caring responsibilities.

## Broader system context to this submission

The Victorian Department of Education (DET) reported<sup>4</sup> that in 2015:

- 2,160 students were suspended and 26 expelled from primary schools
- 11,282 students were suspended and 172 expelled from high/secondary schools.

In the past year, there has been a 25 per cent increase in the number of students being expelled, according to DET figures cited by the Ombudsman<sup>5</sup>. Complaints to the Ombudsman indicate that families experience difficulty:

- When attempting to appeal expulsions and
- In finding alternative education placement for a child when they are expelled.

Although Melbourne Academy students have a lot to say about the issues they have experienced at school, Melbourne City Mission also wishes to formally acknowledge that these student experiences are set against a backdrop of growing system pressures on schools and teachers, which contribute to the growing number of students disengaging from traditional education settings.

These pressures – which have been documented by the Youth Affairs Council of Victoria<sup>6</sup> (YACVic) – include:

- **Loss of DET/school capacity** – YACVic reports that prior to 2015, DET experienced significant loss of staffing and capacity. This has had flow-on effects for stakeholder communication and engagement. Consequently, there has been a perception – particularly in the youth and flexible learning sectors – that DET has often appeared disengaged from the issue of school exclusion, especially ‘soft’ expulsions (i.e. where a student has not been formally expelled).
- **Rising demands and increased education support needs** – while new investments in equity funding have been welcome, YACVic reports that this funding has not reached all the students who need it (e.g. there are gaps in targeted resourcing to support students affected by trauma, mental illness and learning difficulties who do not meet the criteria for Program for Students with Disabilities, and students who are asylum seekers). This puts additional pressure on teachers to respond without additional classroom resources.
- **Exclusion of primary school students** – the exclusion of students from primary schools appears to be a rising concern<sup>7</sup> and is believed to be indicative of severe wellbeing problems or inadequate support for students with disabilities.

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<sup>4</sup> The Conversation, ‘Are we expelling too many children from Australian schools?’

<https://theconversation.com/are-we-expelling-too-many-children-from-australian-schools-65162>

<sup>5</sup> Victorian Ombudsman, ‘Ombudsman investigates expulsions at Victorian Government schools’

<https://www.ombudsman.vic.gov.au/News/Media-Releases/Media-Alerts/Ombudsman-investigates-expulsions-at-schools>

<sup>6</sup> Cited from the Youth Affairs Council of Victoria’s (YACVic) 2016 report, ‘Out of sight, out of mind? Exclusion and inclusion of students in Victorian Schools’

<sup>7</sup> The Victorian Department of Education suspension and expulsion rates for 2015 report that in primary schools, 2,160 students were suspended and 26 expelled

<https://theconversation.com/are-we-expelling-too-many-children-from-australian-schools-65162>

- **Academic pressures and competition** – YACVic notes a growing culture of competitive academic schooling (e.g. NAPLAN results) has provided less incentive for schools to support the engagement of students who appear to be at risk of achieving lower-than-average academic results.
- **Official guidelines versus realities on-the-ground** – YACVic’s consultation with stakeholders identified strong concerns that education safeguards for the most vulnerable student cohorts are not always implemented correctly, or at all. Stakeholders particularly raised concerns about students in out-of-home care, Aboriginal students, and students with a disability.
- **Internal school cultures** – internal culture of a school differs from school to school. Some schools place strong emphasis on positive relationship building, engaging vulnerable families, linking into flexible learning options and/or taking a restorative justice approach, whilst other schools show relatively little interest in such approaches. This can also be exacerbated in schools where the wellbeing staff are not adequately resourced or qualified to address students’ needs.

Melbourne City Mission shares the concerns documented by YACVic.

At the same time, Melbourne City Mission acknowledges the State Government’s *Education State* investments, which include new initiatives such as Navigator and LOOKOUT. These initiatives are in their early pilot phases and Melbourne City Mission looks forward to seeing how these programs address student need and what impact they have on rates of student disengagement, suspension and expulsion. If these programs prove to be successful, we anticipate a significant scaling from the Department of Education and Training (DET) of both these initiatives.

In the interim, Melbourne City Mission notes concerns by VCOSS, YACVic and other peak bodies that the Navigator pilots are limited to eight of the 17 regional areas, leaving significant unmet demand in this transition period, and uncertainty beyond the two-year pilot.<sup>8</sup>

## About this submission

This submission is informed by Melbourne City Mission’s perspectives as a flexible learning and education support provider working with students who have multiple and complex disadvantage and concurrent high support needs, many of whom have experienced school exclusion. The case studies and insights presented in this submission come directly from the students who attend our Academy classrooms and the educators and wellbeing staff who work alongside them.

This submission aims to capture on-the-ground realities, from a student and teacher perspective, of what gets in the way of education and students’ ability to learn within the classroom and wider school context. The way students described their experiences to us was heart-felt and authentic. However, we acknowledge that Principals, teachers, education support staff and/or peers may have a different perspective on the stories students have shared in this submission.

We wish to thank and formally acknowledge the time Melbourne City Mission’s Academy team dedicated to this project and to the students who so openly and bravely shared their stories and insights with us.

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<sup>8</sup> Victorian Council of Social Service (VCOSS) (2016), *Creating engaging schools for all children and young people: What works* [http://vcoss.org.au/documents/2016/12/REP\\_161213\\_Engaging-schools-report\\_Final.pdf](http://vcoss.org.au/documents/2016/12/REP_161213_Engaging-schools-report_Final.pdf)

We also wish to thank and acknowledge Michael Lim, from Melbourne City Mission's broader Early Years, Education and Employment team, for assistance with student interviews and transcription.

## Methodology

At the heart of our submission lies the lived experience and practice wisdom of Melbourne City Mission's students and staff.

A total of 35 students participated in the process – around 17 per cent of the 2016 student body. Additionally, five staff (educators and youth workers) provided feedback. While this is a strong representative sample, Melbourne City Mission notes that the Ombudsman's inquiry was established in the latter part of the school year, when many of our students and staff were focused on completion of final assessments and preparing for graduation. Had this consultation been conducted earlier in the school year, we anticipate almost universal participation from our student body.

Student and staff perspectives were obtained via two methods:

- An online survey was developed for students to be able to share their information anonymously. A total of 35 students from across our classrooms (roughly 17 per cent) took part in the online survey
- Long-form interviews were conducted with students, teachers and wellbeing staff from the Academy classrooms. A total of 16 interviews were conducted.

Early in the process it was identified that many of the young people surveyed or interviewed had never heard of terminology such as 'suspension' or 'expulsion' or were confused as to whether they ever had been suspended or expelled from a school. This was because:

- Their suspension or expulsion had been communicated to their parent and/or guardian and not directly to them, or
- They were informally 'asked to leave' rather than formally suspended or expelled.

We also noted a phenomenon of student drift amongst our student body – students reported receiving no regular communication or formal contact from schools during periods of disengagement and schools making it difficult to return. For example, one student told us:

*"I literally had more than 200 days off last year. Throughout that whole time, they didn't even call my parents and tell them I wasn't going to school. I didn't get called into meetings – nothing. That's what annoyed me the most. They didn't even try. And then when I tried to tell them that I'd try my hardest, no, they didn't want to hear that. They just wanted me gone."*

This issue is unpacked in more detail later in this submission.

Although many of the students who were interviewed were comfortable with their names and the names of their schools published in this submission, Melbourne City Mission has chosen to alter the case study names and keep the names of listed schools anonymous based on the advice of our education and wellbeing staff.



**Table 1: Demographic information of surveyed students (through the online survey tool)**

| Total # Young people | Age   | Gender                             | Sexual Identity   | Location                         | Cultural background description                                | Experience of Homelessness  | Out of Home Care                  | Disability                           |
|----------------------|---|------------------------------------|---|----------------------------------|--|---|-----------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| <b>35</b>            | 16 years: 7<br>17 years: 12<br>18: years: 6<br>19 years: 5<br>20 years: 2<br>21 years: 1<br>22 years: 2 | Female: 21<br>Male: 13<br>Other: 1 | Lesbian: 1<br>Gay: 0<br>Bisexual: 4<br>Pansexual: 1<br>Queer: 0<br>Straight: 27<br>Other: 0<br>Prefer Not to Say: 2 | Rural / Regional: 4<br>Metro: 31 | Australian born: 33<br>Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander: 2 | Currently: 0<br>Past: 12<br>No: 12<br>Other [chose not to disclose]: 11 | Currently: 4<br>Past: 6<br>No: 16 | Yes: 3<br>No: 23<br>Didn't answer: 9 |

### Suburbs

Aberfeldie, Ardeer, Ballarat, Broadmeadows, Caroline Springs, Deer Park, East Brunswick, Elwood, Glenroy, Glen Waverley, Hampton, Hoppers Crossing, Keilor East, Kings Park, Lara, Melbourne CBD, Melton, Preston, South Melbourne, Springvale, Sunbury, Sunshine, Tarniet, Thornbury, West Footscray.

## Summary of Recommendations

- **Recommendation 1:**  
Stronger models of collaboration between schools, flexible learning organisations and community organisations
- **Recommendation 2:**  
Implementation of effective policies and procedures
- **Recommendation 3:**  
Greater accountability for post-expulsion pathways
- **Recommendation 4:**  
A more holistic education model
- **Recommendation 5:**  
A more transparent approach to exclusion/transitions
- **Recommendation 6:**  
Introduction and implementation of accessible, annual public reporting of Early School Leaving data

**Each of these recommendations is detailed in full on page 30 of this report.**

## **Melbourne City Mission's response to: Whether the Department is complying with the Ministerial Order and policies regarding Government school expulsions**

School expulsions are made according to *Ministerial Order 625 – the Procedures for Suspension and Expulsion*, an Order which has been in effect since March 2014. Through consultations with Melbourne Academy students and staff, Melbourne City Mission identified the following issues:

### **Failure to provide natural justice**

Ministerial Order 625<sup>9</sup> covers off on the following requirements:

- Ensuring relevant parties are notified that an expulsion is being considered
- Ensuring a conference is conducted with the affected student
- Ensuring the student is provided with other educational and development opportunities
- Providing a fair and effective appeals process.

However, our online survey of Melbourne Academy students found:

- 33.3 per cent of students **surveyed did not have a school inform their parent and/or guardian about being expelled or suspended**
- 51.4 per cent of students **were not offered an opportunity to speak formally with a school representative**
- 57.1 per cent of students were **not given other options for schooling**
- 57.1 per cent of students **did not have 'alternative education' spoken about with them**
- 88 per cent of students were **not told about being able to appeal their expulsion.**

### **Failure to take into account student circumstances**

Parts 3 and 4 of the Ministerial Order ('Suspension' and 'Expulsion') specify that a student's 'behaviour, education needs, disability, age and residential and social circumstances of the student' must be taken into account when a Principal is determining whether to suspend or expel a student". However, our students told us that this was not their experience.

Student feedback included:

- "I got suspended too many times at primary school. There was a lot going on at home and the schools weren't supportive."

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<sup>9</sup> Ministerial Order 625 – *Procedures for Suspension and Expulsion*  
<http://www.education.vic.gov.au/Documents/school/principals/participation/minorder625.PDF>

- “I was told to leave and that I couldn’t finish year 11 and 12 because of my disability and my mental health as well. I was kicked out and sent to different schools and they couldn’t handle me.”
- “I was put in resi care and my school told me to think about other options. They didn’t help me with what those options were. This was in Year 9. After that, I didn’t really go back to school. I hated school.”
- “Once I couldn’t do the SACS, I was sent to [program name] to do Year 10, because the school said I couldn’t complete the SACS. I didn’t have anywhere to live at this point, so I couldn’t really study. I wasn’t offered any support. They told me that there was nothing more they could do. I felt set up to fail. I was 14 years old. Even though I had a relatively high IQ, I still didn’t know what to do in that situation.”
- “I did get to complete year 11 and then when I wanted to complete year 12 they kicked me out because of my attendance. I couldn’t go every single day because I had a baby. They asked my mum to come in and sat us down in the office and just told us that I needed to put my six-week-old baby into childcare so I could come to school five days a week as well as doing work experience. I told them I couldn’t do that because I had a six-week-old baby and my mum couldn’t look after him either.”
- “I went to [school name], which was my first VCAL School and that’s coz [school name] didn’t want me and they told me this other school was another option. They said that if I don’t go to [school name] I’ll go to [program name] instead, which is a project. But kids that have special needs go into [program name]. I was really mad at that because I don’t [have special needs]. Not that it is bad to have special needs, but that’s not what I’ve got.”
- “I was suspended from [school name] two or three times because I skipped school. I skipped school due to the fact that my anxiety of being inside a classroom got too high.”

### **Lack of accountability for post-expulsion pathways**

Point 12 of the Order under ‘Procedures Following Expulsion specifies that:

- (1) ‘The Principal of the expelling school, in collaboration with the DEECD regional office, must ensure that the student is provided with other educational and developmental opportunities as soon as practicable after the expulsion’
- (2) ‘In the case of a student of compulsory school age, the Principal and the DEECD regional office must ensure that the student is participating in one or more of the following options as soon as practicable –
  - (a) enrolled at another registered school;
  - (b) enrolled at a registered training organisation;
  - (c) engaged in employment.’

However, our students reported a litany of instances where ‘other educational and development opportunities’ were not explored or followed up, resulting in a breakdown of education pathways once they’d exited the school system.

- “I really wanted to get back into education and now I am, but, for like three years I didn’t do anything. I was just bored. I just wanted something to do and not be in that situation again.”
- “I was rogue for a long time. After my education went, that was it. I felt nothing was left because I had already lost my home and lost everything else.”
- “I was never formally suspended or expelled, I was kicked out and asked to leave. They just told me that the school was too big for me. They gave me a couple of alternative schools, like, behaviour schools, but they didn’t really care once I left.”
- “The Principal [at school name] didn’t give me options. The Principal talked to me, walked me to his office and just gave me a bit of a lecture. He told me that I wasn’t allowed to act like how I was at school. He said that I wasn’t getting enough support and that I am more of a one-on-one student.”

Our students’ experience in mainstream schools points to failure by schools to adhere to the processes set out in the Ministerial Order. Policies regarding government school expulsions have, for the most part, not been fully adhered to in our students’ previous education settings.

This has resulted in students being labelled ‘at-risk’ and ‘marginalised’ and being stripped of their educational rights, and left to navigate the system without appropriate advocacy or support.

## Melbourne City Mission's response to: Whether vulnerable or at-risk students are over-represented in expulsion numbers

Melbourne City Mission delivers education to some of the State's 'highest needs' learners, including young people who are experiencing complex trauma, anxiety and/or depression, young women who are pregnant or parenting, young people experiencing (or at risk of) homelessness, and young people who have grown up in families characterised by inter-generational early school leaving and long-term unemployment. We have never expelled a student. We have never asked a student to leave. We always find a way to support our students – we believe that, with the right supports, all students can be engaged, educated safely and 'make it'.

Most students have a two to three year gap in their education attendance history when they first present to the Academy. Specialist youth workers are located in the classroom, working alongside teachers, to support students to overcome barriers to engagement and learning. Appendix (i) provides a snapshot of the student cohort at each Melbourne Academy site.

Our consultations with young people for this submission found our student body's education history was overwhelming characterised by formal suspensions and expulsions, informal or 'soft' expulsions (i.e. being told not to return, encouraged to look elsewhere or asked to leave) and other forms of disengagement not related to formal or informal expulsion (such as neglect/student drift).

### Online survey data

Of the student body who completed our online survey:

- 37.1 per cent had **left a primary school before they formally finished** (ranging from one to nine different schools)
- 91.4 per cent had **left a high school before they formally finished** (ranging from one to nine different schools)
- 25.7 per cent had been formally **expelled** from either a primary and/or high school
- 76.9 per cent had been formally **suspended** from either a primary and/or high school
- 46.2 per cent had been **informally asked to leave** either a primary and/or high school.

### The stories behind the statistics – what students told us

As stated earlier in this submission, the Ministerial Order requires that "a student's 'behaviour, education needs, disability, age and residential and social circumstances of the student must be taken into account when a Principal is determining whether to suspend or expel a student". However, our students, overwhelming, reported that this was not their experience.

Key themes emerged in relation to types of personal/individual-level circumstances and system/structural-level circumstances.

## Bullying / Discrimination / Intimidation

In 2015, in a report for the Office for Youth, Melbourne City Mission identified bullying and discrimination as significant concerns for cohorts of ‘marginalised’ young people, including early school leavers. The Australian Covert Bullying Prevalence Study also reported more than 23 per cent of Years 4 – 9 Victorian students said they’d been bullied.<sup>10</sup>

For this submission into school expulsions, Melbourne Academy students told us:

- “I was bullied all the way through from Year 7 to Year 9 and pretty much all through the rest of high school, then I put the bullying onto someone else, like, I’d just be getting into fights just so I could get recognised by teachers or even to speak to a teacher or something. Then, I just kept getting suspended. I ended up getting up to 15 days’ suspension, just a lot, then they just told me that they couldn’t keep me at the school anymore and they expelled me. I tried to go to other public schools in my area like [school name] but they wouldn’t accept me because of my prior history at [school name] – I was always getting suspended for fights, mucking up, just stupid stuff that I could’ve avoided.”
- “It’s really unfair how they [schools] treat us kids. If one kid has one thing happen, they just don’t care. They just put you in a separate room and tell you that you can’t go chill with the other kids in your age group. It made me feel like I never wanted to go to school again.”
- “I went to [school name] and there was a lot of violent situations and a girl threatened me. I reacted to the violence and I was told I could not be there anymore.”
- “The Principal and I had a big screaming match in the front office and I said some really harsh stuff and she said some harsh stuff too. She never liked me and always got me in trouble.”
- “[The teacher] never listened. She would take the thing I did wrong and turn it a million times worse – hand in a report to the Principal. The Deputy Principal knew I was a firecracker ready to go off at any second. Just imagine, waking up every morning, you gotta go to school from 8:30am to 3:00pm – with this [expletive] hanging over your head for about 7 hours. Just imagine that. For about 300 days of the year. You want to cut your fingers off, that’s the thing. I didn’t resort to self-harm, because I thought to myself, “I’m better than her.”

## Falling through the gaps – lack of system rigour/accountability

For this submission into school expulsions, Melbourne Academy students told us:

- “The school told my mum that I wasn’t allowed to come back, my mum thought that was a bit of a rip [harsh] and then unfortunately she passed away from cancer, which is unfortunate because she had all my education records and I don’t know where they are.”

<sup>10</sup> Child Health Promotion Centre (2009), ‘Australian Covert Bullying Prevalence Study’

[https://docs.education.gov.au/system/files/doc/other/australian\\_covert\\_bullying\\_prevalence\\_study\\_executive\\_summary.pdf](https://docs.education.gov.au/system/files/doc/other/australian_covert_bullying_prevalence_study_executive_summary.pdf)

- “I wanted to be in the senior class not intermediate. I’ve already done Year 9 and 10 but I was forced to do it again because it wasn’t on the system. I just thought to myself, ‘of course it’s not! That’s [school name] for you.’ They [the school] are gonna say that I was difficult, but that’s not right. I did what they wanted me to and I did pretty well.”
- “I never was expelled from high school, I was told that they [my school] didn’t want an 18 year old to repeat Year 10 again. They told me that I had to leave and find a job. They offered me no support, it was fucked. One of the teachers at this same school actually told me it was their job to yell at me. Because of this teacher, I had no maths class – I just floated around the school during this period every day. There was a school counsellor, but I was never recommended to speak with them.”
- “The school didn’t really sit down and discuss any options with myself and my mum. They just said that I was going to be transferred to [TAFE name] after finishing Year 10.”
- “The TAFE just said come back next term or next year and re-enrol. There was no language around expulsion – everything just went through my parents. All I was told was that maybe you can come back next term and re-enrol, then we will see how you are. And then when I went to go enrol, I was denied that access to my education.”
- “After I was told to leave [TAFE name], I thought [school name] would stay in touch and tell me to come back and do school but nobody said anything. It went quiet and I just went rogue.”

## Family Difficulties

**According to the Department of Human Services, there were 35,720 recorded family violence incidents in Victoria during 2009 – 10<sup>11</sup>.**

For this submission into school expulsions, Melbourne Academy students told us:

- “I was suspended and expelled many times throughout primary school. I was very violent when I was young because I experienced this behaviour at home. I saw a psychologist for a little while when I was eight, but that was about it.”
- “I didn’t look after myself. Between the ages of 14 to 18 it was really hard. I had to leave home because of my family situation. Not only was I put in hospital for being suicidal because of so much that was going on with my education, I also lost my mum to cancer. I also had my little sister to look after. I had to essentially be a parent at a very young age. I’m not a mum, but I’m an older sister and looking after a younger sibling is like being a parent. This was on top of me not being able to complete my education and being discriminated against and being told that I’m not good enough or smart enough or that my mentality wasn’t there.”

<sup>11</sup> Victorian Government Department of Human Services (2013), ‘Assessing children and young people – experiencing family violence: A practical guide for family violence practitioners.’  
[http://www.dhs.vic.gov.au/data/assets/pdf\\_file/0006/761379/Assessing\\_children\\_and\\_young\\_people\\_family\\_violence\\_0413.pdf](http://www.dhs.vic.gov.au/data/assets/pdf_file/0006/761379/Assessing_children_and_young_people_family_violence_0413.pdf)



## Homelessness

**According to the Council of Homeless Persons<sup>12</sup>, there are 6,117 young Victorians aged 12 – 24 who are experiencing homelessness on any given night.**

For this submission into school expulsions, Melbourne Academy students told us:

- “I didn’t have anywhere to live ... so I couldn’t really study. I wasn’t offered any support. They told me that there was nothing more they could do. I felt set up to fail.”
- “I experienced homelessness at the age of 14. I was sleeping rough at that point. Mum got really sick when I was 14 and she passed away when I was 18. I had to watch her throw up blood and watch her get sick and stop eating. Mum and Dad were divorcing and breaking up so it was kind of like, ‘swap, swap, swap’ [schools]”.
- “Moving to other people’s houses where you don’t want to be living was hard. I was trying to live, eat, and breathe at the same time and I just couldn’t cope. I was always pissed off about something because of what was going on. This was over a period of around two years.”

## Learning Disabilities

**Around nine per cent of Victoria’s young population have a disability, with learning disabilities being one of the most common disabilities young people say they have<sup>13</sup>.**

For this submission into school expulsions, Melbourne Academy students told us:

- “I was treated a lot differently to a lot of other students. Instead of sitting in a classroom, they put me in a warehouse at the back of the school, where they had a special learning class for kids with disabilities, which I didn’t really think I needed. Just because I wasn’t good at Math that well.”
- “When I learnt about my learning difficulty, I was smiling a lot more and I realised – oh – that solves a lot of questions! My rage is down to dust now. I let go of that anger a while ago now. When I got to [school name], I realised I was out of her class and I felt like, I could lick a tree right now! Holy shit! I felt like something had come off me. [My former teacher] deliberately said one time to me when I was held back for lunch, ‘You have been the worst student I have ever had in all my years of teaching.’”
- “I ended up getting tested for dyslexia, but I was one point off being officially dyslexic so I couldn’t get a worker and all that stuff. So, because of that I couldn’t get the help I needed. It was just a whole big mess in high school.”
- “When I was told to leave and that I couldn’t finish Year 11 and 12 because of my disability and my mental health as well, I was kicked out and sent to different schools and they couldn’t handle me.”

<sup>12</sup> Council to Homeless Persons (CHP), ‘Youth Homelessness in Victoria: Key statistics’  
<http://chp.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/130822-Youth-homelessness-in-Victoria.pdf>

<sup>13</sup> Youth Affairs Council of Victoria (YACVic), Yerp, ‘Young people’s part in Victoria’  
<http://yerp.yacvic.org.au/why-it-matters/for-young-people/young-peoples-part-in-victoria>

- “At all my schools, I thought my disability was a bit over-exaggerated. I felt that they were all really picking on me ... I had my mum at home tutoring me ... because I got that frightened with anxiety and depression that I was given up by those schools. That was hard for me. Not only did that scar me, but it also wrecked my life in general. I’m now 22 and I’m still at an intermediate stage [with VCAL studies]. I wish I could be like all my friends who are finishing university and getting married and having kids. I feel like I’m sitting in a child’s classroom or a prep classroom. I feel a bit silly.”

Additionally, a Melbourne Academy **staff** member reflected:

- “I spent about three or four years working with an organisation that worked with children and adults with learning difficulties associated with dyslexia, dyspraxia, ADHD and Aspergers. I remember this one kid I was working with who was going from primary school to secondary, and in his words, said he was going to “the cabbage class”.

## Mental Health

**According to The Department of Health and Ageing, mental ill health is the number one health issue facing young Australians. Mental disorders are more prevalent for young people aged 16 – 24 than any other age group, and affect 26 per cent of young Australians in any year<sup>14</sup>.**

For this submission into school expulsions, Melbourne Academy students told us:

- “At [school name] I did a little bit of counselling. At TAFE, I did do a couple of sessions with someone and then they just stopped once they figured out that things were getting too bad. It was like they couldn’t handle it, but I was asking ‘Why do you have counselling at school to help people if you’re not allowed to use it or they are just going to use it to expel you from the school?’.”
- “I was suspended from [school name] two or three times because I skipped school. I skipped school due to the fact that my anxiety of being inside a classroom got too high.”
- “Before I came to Melbourne City Mission, my anxiety and depression was . . . I honestly couldn’t see a bright side to my anxiety. I couldn’t come in here and speak to you like what I’m doing now. I couldn’t approach someone randomly. James and Stella [classroom educator and youth worker] have really just opened up my mind and, just like, I’m more confident with things now. Like, I’m more confident coming out and putting up my hand or giving it a go or saying something I might not know anything about but I’ll project my idea anyway. Just, the environment is awesome. It can’t compare to ‘normal’ school.”
- “I’ve got really bad anxiety now. Really bad. I never used to. Like, I got bullied this whole year at my old school. Usually I can deal with shit like that but this time, I couldn’t. And I was bullied for things that normally wouldn’t get at me, but this time it did. I wouldn’t be able to get out of bed, my mum couldn’t even get me out of bed, so she said that I had to find another school because I couldn’t keep going how I was.”

<sup>14</sup> The Department of Health and Ageing (2009), *The mental health of Australians 2: report on the 2007 national survey of mental health and wellbeing*

<http://www.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/content/mental-pubs-m-mhaust2>

## Moving States / Suburbs / Houses – being uprooted – development disruption

The Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority estimates that between four to five percent of students changed schools in 2015, with 40,000 Victorian students moving in and out of Government, Catholic and independent schools<sup>15</sup>.

For this submission into school expulsions, Melbourne Academy students told us:

- “First, I went to primary school at [school name] and then I moved to [school name]. When I was at [school name], everything changed. The teacher wasn’t really paying that much attention to me so I was just mucking up and stuff like that, I wasn’t really caring about school. From Grade 2, the teacher just never really cared. I don’t know if it was just that the teacher didn’t like me as a person or something like that, they just didn’t really care.”
- “I came to Victoria and I was expected to know my times table and I was getting thrown all this work that I couldn’t do. In Adelaide, we didn’t learn our times table ‘til we were much older. But then I came to Victoria and they said ‘You don’t know this, you’re going to stay behind’. I didn’t want to do that. As much as you say that in my old school we didn’t do this and it isn’t my fault, they [teachers] don’t really care. They just say ‘It’s not our fault that you moved’ and I would think ‘It’s not **my** fault either’.”

## No room for individuality or expression

For this submission into school expulsions, Melbourne Academy students told us:

- “A lot of schools expect this and expect that. I understand that there needs to be rules and expectations surrounding swearing, violence and no phones. I get these rules, because in high school they want you to be more mature. But it gets to a time where it’s like you’re not going to be mature because you’re being thrown around and being treated really badly. So why should I come to a new school, when in 10 months you’re going to throw me out, and you want me to be respectful now?”
- “They sold these jackets at the school shop and we bought them, but now we’re not allowed to wear them – but when they came out, we had to buy them. They would make us wear our blazers in 40 degree heat. We had to wear white long socks in summer and black long socks in winter, and if you wore white in winter, you’d get a half hour detention. This wasn’t even a private school. Boys had to wear ties. We would get detentions if we didn’t have our calculator or diary.”

<sup>15</sup> The Age (2016), *The student exodus. Why are so many families moving schools?*

<http://www.theage.com.au/victoria/the-student-exodus-why-are-so-many-families-moving-schools-20160916-grhw82.html>

## Out-of-Home-Care Challenges

The most recent statistics from the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) show that, as of 30 June 2015, there were 8,567 Victorian children aged 0 – 17 years living in out-of-home care<sup>16</sup>.

For this submission into school expulsions, Melbourne Academy students told us:

- “I was ... put in resi care and my school told me to think about other options. They didn’t help me with what those options were. This was in Year 9. After that, I didn’t really go back to school. I hated school.”
- “I have a little sister who is going to a Catholic Orthodox school at the moment and she’s going through a lot of social issues. I have to go to a lot of DHS meetings for her, and it turns out she’s the only foster child at her school. She has a lot of problems socially and I think they put a lot of pressure on her because of that.”
- “I had to attend my own court cases from the age of 10. When you’re in DHS, you have to be under a specific court order. I was a ward of the state, so they have to review this at least once a year. So, I had to do a psychiatric evaluation this one year and my school got a copy of my IQ report. My Principal called me to the office and told me they had gotten a copy of my IQ test. I don’t know how they got that. They wanted to put me in Year 11 from Year 9. So, they put me in Year 11 and I was doing perfectly fine, but then my foster mum passed away roughly one month before my final SACS and things went downhill from there.”
- “I wish I’d had someone who was able to advocate for me instead of me struggling to find the words. I had a few workers, but they weren’t education workers so didn’t know how to help.”<sup>17</sup>

Additionally, Melbourne Academy **staff** reflected:

- “A lot of these kids don’t have mums or dads, they have workers as they come from the out-of-home care system. They don’t get a cut lunch, they don’t get dropped off to school – they don’t have the typical school experience that other kids do. I would say around 80 per cent of the young people we work with experience, or have experienced, anxiety. This is why we keep class numbers so small, because they get so overwhelmed with numbers and people. Like, they often are thinking about whether they are accepted or a person likes them, and this is something we deal with all the time and often something that young people are thinking about before any sort of learning can take place.”
- “The lack of transition planning for when a young person turns 18 in out-of-home care is really distressing for young people.”

<sup>16</sup> Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS), ‘*Children in care*’  
<https://aifs.gov.au/cfca/publications/children-care>

<sup>17</sup> Melbourne City Mission acknowledges that under the State Government’s new LOOKOUT model, there are LOOKOUT Principals who are employed to play the role of “pushy parent” and advocate for students who are in out-of-home care.

Melbourne City Mission acknowledges that under the State Government's new LOOKOUT model, there are LOOKOUT Principals who are employed to play the role of "pushy parent" and advocate for students who are in out-of-home care. Melbourne City Mission also acknowledges the State Government's Roadmap for Reform agenda which seeks to strengthen families, reduce the number of children and young people in residential care, promote kinship care, and attain stability and permanency for children and young people for whom family reunification cannot be achieved in a timely manner.

## Power Dynamics

For this submission into school expulsions, Melbourne Academy students told us:

- "Teachers think they are better than us."
- "Teachers acting too prim and proper. We don't feel comfortable to talk to you."
- "Act like a human. Still be a teacher, of course, but act like a human being."
- "Teachers never listened, at all. You'll say one thing but they don't give a shit. The teachers were very rude and they didn't care about the students. When my mum went to speak with them, they didn't even want to hear what she had to say, and that was a parent."

Additionally, a Melbourne Academy **staff** member reflected:

- "Most of our kids have been expelled or asked to leave and I don't believe their behaviour has been as extreme as what's written on paper when they are referred to us. If you show someone respect and that you're there for them, and ensure they know that there's no abuse of power in the environment they're in, they don't react badly to that. I used to be really hierarchical in my style and kids don't respond well to that. When they are reacting, they are not reacting at you – it's about the systems that have let them down. We need to provide safe spaces for young people which remind them that they're wanted, respected, and valued in the world."

## Shame and Emotional Impact

For this submission into school expulsions, Melbourne Academy students told us:

- "All the schools I've been to have made me feel shitty about myself as a person. When they say, 'we don't want you here', they could at least say something nice and give me more options. It made me feel guilty for being myself."
- "I did want help. I never got the attention I really needed because there was always so many kids in the class and I was always feeling obligated to ask for help. There were so many kids in the class and only one teacher. Depending on how long the class was, I was always missing out on getting help. If no-one else was asking for help, I didn't want to be the only person to keep asking for help. I just felt embarrassed."

“I didn’t want to be the kid that had to ask for something and need help with the work, when I was really the only one who didn’t understand it. It was just embarrassing. So, it would always just be me not doing anything – not being productive in class and I turned unproductive outside of class too, hanging with the wrong crowd and just got into the wrong experience. I also started to wag [skip] school because no-one was really paying attention. It was just a bad time.”

- “That’s something my schools never gave me. They never gave me the chance to graduate. I’m shocked and I’m heartbroken about the fact that I never got to graduate from Year 11 and 12 and that I was never able to go to uni like all my other friends are doing right now. I can’t explain it. It has made me so angry to the point that when I was told to leave from [school name] or [TAFE name], I wanted to get back at them. I could of, but I didn’t. I choose to be the better person.”
- “You take a child’s, or a kid’s, or a young adult’s education away and you’re going to scar them for life. And that’s what they’ve done to me. They’ve scarred me for life, but it doesn’t matter if I’m scarred today, nothing is going to break me down because I’m just going to keep going.”
- “It felt really gutting, because I was always a kid who said I was going to get my VCE. I had no idea where to go after that.”

## Standardised Testing

For this submission into school expulsions, Melbourne Academy students told us:

- “I was given a warning at the start. You do this assembly on your first day of Year 7 and they sit you in a big assembly hall and there will be someone who comes to speak from the senior class and explain that someone of us won’t make it and some of us will.

“Some of us will choose different pathways. They kind of give you that warning, but I never thought that would be me that wasn’t going to make it. I felt that people never really gave me that chance.”

Additionally, Melbourne Academy **staff** reflected:

- “When you’re teaching juniors and young kids, you see that potential that slowly dies as they go through the school years and are indoctrinated into the box the school expects them to be in, rather than being able to be the person they really are.”
- “I became very disillusioned with what I was seeing in the state system, in primary schools, and that’s what prompted my career change. Our day, teaching wise, was becoming very crowded with program delivery, expectations about NAPLAN results, improving data, what our school looked like on the Myspace website, it was the driving factor behind everything that we were doing and that meant that there was no time, no consideration given to wellbeing and learning. The human focus.

“So, even in primary schools we were seeing students in Grade 5 and 6 becoming disengaged, issues with non-attendance, family issues, which in that situation weren’t being dealt with at all.”

- “Teachers in the state system are suffering, and continue to. I’m still in contact with staff who I’ve worked with, and most of them are talking, using words like ‘burn-out’ and ‘overworked’ and, you know, many of them who have been teaching for a long time use the phrase, ‘It isn’t what it used to be.’ The flexibility and the freedom to individualise programs and things like that for particular students just isn’t there anymore because they’re swept up in this wave of, ‘May is coming around’ – which means NAPLAN and then reports are being written and things like that. There’s all these boxes we need to tick for the Australian Curriculum – and that’s all fine, we need that structure I think, but there needs to be that flexibility.”
- “The introduction of recent standardised testing that’s been rolled out in schools has really pushed our young people, or young people that are marginalised and disadvantaged in their communities, out of the education system. I do blame schools, I get really upset at them.

“A really good example is we’ve had a young person who came to us at the end of Term 3 this year, so she came over in Term 4, and she had been at the same high school since Year 7 [and was then in her final year], yet she had some significant issues going on at home and this school decided to exit her in the last term of her last year at high school because she wasn’t going to be finishing her VCAL certificate.

“She has only attended our classroom four times this term and so this is a really bad outcome for this young person because she got pushed out to a school that she doesn’t know and doesn’t feel comfortable in, she doesn’t have any friends here, I mean, she had friendship networks from Year 7 until the last term of Year 12 at her old school and so she’s been taken out of that environment and so, of course she’s not going to be engaged. Instead of supporting her and allowing her to do that at their school, they decided to exit her from that school. We received two young people from this same school in the same situation and anecdotally, they told me that there were a group of up to 10 students who were pushed out because they wouldn’t be finishing.

“This goes back to major policy decisions such as schools being forced to display their results on websites, so that people can choose which school to go to and that defines whether that school is good or not. It goes nothing into the demographics or the support that is offered to the students.

“So, the school then says to our students, ‘If you’re not going to be finishing the year, this is going to reflect poorly on our results and maybe that’s going to affect our funding, so we’re going to push you out before those results are submitted’, which is in Term 3 where they get a clear indication of who’s going to be finishing, not passing, their VCAL or not, because VCAL is not like VCE.”

- “Big, overarching standardised policy doesn’t work. It might work for the slight majority of students within mainstream education, but it doesn’t work for the majority and we see this in our programs. One-size-fits-all systems has led to a number of young people disengaging from not getting results. You can’t compare two young people doing the same test when they have completely different abilities – it’s like telling a fish to climb a ladder, knowing that they can’t. I think that VCAL is an awesome thing that’s been introduced into schools in Victoria, because it shows that there are different pathways and gives young people that option, rather than forcing them to do VCE, but what our program definitely shows is that policy is letting down vulnerable young people.”

## Subjects and Curriculum

For this submission into school expulsions, Melbourne Academy students told us:

- “At the time, I wanted to be mechanical and I was really into that and then the Principal put me into designing and that wasn’t my thing. I told her I didn’t want to go into that [design] class, so I didn’t go. There were no girls in the mechanical class. She just didn’t want me to put me in there, but I already knew the teacher and he was happy to have me in there. I did go into the mechanical class for a bit and the boys were cool about it, but a problem happened because this girl’s boyfriend was in the class and we didn’t get along. The issue went to the teacher and then the Principal got me thrown out of the class. I was then put into the design class. She then told me that if I didn’t go to that class, I was going to be kicked out. So I went to the class, but I chose to do different work. She just told me to get out and called my mum.”
- “I’ve been to four high schools. At high school, I was trying to do the work but it was just too much.”
- “The classrooms and subjects need to change in schools. There’s only one teacher to heaps of students. It feels like kids go to school to socialise and bag other kids. I don’t know – something needs to be done about that.”
- “It sounds bad, but I learnt more when I was in Parkville [youth justice centre] through their education compared to mainstream school. They just taught us straight and gave us worksheets to do. It made more sense.”

Additionally, Melbourne Academy **staff** reflected:

- “I think an understanding in education about fostering resilience and emotional literacy in our young people is crucial. It’s not just about taking tests and results, it’s about how to be a responsible individual and some young people need to be taught about that. A lot of the students we see here [at Melbourne Academy] for whatever reason, don’t have external people or family that can do that for them. So, it becomes even more important that the six hours they spend at school, five days a week, that there’s somebody there. Or an understanding in a school that there’s not just a wellbeing person who you get sent to when you’ve mucked up, but that opportunities for building resilience and emotional literacy and wellbeing are built into the curriculum.”
- “I had a girl back in Wellington, New Zealand whose attendance at the youth-at-risk program I was working with varied between 25 to 30 per cent of the time. So, I sat down with her and asked her what she was interested in, to which she responded she didn’t know – so then I asked her what she liked doing and she said, ‘I like drinking coffee’ and so I asked her if she’d ever thought of being a barista. She hadn’t and so I got her into a training course on how to become a barista, which she attended after school because it was out-of-school hours. After a few weeks of this, I asked her whether she wanted to do some work experience in a café, as a friend of mine ran a café. So, I took her down there and there were a lot of other young people working there, who were dressed like she dressed and they were all looking forward to her coming. Once that happened, her attendance at the school program went from 25 to 30 per cent to 90 per cent. You could see something blossom in her, because she was interested.”



- “We have a lot of young people who will only do Maths, for example, because it’s black and white. Some of our young people get really overwhelmed when it comes to writing, particularly around exploration of identity. This can be really triggering for them; we tend to steer away from that specific kind of educational engagement because it can really trigger the whole class.”

## Teaching Styles and Communication

For this submission into school expulsions, Melbourne Academy students told us:

- “I never really got told to leave, I left because of the teachers.”
- “When I progressed to high school, the teachers didn’t make an effort with me so I never made an effort back with them. So, it was just me never trying and always going down the wrong path. When I never got the attention I needed, I would always try to put the attention onto something else.”
- “She [the teacher] would often say, ‘why aren’t you doing your work?’ and I’d tell her I didn’t know. She would really push my buttons.”
- “I reckon you need a connection with your teacher if you wanna learn. If you don’t like your teacher, you won’t listen to them and none of the teachers wanted to give me their time and I just gave them my bad time. I didn’t give them my good time. I gave them all my bad energy. All it needed was the teachers just showing they cared just a tiny little bit, maybe it would have changed my outlook or just the way I took on school. I wouldn’t have tried to mess up. I wasn’t the smart kid, so I had to have something else to do, I had to have a reputation. It was either you were smart, you were cool, or you had a reputation in school, and I had a reputation so that was my biggest thing, really.”
- “When I went to [school name], my teacher was really good for the first few months, she let us explore the work we wanted and didn’t force us to do anything. However, she resigned. We had another teacher come in for one day and then she resigned.

“And then we had this other teacher who was a good teacher. But I was living in Sunshine and travelling all the way down there [to Melton] and I had some mental health problems so it made it hard for me to get there and then in front of the whole class she would just embarrass me about it so I didn’t go back. They [the school] didn’t really care. They just said ‘You need to come to school’. I would get there at 11am and I was still putting in effort to get there. I would have to take two buses and it would take an hour and a half to get there and then my teacher would just say I need to get here earlier. But I couldn’t.”

- “I think a lot of problems can be solved simply by teachers caring.”

Additionally, Melbourne Academy **staff** reflected:

- “I’ve also taught in high schools and I think, and this is a generalisation, but I think that high school teachers are even more removed from that individual relationship with students. They’re content specialists. I think that the primary sector is even more crucial to get it right in the beginning. They’re two different things. I think that high school teachers, from my experience, are even further removed from that wellbeing and understanding learning, so maybe that’s why we’re seeing part of what we’re seeing in high schools.”
- “It not just the child who is ‘dysfunctional’ at school, it’s more the dysfunctional staff who work there.”

### Unsupportive School Environment and Rules (Culture)

For this submission into school expulsions, Melbourne Academy students told us:

- “I didn’t get enough help and support at school. Here [at the Academy classroom] is different though. When I need help I just go to the teachers or call them and I get help straight away. At the other schools I went to, it wasn’t like that. At the other schools you just blend in because the classes are so big.”
- “Mainstream schools need to help kids more instead of just suspending or kicking kids out or expelling them. Look at the problems we are experiencing.”
- “What I think needs to change in public education is that they need to stop seeing things as a problem, they need to start working towards the solution. They can’t just keep pushing things to the side, giving kids a laptop. You’ve gotta put more teachers in there. You just gotta project your energy where you’re going to get helped, you’re not going to feel like an obligation or like you’re begging for help and that’s sort of what it felt like in school, like I was begging for someone to look at me and say, “He needs help. He’s not on the right path.” I felt like shit having to beg for help.
- “At [school name] it was like they were sliding me between two classrooms and on my last day of finishing my exams they kind of just said that I wasn’t going to finish Year 11 and 12. I was then asked to exit and go to TAFE.”
- “[School name] told me that I couldn’t come back and finish Year 11 and 12. I wasn’t even allowed at my own Year 11 and 12 formal. I wasn’t invited. [School name] sort of just chucked me like I was a piece of shit.”
- “I was taken off [school name’s] school list and transferred over to TAFE. I only got through half a term at [TAFE name] because they turned around and told me that my mentality would not get me to a Year 11 and 12 pass.”

Additionally, Melbourne Academy **staff** reflected:

- “My wife and I are both teachers and when we’re in a classroom, you know there’s kids you want to spend more time with but you just don’t have the time, or resources, to do it.”
- “I’m a big believer in culture and cultural safety. When you look at schools, the culture that operates in the schools is so crucial to making kids feel welcome or part of a community and most schools, dare I say it, are white, middle-class and so are most of the staff, so they come from this narrow band of what they believe to be acceptable. This is all built into the culture of the school, due to *who* there are more of in the school. It has an overall impact on culture.”
- “Schools don’t actually teach a child, they teach a subject. Teachers are totally focused because the expectations and the outcomes are for them to get great results from the kids. It’s not about the actual student as a person.”
- “Education is no longer just reading and writing. The horizons have moved and families no longer have the capacity to provide for all the life skills that kids need to learn – especially if both parents work full-time. So everything has basically been dumped on the education system. But, we need to look at the education system itself and ask ourselves how we cope with the fact that some children don’t have shoes, and other children have no lunch, and that a lot of children don’t have all of what they need to actually learn and reach the potential they are able to reach.”

## Young Mum’s

**In 2013 in Australia, the birth rate among teenage women was 14.6 births per 1,000 women.<sup>18</sup>**

For this submission into school expulsions, Melbourne Academy students told us:

- “I did get to complete Year 11 and then when I wanted to complete Year 12 they kicked me out because of my attendance. I couldn’t go every single day because I had a baby. They asked my mum to come in and sat us down in the office and just told us that I needed to put my six-week-old baby into childcare so I could come to school five days a week as well as doing work experience. I told them I couldn’t do that because I had a six-week-old baby and my mum couldn’t look after him either. Then they told me that I had to find somewhere else to be and so that’s when I found this school [Melbourne Academy.] They never said that I was expelled or suspended, they just told me I had to leave. I did ask whether I could do work experience as my Year 12 study, but they didn’t like that idea.”

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<sup>18</sup> Victoria State Government, Better Health Channel, ‘*Teenage pregnancy*’  
<https://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/health/healthyliving/teenage-pregnancy>

These stories highlight the vulnerabilities of students who have experienced high rates of suspension, as well as formal expulsion and informal exclusion, and the need for non-punitive responses that address the root causes of disengagement.

As one member of our wellbeing staff reflected,

*“We definitely, 100 per cent, see a correlation between the amount of trauma a young person has been through and their level of disengagement in education.”*

Melbourne City Mission’s recommendations to this inquiry provide more detail about specific measures we know can make a tangible difference for students, teachers and wellbeing staff.

**Melbourne City Mission's response to:  
Whether the data collected by the Department regarding expulsions is sufficient to inform  
Departmental policy-making and programs**

**Whether the Department is monitoring and preventing instances of informal expulsions,  
which occur outside a formal expulsions process**

As reported in the Youth Affairs Council of Victoria's (YACVic) 2016 report<sup>19</sup>, 'Out of sight, out of mind? Exclusion and inclusion of students in Victorian Schools':

*'Up-to-date, comprehensive data on suspensions and expulsions is not readily available at present. While DET collect suspension data via their school census, we have been informed this data is not released publically. Principals record and report student expulsions, but this information does not appear publically either.'*

Additionally, the Department of Education and Training does not keep separate data on suspensions or expulsions of students with disabilities<sup>20</sup>.

This lack of data is masking a larger problem, as illustrated to us by students' lived experience. Without this data, we're missing crucial parts of the story. For example, the absence of robust data makes it difficult to fully quantify and unpack the impact of expulsion on vulnerable cohorts of students, including post-expulsion pathways.

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

## Recommendations

### Melbourne City Mission advocates for:

#### Recommendation 1:

#### Stronger models of collaboration between schools, flexible learning organisations and community organisations

At the recent *Education State in Schools Forum*<sup>21</sup>, the State Government stated: “collaboration is at the heart of our ambition for a high performing system.” From Melbourne City Mission’s perspective, stronger collaboration between schools, flexible learning organisations and community organisations will enable more timely identification of – and tailored responses to – young people who experience challenges and barriers to their education.

In particular, we believe there is capacity for schools to be more effectively leveraging the expertise of community service organisations to enhance the capabilities of teaching and wellbeing staff in best-practice responses to students with specific support needs.

For this change to be systemic, Melbourne City Mission advocates for contracted partnerships. Every Victorian school should be attached to (in contract with) at least one community organisation that can facilitate skilled community-based student support, advice and guidance. Government should adequately fund these contracting arrangements.

Collaboration would include:

- Looking at sharing good practice and establishing models and strategies that are proving to work in other settings (like the educator/youth worker paired model at Melbourne Academy)
- Schools looking to community organisations for specific training and professional development for trauma-informed practice and wrap-around education support
- Schools ensuring young people are connected with local organisations to identify and support the transition process, including facilitation of skilled community-based student support, advice and guidance.

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<sup>21</sup> Victoria State Government, ‘*Education State in Schools Forum: Forum statement*’, 30 Nov – 1 Dec 2016

### **Recommendation 2: Implementation of effective policies and procedures**

Data cited by the Ombudsman as context to this inquiry highlights the gap between legislative intent and practice, in relation to schools' implementation of the Ministerial Order. Melbourne City Mission calls for effective policies and procedures to be developed, to ensure that schools are in a position to be able to transition students into a more appropriate pathway with absolute transparency<sup>22</sup> and accountability, to provide the best possible outcome for that student.

### **Recommendation 3: Greater accountability for post-expulsion pathways**

Expulsion should only be an option after all other options have been exhausted. In those instances where a student is expelled, Melbourne City Mission advocates for increased school accountability for the student's sustainable transition to a destination or pathway of their choice post-expulsion. As part of this, there should be stronger collaboration between schools and the flexible learning sector. This post-expulsion accountability should be in place for a period of 12 months following expulsion. If a student is excluded from a school, they should be able to return for support for a 12 month period, either to the school or to a support agency contracted to that school.

### **Recommendation 4: A more holistic education model**

Melbourne City Mission advocates for a culture and practice shift in education. Schools should look to more holistic models of education as best practice, whereby the young person and their wellbeing is considered alongside their educational engagement as central to ensuring a positive learning experience. Experience tells us that addressing these barriers first will enable a young person to engage in learning.

### **Recommendation 5: A more transparent approach to exclusion/transitions**

Melbourne City Mission calls for stronger compliance by schools with the Ministerial Order, so that young people, and their families, guardians or carers, are fully informed of:

- What's happening – the circumstances surrounding the school's decision process
- The reasons for exclusion or suggestion of transition – why does the school feel the student's education setting needs to be different?
- Options, process and rights – a clear and supported transition process, in which the student and their family or carer is aware of their rights, the appeals process, and opportunities to speak with a school official about the school decision.

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<sup>22</sup> Current behaviours around exclusion would suggest that policies and procedures are leading Principals to be less clear when dealing with an expulsion.

## Recommendation 6:

### Introduction and implementation of accessible, annual public reporting of Early School Leaving data

State-wide data about early school leaving should be reported annually to the public in a format that clearly identifies formal and informal expulsion processes and situations where the school has allowed a student to ‘fall through the cracks’.

This ensures informal expulsion is reported on, schools need to be accountable for any student leaving early, and this data could be reflected in school performance.

Melbourne City Mission notes that these six recommendations align with YACVic’s research, policy and advocacy on student expulsions. Melbourne City Mission endorses the following eight recommendations outlined in YACVic’s report<sup>23</sup>, *‘Out of sight, out of mind? Exclusion and inclusion of students in Victorian schools’*:

1. Commit to reducing and eventually eradicating exclusion of students from education
2. Review and improve DET policies and procedures concerning student exclusion
3. Collate, analyse and make available the relevant data
4. Provide expert guidance and brokerage for students facing exclusion
5. Build schools’ capacity to support students experiencing trauma and mental health problems
6. Strengthen meaningful student engagement and student voice
7. Adequately fund successful flexible learning models, including within mainstream schools
8. Support appropriate transitions, not exclusions.

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid.



## Conclusion

At-risk and marginalised young people are overrepresented, not only in Victoria's expulsion numbers, but also, anecdotally, in suspension and 'soft' expulsion numbers (whereby students are 'neglected', asked to leave, or not having their emotional and learning needs met).

Due to a current lack of robust data, particularly surrounding the exclusion of vulnerable young students, it is apparent that there is a level of non-compliance with the Ministerial Order and policies regarding Government school expulsions that is taking place under the radar. This is masking a larger problem in our schools and leaving some of the most at-risk young people in our communities, and their families, to navigate the complexities of the education system themselves, without appropriate advocacy or support.

The stories of Melbourne Academy students, educators and wellbeing staff, makes clear that education is more than teaching a subject, it is also, crucially, about developing a person who will become a contributing member of their community.

Without the necessary resources and value placed on a student's emotional literacy and capacity to build resilience, learning will simply not take place and continue to suffer due to the host of other issues young people must deal with in addition to their education.

It is time we see the student as a whole person – one who comes into the education system with a diversity of experience, multi-faceted needs and interests, and ultimately, a unique capacity for learning.

## Appendix (i)

### List of Melbourne Academy Classrooms

- **Braybrook (Young Mums of the West)**

At Braybrook, young mums have the chance to continue their education through pregnancy and after having a baby. This class offers Foundation, Intermediate and Senior VCAL. Students can be pregnant and can bring a baby with them to class when they are ready to return to learning.

- **King Street**

At King Street, students can study Foundation or Intermediate VCAL. The classroom is integrated with our Frontyard Youth Services for homeless or for those at risk of homelessness and engages students as an alternative to school and TAFE.

- **North Fitzroy**

At North Fitzroy, students can study Intermediate or Senior VCAL and engage in a multimedia-themed program based at our purpose-built multimedia and music studio.

- **Online enhanced engagement and delivery.**

Our VCAL online program (not a pure online program, but a program that facilitates outreach education) offers a flexible and individualised model of learning for students who are moving into, or through, a VCAL certificate and are not always able to access a classroom. Online enhanced delivery is an effective re-engagement strategy for students with mental health challenges, such as anxiety. It is used to facilitate early engagement in learning and allows a student to develop their confidence before moving into an Academy classroom or into another education setting. Blended learning is an important feature of this program and lessons can be delivered in a number of ways, including via Moodle's 'Virtual lesson' tool, small face-to-face workshops and excursions. Online enhanced learning also benefits students who are combining study commitments with work or caring responsibilities.

- **South Melbourne**

At South Melbourne, three classrooms offer VCAL at Foundation, Intermediate and Senior levels. One of these classrooms is specifically for Young Mums, who are supported to continue their studies whilst pregnant, or after having a baby. These students can bring a baby with them to class when they are ready to return to learning. All classes are designed to be highly flexible for young people who have faced barriers to learning in the past.

- **Sunshine**

At Sunshine, two classrooms offer students Intermediate and Senior VCAL as well as the opportunity to undertake a Certificate II in Community Services. The Sunshine space is located in the Visy Cares Hub, a youth hub comprising other co-located youth support services.

- **Connect Youth Program**

Connect Youth sits under the broad Melbourne Academy umbrella as an outreach education program targeted to young people aged between 15 and 20, who are severely disengaged from education and who have predominantly come from care or have been linked into out-of-home care. The Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) refers young people to the program and have 10 spots allocated to them per calendar year. The remaining vacancies in the program are filled by non-DHHS referrals. Connect Youth is currently in its second year of operation and has become a sustainable program model. Connect Youth provides outreach education, it is a client-seeking, assertive outreach education model. Workers are in the community actively identifying and fostering relationships and referral pathways with young people who are disengaged from education and, in some cases, community support. In the first two years of the program, Connect Youth has supported approximately 75 young people who would have otherwise fallen through the cracks of a variety of different support services (e.g. education, mental health, family breakdown).

## Appendix (ii)

### Long-form interviews with The Melbourne Academy students and staff

#### Young Mums of the West

#### Emma and Tasha – Braybrook Academy Classroom

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**Emma and Tasha are young mums and current students at the Melbourne City Mission Braybrook Academy classroom. Between the two girls, they have been to six different high schools. They are due to finish their studies with the Academy classroom at the end of 2016.**

“I was never expelled or suspended from school. I left school because of family issues. I ran away from home and ended up in a resi-unit, which was really far away from the school and so it became too hard to travel and I had to drop out. From there, I went to another high school when I went to live with my uncle but then I also ran away from there and had to leave. From there, I went to an all-girls school and then got pregnant with my son, so stopped going there as well.”

“The first high school I went to I was bullied at, so I decided to leave and then the second high-school I went to I fell pregnant. I did get to complete Year 11 and then when I wanted to complete Year 12 they kicked me out because of my attendance. I couldn’t go every single day because I had a baby. They asked my mum to come in and sat us down in the office and just told us that I needed to put my six-week-old baby into childcare so I could come to school five-days-a-week as well as doing work experience. I told them I couldn’t do that because I had a six-week-old baby and my mum couldn’t look after him either. Then they told me that I had to find somewhere else to be and so that’s when I found this school [Melbourne Academy.] They never said that I was expelled or suspended, they just told me I had to leave. I did ask whether I could do work experience as my Year 12 study, but they didn’t like that idea.”

“I didn’t get enough help and support at school. Here [at the Academy classroom] is different though. When I need help I just go to the teachers or call them and I get help straight away. At the other schools I went to, it wasn’t like that. At the other schools you just blend in because the classes are so big.”

“When I was bullied at the first high school, we went to speak to the school Principal about it and he turned around and said that he didn’t believe anyone gets bullied or gets depression and that’s when my mum decided to pull me out and send me to another school. The second school was much better, I never got bullied until I fell pregnant – I didn’t actually know I was pregnant. Once we found out though the school helped to fit my uniform and everything. I didn’t have a problem with that school until they decided to kick me out.”

Asked what she’d like to do after she completes her studies with The Academy, Tasha says, “After this, I want to go to uni and become a nurse.” Emma says, “I want to do hairdressing after this but I’m also currently pregnant so it will be a gap year for me next year.”

When asked about what the best parts of being a part of the Melbourne Academy classroom are, the girls reflect, “The highlight of being here in this classroom is the environment. The teachers are just really easy-going and understand if you can’t come to school. Like, sometimes we can’t come in because our kids are sick and they get that.”

“I feel a lot more motivated to learn here because I can be myself. It can be difficult to learn at times with having the kids here as well because they’re still at you, but I think it depends on the age of the children. My son normally goes to day-care, so he’s alright.”

Their final words of wisdom to schools about what needs to change: “You need to help kids more instead of just suspending or kicking kids out or expelling them. Look at the problems we are experiencing.”

## Connect Youth Elise – North Fitzroy

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**Elise currently works as the Senior Worker and facilitator with our Connect Youth program, located at our North Fitzroy site. Elise has worked with Melbourne City Mission for the past five years in a variety of youth worker roles.**

“Most of our young people drop out in year 7. They’re told to go to school if they live in a residential unit, but nobody can force them to go. School can be really socially and academically overwhelming for young people who have been through so much.”

“We have a lot of young people who will only do maths, for example, because it’s black and white. Some of our young people get really overwhelmed when it comes to writing, particularly around exploration of identity. This can be really triggering for them; we tend to steer away from that specific kind of educational engagement because it can really trigger the whole class.”

“A lot of these kids don’t have mums or dads, they have workers as they come from the out-of-home care system. They don’t get a cut lunch, they don’t get dropped off to school – they don’t have the typical school experience that other kids do. I would say around 80 per cent of the young people we work with experience, or have experienced, anxiety. This is why we keep class numbers so small, because they get so overwhelmed with numbers and people. Like, they often are thinking about whether they are accepted or a person likes them and this is something we deal with all the time and often something that young people are thinking about before any sort of learning can take place.”

“We had a young boy who was with us around August last year who had come out of Parkville. He’d been in and out of juvenile detention for around three years. The longest he had been out was six months in-between stints – he just couldn’t stay out. He was referred to us and we began outreach support with him. We began with things like providing him with clothes and a laptop and he eventually got housing. He was then transitioned into our classroom and he is now a Connect Youth leader who provides mentoring to other students with similar experiences to his. He has come so far. He’s just celebrated being out of prison for 12 months, the longest he’s ever stayed out from the age of 15 (he’s now 19 years old).”

“We have another young girl who I’ve worked with for three years that came through a few of our older programs and she is probably one of the toughest kids I’ve ever met. She has such a hard exterior. She grew up in care and as a result of that, has a serious and very real sense of abandonment. She was convinced everyone would eventually leave her. When she exited care, she got placed in a house where she was extremely vulnerable and was using really hard drugs, but she would still come to class and we just did our best to support her during that time. She fell pregnant within weeks of leaving care and there was a real sense that she wouldn’t cope as a mum. We continued outreach support to her during her pregnancy to remind her we were here and wouldn’t giving up on her. She’s now had her baby, and she’s honestly the most amazing mum. She’s no longer on drugs, has been able to cut out the old people in her life that weren’t good for her and she told me that her baby and education are the only two things in her life that are important. Her life has changed for the better and she now wants to do child care because she says she really loves looking after and being around kids.”

“Most of our kids have been expelled or asked to leave and I don’t believe their behaviour has been as extreme as what’s written on paper when they are referred to us. If you show someone respect and that you’re there for them, and ensure they know that there’s no abuse of power in the environment they’re in, they don’t react badly to that. I used to be really hierarchical in my style and these kids don’t respond well to that. When they are reacting, they are not reacting at you – it’s about the systems that have let them down. We need to provide safe spaces for young people which remind them that they’re wanted, respected and valued in the world.”

“DHHS kids often get the crappy end of the deal and if we can do something to help them, then that’s a big deal.”

**Connect Youth students**  
**Group Discussion – North Fitzroy**

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**What wasn't good about your traditional schooling experiences?**

- “Teachers think they are better than us.”
- “Reading and library time when it was given to us as punishment.”
- “Being bullied.”
- “Having to wear a uniform and the school coordinator checking out uniforms all the time to make sure they were right.”
- “Suspension.”
- “Detention.”
- “Being sent out of the room and feeling embarrassed.”
- “The homework amount, especially in Year 12.”
- “Having to get a toilet pass just to go to the toilet.”
- “We didn't respect our good teachers enough. We know they were just trying to do their best. Some teachers are complete assholes though.”

**What would a great school system look like?**

- “Being treated with respect and like young adults”
- “Better communication from teachers to students.”
- “More fun ways of learning.”
- “Less students in a classroom and more teachers.”
- “More interesting subjects.”

**What do you think are some reasons why young people 'play up' at school?**

- “Other student's behaviour.”
- “Bullying.”
- “Teachers acting too prim and proper. We don't feel comfortable to talk to you.”
- “Act like a human. Still be a teacher, of course, but act like a human being.”



## Rohan – King Street Academy Classroom

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**Rohan is 17 years old and a current student at the Melbourne City Mission King street classroom. He was born and raised in Auckland, New Zealand.**

“I started going to primary school in New Zealand. I went to primary school in my neighbourhood, it was usually a five minute walk down the road from my house, not even that, it was about two minutes. This was my first primary school. I stayed at this school until Grade 6.”

“Right after that I went to what’s called intermediate in New Zealand, basically what you guys [in Australia] call high-school. You go there for two years or so and then you would move onto the next year. So I was there for two years, that’s what it was until you graduated, and then I went to another high-school and you’d go there for another six years until Year 12. I was only at [school name] for a year, but then I had to move to Pakistan. I stayed there for about a year and education was through online schooling. It was not the best and kind of boring for me. The course was not interesting. I prefer being in a classroom and stuff.”

“I moved to Pakistan with my father, my mother and my little brother. We stayed for a year and then came to Australia, because my brothers needed us for some stupid reason, I can’t remember why. My two older brothers have lived here [in Australia] for a while. They needed my dad for this business they’re making.”

“When we came to Australia, my parents looked for a school that would be alternative for me. But, my older brother wanted something different for me and wanted me to go to Collingwood. He’s been nagging my mum telling her to take me to Collingwood and stuff, cause he wants me to branch out and meet more people and he also says I might get better education there. My mum has been thinking about it for these recent months, the past four to five months. I personally don’t care where I go, as long as I get my education done.”

“I’ve been here at the King Street classroom since March [this year]. I’m hoping to graduate this year because I had plans already – I wanted to go find a trade somewhere.”

“At first we didn’t, and I didn’t, know that I had a learning difficulty – I take things really differently. I don’t know the term for it, but, I learn things from hands on than I do from theorising. We found this out in the middle of Year 8 when I was in New Zealand. I had a massive anger issue because my teacher bullied me. My mum didn’t believe me, I would come home and say, “I hate my teacher” and whatnot and my mum would often tell me, “it’s just school, it’s fine.” I came home every day after school, whining and saying I wanted to move. Then I burst out of anger one time, and my mum realised I needed a therapist. So, I was in therapy for a couple of months, couldn’t afford it for any longer, but we found out during that short time that I had a learning difficulty when I talked with the therapist. That’s when I discovered that I learn differently. So, I’ve carried this form [from the therapist] around with me for my education. It didn’t help me in Pakistan, but it helped here [in Melbourne] though. The two workers [from the King Street classroom] took a copy of the form for my file.”

“I had issues with this teacher when I was at [school in New Zealand].”

“I question it myself day to today, sometimes. I wonder why the hell did she [the teacher] pick on me? I think it was because I was one of those hyperactive kids. She picked on me for some random reason throughout the year, I don’t know why. It was hell for me, so . . . I even had a plan for how to get myself out for a while, it got that desperate. Most of the time I was scared about hurting people because I had this massive anger issue where if I got the wrong side of the wick, BOOM! I was off like a firecracker. She [the teacher] would often say, ‘why aren’t you doing your work?’ and I’d tell her I didn’t know. She would really push my buttons.”

“She never listened. She would take the thing I did wrong and turn it a million times worse – hand in a report to the Principal. The deputy Principal knew I was a firecracker ready to go off at any second. Just imagine, waking up every morning, you gotta go to school from 8:30am to 3:00pm – with this [expletive] hanging over your head for about seven hours. Just imagine that. For about 300 days of the year. You want to cut your fingers off, that’s the thing. I didn’t resort to self-harm, because I thought to myself, “I’m better than her.” I wasn’t the smartest of kids, but I did get a sense of when someone was picking on me. She would often give me worksheets that were not at my level, so I would sit there for more than an hour on this one question and be like, what? This is like reading Greek!”

“When I learnt about my learning difficulty, I was smiling a lot more and I realised – oh – that solves a lot of questions! My rage is down to dust now. I let go of that anger a while ago now. When I got to [school name], I realised I was out of her class and I felt like, I could lick a tree right now! Holy shit! I felt like something had come off me. One of my good friends who was still at that same school after I left told me that she left after I went. She deliberately said one time to me when I was held back for lunch, “You have been the worst student I have ever had in all my years of teaching.” I said to her, “well, I’m glad.”

“When I went for the enrolment at [school name], my mum and dad told them, “this is my son and he is a different learner – here is a form that will explain everything about it.” And the school were like, “alright cool – we’ll set the work right for him” and after that my education – because it was at the low end for Maths and everything – slowly, you could see over the years from parent / teacher interviews that it was like, “Holy shit, he’s getting better thanks to the school” but sadly, I had to leave because my step-dad told me my grandfather in Pakistan was dying and he wanted us to meet him. I wasn’t really sad because I’ve never been that type of guy – I was just like, “okay, whatever, shit – I’m going to Pakistan.”

“If I could speak to these schools, I would say to them that there are students – if they can’t get it – they might have a problem and try to look into it and not jump straight to conclusions because it just makes you look like a deadhouse teacher. If I was to speak to my old teacher, I would say, “Well, can you see that I’m doing well with myself in life and I’m actually learning some shit and I’m moving up a notch and all you did was pick on me. Are you proud of yourself?”

“Categorising is just fucked.”

“For me, learning another language is like water. I can take just about any Asian language and it makes so much sense. It’s just some sort of quirk.”

“I already have my life planned out somewhat. I want to travel the world, just see what’s around. I see so much on the media about, oh, Pakistan is full of terrorists – I’ve been there. I’ve seen the true side of Pakistan, unlike what the media says.”

“I was a bit depressed when the bullying was happening with that teacher. I thought, “Well I’m a bit of a failure aren’t I.” But I didn’t let it get me down that much. I told myself I wasn’t going to give up. I built this resolve around then that I liked challenges, so I saw it as a challenge I could take on. She might have won the battle, but I won the war. I have, currently.”

## Michael – North Fitzroy Academy Classroom

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**Michael is 19 and a current student at Melbourne City Mission’s North Fitzroy Academy Classroom. He is aiming to finish Year 12 through the Academy classroom at the end of 2017. Michael came to the Academy classroom through the Connect Youth program.**

“I’ve lived in Victoria my whole life. When I was in primary school, I was always moving to different schools because my mum and dad kept moving to totally different areas.”

“First, I went to primary school at [school name] and then I moved to [school name]. When I was at [school name], everything changed. The teacher wasn’t really paying that much attention to me so I was just mucking up and stuff like that, I wasn’t really caring about school. From Grade 2, the teacher just never really cared. I don’t know if it was just that the teacher didn’t like me as a person or something like that, they just didn’t really care.”

“When I progressed to high school, the teachers didn’t make an effort with me so I never made an effort back with them. So, it was just me never trying and always going down the wrong path. When I never got the attention I needed, I would always try to put the attention onto something else.”

“I was bullied all the way through from Year 7 to Year 9 and pretty much all through the rest of high school, then I put the bullying onto someone else, like, I’d just be getting into fights just so I could get recognised by teachers or even to speak to a teacher or something. Then, I just kept getting suspended. I ended up getting up to 15 days suspension, just a lot, then they just told me that they couldn’t keep me at the school anymore and they expelled me. I tried to go to other public schools in my area like [school name] but they wouldn’t accept me because of my prior history at [school name] – I was always getting suspended for fights, mucking up, just stupid stuff that I could’ve avoided.”

“I did want help. I never got the attention I really needed because there was always so many kids in the class and I was always feeling obligated to ask for help. There were so many kids in the class and only one teacher. Depending on how long the class was, I was always missing out on getting help. If no-one else was asking for help, I didn’t want to be the only person to keep asking for help. I just felt embarrassed. I didn’t want to be the kid that had to ask for something and need help with the work, when I was really the only one who didn’t understand it. It was just embarrassing. So, it would always just be me not doing anything – not being productive in class and I turned unproductive outside of class too, hanging with the wrong crowd and just got into the wrong experience. I also started to wag [skip] school because no-one was really paying attention. It was just a bad time.”

“There was like an expectation where asking for help was a thing, but it wasn’t a thing. You had to approach the teacher in your own time. When you’ve got your mate sitting next to you and they know what to do, and the other kid next to you knows what to do, you just don’t want to be that one kid in the middle. It was always like, if I didn’t do the work, it was my fault, and they [the teachers] brought that onto me – told me I had to put up with what I’d done to myself, but it was like, “no, I don’t get it!” I get that I was obligated to ask and that part was my own fault, but when there’s 36 people in the class and you got really bad anxiety, it’s just like, you can’t physically bring yourself to ask.”

“I first moved schools when I was in Grade 2 [primary school] and then when I moved schools, that teacher I spoke about wasn’t helping me so I had to move schools again. I got kept down a grade at my next school, got a little bit of help where I needed it but it wasn’t enough to push me over the line to make me feel confident and stuff like that. So, when I moved I did the rest of my primary school and then moved onto high school – just a really bad high school in the area that was just one that had a reputation and stuff and it just wasn’t any good for me. No-one was helping me.”

“My parents, I’ve got a step-dad, they got together when I was young. My parents moved because they wanted a new life. When we were in Pakenham, it was a shitty area where we were. At [school name], I wasn’t getting enough help. I done something to a kid and I was really scared of confronting the teacher about it, so in primary school I would always run to the back of the oval and just hang by myself because I was that scared. I told my parents what happened, so my parents said that wasn’t that good and moved me to another school. I got moved to another school, different problems occurred, they [parents] just said, “let’s move you to another school”, then the same problems occurred and it was just, yeah.”

“I ended up getting tested for dyslexia, but I was one point off being officially dyslexic so I couldn’t get a worker and all that stuff. So, because of that I couldn’t get the help I needed. It was just a whole big mess in high school. It just wasn’t my main point. I should’ve gotten the help I needed but didn’t.”

“When you’re at school you have to learn a language, like Japanese, and my mum was like, “well he’s not doing well at any other subject, why teach him another language?” I’ve got speech problems and stuff so it was just, I can barely speak English and write and spell words and stuff, how am I going to learn another language? My mum was real passionate about me getting out of that, which I was lucky for – I got extra help there, but yeah, they just needed more teachers on the ground to help.”

“After my suspension and expulsion, I went to TAFE but TAFE wasn’t really the thing for me. I just went to another bad area. I got jumped on the train, I got rolled, I got my money taken off me, my cigarettes taken off me, so then I just didn’t want to go to TAFE. Then, after I went to TAFE I just didn’t do anything for myself. I really wanted to get back into education and now I am, but, for like three years I didn’t do anything. I was just bored. I just wanted something to do and not be in that situation again and alternative Ed [education] was honestly the best thing that ever happened to me, like, honestly, it saved my life. It really did. It just saved my life. Cause if I wasn’t in alternative Ed, well then I would be out in the streets. I’d be out stealing cars, I’d be out doing stuff that I was doing three years ago, but I’m not now.”

“I was living with my parents when all this was going on, and then knew what was going on at school and that I was having a hard time going and coping and stuff like that. They were trying to get me into TAFE’s and stuff like that but TAFE really wasn’t for me either because, I don’t know, I had all those incidents and got really scared. It was a real stepping stone in my life to try pushing myself to come to education again just because of all that shit that happened.”

“I’ve been coming here [Melbourne Academy] for a year. It’s awesome. I can do everything in my own time and there’s no rush, there’s no expectation that I have to prove myself to anyone but myself and that’s probably the big thing is I actually get help when I ask for it here. There’s support here, like, I’ll ask for help and James [classroom educator] will literally, he won’t leave me alone until I understand every aspect. With a teacher at [traditional] school, they’ll explain it, like they’ll explain it in the same context over and over, they won’t go into it. They won’t break it down. I have ADHD too, so it was just a bad mix.”

“Coming to this school, my maturity level has risen so much more, I reckon, just because – there’s an independence here. You’ve got to commit to it, you’ve gotta want to come and the teachers made me feel like I wanted to come. So, without the youth workers and without the teachers and without the energy they project onto us, I honestly wouldn’t be here today and I’d probably be in a lot worse situation.”

“I’m hoping to finish Year 12 next year and hopefully go onto something bigger. I’ve done my pre-apprenticeship in carpentry and my pre-apprenticeship in automotive.”

“Cause I came here from Connect Youth, I didn’t just jump into school – I took baby steps and that’s what probably was the best thing for me, not just chucking me all this work and all this homework and stuff and telling me I only have this long to complete it. Most kids don’t work like that. Well, most people can’t work towards a set date, like, they have to do it in their own time. If they don’t understand it, it’s just hard.”

“Before I came to Melbourne City Mission, my anxiety and depression was . . . I honestly couldn’t see a bright side to my anxiety. I couldn’t come in here and speak to you like what I’m doing now. I couldn’t approach someone randomly. James and Stella [classroom educator and youth worker] have really just opened up my mind and, just like, I’m more confident with things now. Like, I’m more confident coming out and putting up my hand or giving it a go or saying something I might not know anything about but I’ll project my idea anyway. Just, the environment is awesome. It can’t compare to ‘normal’ school.”

“What I think needs to change in public education is that they need to stop seeing things as a problem, they need to start working towards the solution. They can’t just keep pushing things to the side, giving kids a laptop. You’ve gotta put more teachers in there. You just gotta project your energy where you’re going to get helped, you’re not going to feel like an obligation or like you’re begging for help and that’s sort of what it felt like in school, like I was begging for someone to look at me and say, “He needs help. He’s not on the right path.” I felt like shit having to beg for help. Now, I don’t feel like I can do many things, like, I know I can it’s just what they’ve projected onto me – it was just bad.”

“Half the stuff you learn in ‘normal’ schools, like, you don’t need it in everyday life. Like, you’re going to need maybe half the stuff. Like, with Maths, Algebra and stuff like that, kids don’t understand that and you’re trying to teach something they’ll never understand. I still don’t understand Algebra to this day. Like, I’m not complaining, I’m doing just as good as someone who is in ‘normal’ school. It just took me a little bit longer.”

“I reckon you need a connection with your teacher if you wanna learn. If you don’t like your teacher, you won’t listen to them and none of the teachers wanted to give me their time and I just gave them my bad time. I didn’t give them my good time. I gave them all my bad energy. All it needed was the teachers just showing they cared just a tiny little bit maybe it would have changed my outlook or just the way I took on school. I wouldn’t have tried to mess up. I wasn’t the smart kid, so I had to have something else to do, I had to have a reputation. It was either you were smart, you were cool, or you had a reputation in school and I had a reputation so that was my biggest thing, really.”

## Noah – North Fitzroy Academy Classroom

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**Noah is 18 years old and currently a student at Melbourne City Mission’s North Fitzroy Academy Classroom. He is aiming to complete a plumbing pre – apprenticeship in 2017.**

“I’ve always lived in Victoria and I went to one primary school and then I went to high school, and yeah, didn’t do too good there.”

“Primary school was good up until around Grade 6 and then I started playing up a bit. Nothing was really happening for me at that time, I was just a bit immature. I was just playing and mucking around with other kids.”

“I’ve been to four high schools. At high school, I was trying to do the work but it was just too much. They were big classrooms and all the different subjects. I wasn’t interested in the subjects, didn’t think I needed them. It was just irrelevant.”

“My dad didn’t really care about what was going on, my mum was more the one that did. They understood what was going on though.”

“I was never formally suspended or expelled, I was kicked out and asked to leave. They just told me that the school was too big for me. They gave me a couple of alternative schools, like, behaviour schools, but they didn’t really care once I left.”

“My last time at school was half way through Year 8, when I was around 14 [years old]. After that, I was out of school for six months. I moved to [flexible learning school name] for a while and started meeting some bad kids, getting in trouble and stuff. Then I was in and out of Parkville [Melbourne Youth Justice Centre]. Then I started getting in trouble with the Police and was just in and out of Parkville for a while.”

“I’ve been coming to Melbourne Academy now for 13 months. It’s been good being here. I’ve done work and for a bit of the time I was mucking around, but then I realised I need to mature, so for the past three – four months I’ve just been doing work. Realising how old I’m getting has made me want to get my shit together. I’m due to finish Year 12 at the end of next year but I think I’m going to leave early, I think I’m ready for a pre-apprenticeship. Smash out my plumbing pre-app.”

“The classrooms and subjects need to change in schools. There’s only one teacher to heaps of students. It feels like kids go to school to socialise and bag other kids. I don’t know – something needs to be done about that.”

“It sounds bad, but I learnt more when I was in Parkville [Youth Justice Centre] through their education compared to mainstream school. They just taught us straight and gave us worksheets to do. It made more sense.”

## Jake – Online Academy Classroom

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**Jake is 22 years old and was a student with the Melbourne City Mission Online Academy Classroom. He finished Year 12 with the online classroom this year.**

Jake grew up in Sydney, where he went to primary school. His mum decided to transition to Melbourne for a few years, where he continued the middle of his primary school years, and then moved back up to Sydney for the remainder of primary school. Jake then began high school in Sydney up until Year 10, moving back down to Victoria where he lived in Bendigo for approximately two years. At this stage, he wasn't able to continue his education due to life circumstances.

"I wasn't in the right frame of mind to keep going with school [in Bendigo]. All sorts of things were stopping me. I was highly addicted to marijuana. That was my decision, as I chose to hang around with the wrong people. Also, stress with my housing. I was homeless for a bit. At one stage I had no money for a fair while."

"Moving to other people's houses where you don't want to be living was hard. I was trying to live, eat, and breathe at the same time and I just couldn't cope. I was always pissed off about something because of what was going on. This was over a period of around two years."

"My brother and I didn't get along, so there was a lot of fighting and I had to leave home. I didn't want to live with that. I had to get away from it for a while. My brother was on the wrong path and I guess I was his target at the time."

"I did used to get in trouble at high school because I guess I was associated with the wrong people. My Principal and teachers sat me down and told me I was better than that and to fix myself up. I was never suspended or expelled at high school" [Jordan was not offered any other official support during this time from his high school.]

"I enrolled with the Melbourne Academy this year and I've now finished Year 12."

"I want to open up a transport business now. My dad has one in Sydney and it's something I've always wanted to do. I'm looking to enrol in a business course for next year."

"I'm on a Government allowance at the moment, so I don't have much money. Housing is steady at the moment, but I don't think it will be for much longer."



## Lisa – Online Academy Classroom

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**Lisa is 20 years old and currently a student with the Melbourne City Mission Academy Online Classroom. She is currently completing Year 12 through her studies this year and is also studying a Certificate IV in Mental Health through a second online course.**

Lisa has been in the DHS system since the age of three. She has received a mixture of out-of-home-care, kinship care, residential care, and has also experienced homelessness twice over a period of two years. Lisa attended about 12 primary schools, as she was moved around so often in care, and was emancipated from care at 16 years of age.

“I was suspended and expelled many times throughout primary school. I was very violent when I was young because I experienced this behaviour at home. I saw a psychologist for a little while when I was eight, but that was about it.”

When Lisa was 14, her foster mother passed away. “At that time, every day DHS would come to the school with suitcases and move me around pretty much every night. I then requested residential care.”

Lisa attended one mainstream high school, when she was 14, turning 15 years old, reflecting, “I found stability when I found a foster home.”

Lisa had to attend her own court cases from the age of 10. “When you’re in DHS, you have to be under a specific court order. I was a ward of the state, so they have to review this at least once a year. So, I had to do a psychiatric evaluation this one year and my school got a copy of my IQ report. My Principal called me to the office and told me they had gotten a copy of my IQ test. I don’t know how they got that. They wanted to put me in Year 11 from Year 9. So, they put me in Year 11 and I was doing perfectly fine, but then my foster mum passed away roughly one month before my final SACS and things went downhill from there.”

“Once I couldn’t do the SACS, I was sent to [school program name] to do Year 10, because the school said I couldn’t complete the SACS. I didn’t have anywhere to live at this point, so I couldn’t really study. I wasn’t offered any support. They told me that there was nothing more they could do. I felt set up to fail. I was 14 years old. Even though I had a relatively high IQ, I still didn’t know what to do in that situation.”

“It felt really gutting, because I was always a kid who said I was going to get my VCE. I had no idea where to go after that.”

“I didn’t really fit in at [school program name] because the characters that were there where the kind I was trying to get away from. It also took me an hour and half to get to school every day. I was living in Brighton and the school was in Frankston.”

“I lasted three months and then my worker found a few options for me, one of these was [flexible learning program name]. I liked the idea of [flexible learning program name]. I thought it was very interesting.”

“I figured, I always wanted my Year 12, so I decided to do the online component. I also found my calling in Psychology, and so have been doing that as well through an online course.”

“When it came to high school, they should have had a better structure and a better plan in place, and not put all their eggs in one basket. It was either I pass my VCE at 14 years old, or I fail and go elsewhere. Those were my choices.”

“I wish I’d had someone who was able to advocate for me instead of me struggling to find the words. I had a few workers, but they weren’t education workers so didn’t know how to help.”

“I have a little sister who is going to a Catholic Orthodox school at the moment and she’s going through a lot of social issues. I have to go to a lot of DHS meetings for her, and it turns out she’s the only foster child at her school. She has a lot of problems socially and I think they put a lot of pressure on her because of that.”

## Zara – Online Academy Classroom

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**Zara is 17 years old and is currently a student with the Melbourne City Mission Academy Online Classroom. Zara grew up in Queensland and moved to Melbourne four years ago.**

“I went to two primary schools, was home-schooled for two years and then attended another two primary schools. I then did home-schooling again after that.”

“I got suspended too many times at primary school. There was a lot going on at home and the schools weren’t supportive.”

“I started at high school in Melbourne. I went to one high school in Year 8 and then went to an alternative school after that, but I couldn’t finish that because I couldn’t deal with all the other kids picking on me all the time.”

“I was then put in resi-care and my school told me to think about other options. They didn’t help me with what those options were. This was in Year 9. After that, I didn’t really go back to school. I hated school.”

“I ended up going to another school after a while for about once a week, it was flexible learning, but I hated it. The whole environment. I just hated school. Then a couple of months ago I got enrolled into the Academy online. Online is good because I don’t have to go and sit in a classroom with heaps of other kids. I can do it online and I get heaps more work done. I like to work by myself so it’s really good.”

“I want to do a community services course after this. I want to do resi – care. I want to be able to help other people like me.”

“It’s really unfair how they [schools] treat us kids. If one kid has one thing happen, they just don’t care. They just put you in a separate room and tell you that you can’t go chill with the other kids in your age group. It made me feel like I never wanted to go to school again.”

## Bob – South Melbourne Academy Classroom

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**Bob currently works as a casual relief teacher with the Melbourne City Mission Academy classrooms. He is originally from New Zealand and has been a teacher for the past 20 years.**

“Schools don’t actually teach a child, they teach a subject. Teachers are totally focused because the expectations and the outcomes are for them to get great results from the kids. It’s not about the actual student as a person.”

“When you’re teaching juniors and young kids, you see that potential that slowly dies as they go through the school years and are indoctrinated into the box the school expects them to be in, rather than being able to be the person they really are.”

“Seeing kids who have failed the system come out as great thinkers and who have great ideas and they go ahead and forge their own way, or they – most of them – fall out the bottom and become the beneficiaries of the system itself. For most of them, this is what their parents were as well and no-one had cared for them so the kids get lost on the way and we get generation after generation of kids who are disengaged from education.”

“I think this is all part of that whole Government idea that you have an education department and you have a justice department and you have a social welfare department and basically, they don’t talk to each other so we’re spending a lot of money trying to provide an excellent little niche for the individual, but collectively if it was done as a whole, then results would be completely different.”

“Education is no longer just reading and writing. The horizons have moved and families no longer have the capacity to provide for all the life skills that kids need to learn – especially if both parents work full-time. So everything has basically been dumped on the education system. But, we need to look at the education system itself and ask ourselves how we cope with the fact that some children don’t have shoes, and other children have no lunch and that a lot of children don’t have all of what they need to actually learn and reach the potential they are able to reach.”

“So many people think they are experts on education because they’ve all been to school. That makes just about as much sense as, you know, I know all about how to be a doctor because I go to visit the doctor regularly. Politicians in particular have this problem, where they say they know all about education because they went to school, therefore, it’s this little box of learning and it’s no longer that. It’s no longer about, is this child learning, it’s about whether they have reached particular marks for maths and literacy.”

“I spent about three or four years working with an organisation that worked with children and adults with learning difficulties associated with dyslexia, dyspraxia, ADHD and Asperger’s. I remember this one kid I was working with who was going from primary school to secondary, and in his words, said he was going to “the cabbage class”.

“We got him started on this program [The Door Program, which ran in New Zealand and then Australia for a short period, but originated from England], which was all based on exercises that challenged parts of the brain and I saw him probably three months after he had started the course, he’d started high school at the same time, and he was in the top of the class of his whole age group.

His mother had re-mortgaged her house to pay for him to be a part of this program, it was a very expensive program, but she said the pay-off for her was that for the first time in his life he was coming home with a smile on his face, and he was engaging in PE [physical education], which he'd never done previously, and he was involved in extra-curricular activities and his whole wellbeing completely shifted."

"We currently have an education model that is one-size-for-all and we know that it doesn't quite fit all, so we now have these splinter groups, but the splinter groups don't necessarily have the recognition they need – they are then seen as second-tier learning and probably fourth or fifth tier funding. So, organisations like Melbourne City Mission scrape along on whatever they can to make it work."

"Is the model of education we've currently got really the model we want for our future kids? I wonder about adopting a curriculum of mastery, where students are actually able to master one thing rather than learn a variety of things that may not be necessary or relevant in their lives."

"Are we educating kids for 20, 30 or 40 years' time or are we educating them based on what we learnt 20, 30 or 40 years ago?"

"My wife and I are both teachers and when we're in a classroom, you know there's kids you want to spend more time with but you just don't have the time, or resources, to do it."

"I had a girl back in Wellington, New Zealand whose attendance at the youth-at-risk program I was working with varied between 25 to 30 per cent of the time. So, I sat down with her and asked her what she was interested in, to which she responded she didn't know – so then I asked her what she liked doing and she said, "I like drinking coffee" and so I asked her if she'd ever thought of being a barista. She hadn't, and so I got her into a training course on how to become a barista, which she attended after school because it was out-of-school hours. After a few weeks of this, I asked her whether she wanted to do some work experience in a café, as a friend of mine ran a café. So, I took her down there and there were a lot of other young people working there, who were dressed like she dressed and they were all looking forward to her coming. Once that happened, her attendance at the school program went from 25 to 30 per cent to 90 per cent. You could see something to blossom in her because she was *interested*. After I left, the new teacher working with this girl said, "You won't be doing the stuff you did with Bob" and all of the good work was undone."

"I'm a big believer in culture and cultural safety. When you look at schools, the culture that operates in the schools is so crucial to making kids feel welcome or part of a community. And most schools, dare I say it, are white, middle-class and so are most of the staff, so they come from this narrow band of what they believe to be acceptable. This is all built into the culture of the school, due to *who* there are more of in the school. It has an overall impact on culture."

"It not just the child who is 'dysfunctional' at school, it's more the dysfunctional staff who work there."

"The cheapest model Government invests in, from what I see, is to throw money at problems instead of building or investing in something new. So, the flower that's not flowering, let's give it a couple of tens of thousands of dollars and hope it gets better."

## Chloe – South Melbourne Academy Classroom

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**Chloe is 22 and is currently a student at one of the Melbourne City Mission Academy South Melbourne classrooms.**

“At all my schools, I thought my disability was a bit over exaggerated. I felt that they were all really picking on me. Not only were other students at every school I went to bullying me but I was home schooled and still being discriminated against by the government. I had my mum at home tutoring me as well because I got that frightened with anxiety and depression that I was given up by those schools. That was hard for me. Not only did that scar me but it also wrecked my life in general. I’m now 22 and I’m still at an intermediate stage. I wish I could be like all my friends who are finishing university and getting married and having kids. I feel like I’m sitting in a child’s classroom or a prep classroom. I feel a bit silly.”

“Everything went so fast with education it never really went slow.”

“When I was told to leave and that I couldn’t finish Year 11 and 12 because of my disability and my mental health as well, I was kicked out and sent to different schools and they couldn’t handle me.”

“Even the people that have disabilities like Stephen Hawking. He has a disability and he is the smartest man in the world and everyone has respect for that guy and that’s me. I feel like I’ve been discriminated against my whole life and now I feel like I want to take a stand against that and tell those schools what they have done to me. They have wrecked my life and scared me.”

“In [school name], I only did prep till Grade 5. Not only because of my learning difficulties but also because of bullying issues that the school was not handling, which got really bad because I got bashed. Then I moved to [school name] where I finished Grade 6, but only just.”

“At [school name] they assessed me for mental health and found out that I had a mild intellectual disability which is only for Maths, English and Literature, which I think was a little bit over exaggerated.”

“After finishing Grade 6, I went to [school name]. I only went to Year 10. But I just found out that they never marked me down as finishing Year 10, so now it says I’ve only completed Year 9.”

“I was treated a lot differently to a lot of other students. Instead of sitting in a classroom, they put me in a warehouse at the back of the school, where they had a special learning class for kids with disabilities, which I didn’t really think I needed. Just because I wasn’t good at Math that well.”

“I ended up doing Year 7 to 10 at [school name], again they said I didn’t finish Year 10, which is totally wrong because I remember them [the school] giving me a certificate for it.”

“At [school name]], I kept getting suspended on my last two weeks of school back in 2010 while I was in Year 10 and 11. I was still also finishing Year 9 at the same time, essentially doing three things because I started early in prep.”

“I was suspended from [school name] two or three times because I skipped school. I skipped school due to the fact that my anxiety of being inside a classroom got too high.”

"[School name] put me in classroom for kids with a disability, which would be at the back of the school".

"I was treated so differently. They would never let me do my own work, they would do it for me even when it came to art, media or technology, which I am pretty good at. I never really understood why they [the school] were doing this to me. I felt that no one was really giving me a chance."

"[School name] give you a warning at the start. You do this assembly on your first day of Year 7 and they sit you in a big assembly hall and there will be someone who comes to speak from the senior class and explain that someone of us won't make it and some of us will. Some of us will choose different pathways. They kind of give you that warning but I never thought that would be me that wasn't going to make it. I felt that people never really gave me that chance."

"At [school name] it was like they were sliding me between two classrooms and on my last day of finishing my exams they kind of just said that I wasn't going to finish Year 11 and 12. I was then asked to exit and go to TAFE."

"[School name] told me that I couldn't come back and finish Year 11 and 12. I wasn't even allowed at my own Year 11 and 12 formal. I wasn't invited. [School name] sort of just chucked me like I was a piece of shit."

"[School name] told my mum that I wasn't allowed to come back, my mum thought that was a bit of a rip [harsh] and then unfortunately she passed away from cancer. Which is unfortunate because she had all my education records and I don't know where they are."

"I feel like [school name] have really wrecked my life. Most of my friends now that I went to [school name] with have now all got jobs and are successful or finishing university or getting married and having kids. That is the lifestyle I want. But I was chucked to the side and told that I wasn't good enough. Just because I wasn't good at English and Maths."

"[School name] did the same thing to my sister, she also goes to Pickle Street [classroom] with me now. She's doing really well, she's doing the HEAT program. It is good that she is doing Year 11 and 12. She is ahead of me and I don't get that. [School name] let her pass and not me, which I find kind of weird and how they treated me. I think [school name] pick and choose who they like."

"I don't think I was really liked at any school that I went to, not that I am trying to say that I am perfect."

"[School name] didn't really sit down and discuss any options with myself and my mum. They just said that I was going to be transferred to TAFE after finishing Year 10."

"At [school name] I did a little bit of counselling. At TAFE, I did do a couple of sessions with someone and then they just stopped once they figured out that things were getting too bad. It was like they couldn't handle it but I was asking why do you have counselling at school to help people if you're not allowed to use it or they are just going to use it to expel you from the school."

"I was taken off [school name's] school list and transferred over to TAFE. I only got through half a term at TAFE because they turned around and told me that my mentality would not get me to a Year 11 and 12 pass."

“I got a certificate for completing Year 10 but I lost it and it isn’t on the system at [school name] or [TAFE name]. It’s like they’ve wiped me from the system like I didn’t exist.”

“I wanted to be in the senior class, not intermediate. I’ve already done Year 9 and 10 but I was forced to do it again because it wasn’t on the system. I just thought to myself, ‘of course it’s not! That’s [school name] for you.’ [School name] are gonna say that I was difficult but that’s not right, I did what they wanted me to and I did pretty well.”

“I was at [TAFE name] for a couple of terms doing a Certificate III in Childcare. I really liked it and I was doing really well.”

“There was nothing really wrong until things went down with my family. They [TAFE name] told me that my mental state was not there and they were worried about my education and they said maybe come back next year. I did that and when I went to re-enrol they wouldn’t let me because they said they couldn’t handle my mentality.”

“[TAFE name] said that my mental health, mentality was a problem and that I was struggling. I didn’t really think I was struggling because I was actually doing really well in class. I was always ahead like I am here” [at the South Melbourne Class].

“[TAFE name] had a counselling session with me and they just said ‘look I don’t think you’ll be able to handle what’s going on in the classroom, you’ve got too much going on in your life’. I just felt like I was being discriminated against now. During this time I had my mum passing away from cancer whilst my parents were also getting divorced. Everything was happening and I had to stand on my own two feet. I had to leave home. I left home at a very young age.”

“After they kicked me out of [TAFE name] and told me that I couldn’t come back even if when I tried to re-enrol to finish my Certificate III, they told me that they couldn’t handle my mentality and what was going on in my life generally.”

“[TAFE name] just said come back next term or next year and re-enrol. There was no language around expulsion – everything just went through my parents. All I was told was that maybe you can come back next term and re-enrol, then we will see how you are. And then when I went to go enrol, I was denied that access to my education.”

“I never heard again from [TAFE name] after that. I was just told to leave.”

“After I was told to leave [TAFE name], I thought [school name] would stay in touch and tell me to come back and do school but nobody said anything. It went quiet and I just went rogue.”

“I was rogue for a long time. After my education went that was it. I felt nothing was left because I had already lost my home and lost everything else.”



## Janine – South Melbourne Academy Classroom

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**Janine works as an educator at the Melbourne City Mission Academy South Melbourne site, where she teaches the foundation – intermediate class. Janine is a primary trained teacher and had worked in the primary sector for 20 years before deciding on a career change to adolescent health and wellbeing. This is her first year teaching at The Melbourne Academy.**

“Adolescent health and wellbeing has been a passion of mine for a while, having worked in lots of volunteer organisations.”

“I absolutely adore it here [at The Melbourne Academy]. It’s nothing like what I thought it would be like. It’s extremely challenging, also extremely rewarding and I think it’s the perfect balance of wellbeing and education – I think we’ve got the model exactly right.”

“Coming from mainstream education, given that was all I knew, I expected it [flexible learning] to be a lot more of an education focus. Although we *are* pushing the education focus – I’m learning about the value of the wellbeing component and that engagement model as well.”

“I became very disillusioned with what I was seeing in the state system, in primary schools, and that’s what prompted my career change. Our day, teaching wise, was becoming very crowded with program delivery, expectations about NAPLAN results, improving data, what our school looked like on the Myspace website, it was the driving factor behind everything that we were doing and that meant that there was no time, no consideration given to wellbeing and learning. The human focus. So, even in primary schools we were seeing students in Grade 5 and 6 becoming disengaged, issues with non-attendance, family issues, which in that situation weren’t being dealt with at all.”

When asked whether Janine had a ‘moment’ where she realised something had to change, she reflects, “I had this young person come into the classroom who was extremely at-risk, in terms of family violence. I saw the impact that having an open mind, taking care of that inner, little person, and how once that was done and once he felt safe and valued, then the education happened. I thought, ‘well, perhaps there’s somewhere I can find where I can do that every day.’”

“Teachers in the state system are suffering, and continue to. I’m still in contact with staff who I’ve worked with, and most of them are talking, using words like ‘burn-out’ and ‘overworked’ and, you know, many of them who have been teaching for a long time use the phrase, ‘it isn’t what it used to be.’ The flexibility and the freedom to individualise programs and things like that for particular students just isn’t there anymore because they’re swept up in this wave of, May is coming around – which means NAPLAN and then reports are being written and things like that. There’s all these boxes we need to tick for the Australian Curriculum – and that’s all fine, we need that structure I think, but there needs to be that flexibility.”

“I’ve also taught in high schools and I think, and this is a generalisation, but I think that high school teachers are even more removed from that individual relationship with students. They’re content specialists. I think that the primary sector is even more crucial to get it right in the beginning. They’re two different things. I think that high school teachers, from my experience, are even further removed from that wellbeing and understanding learning, so maybe that’s why we’re seeing part of what we’re seeing in high schools.”

“I think an understanding in education about fostering resilience and emotional literacy in our young people is crucial. It’s not just about taking tests and results, it’s about how to be a responsible individual and some young people need to be taught about that. A lot of the students we see here [at Melbourne Academy] for whatever reason, don’t have external people or family that can do that for them. So, it becomes even more important that the six hours they spend at school, five days a week, that there’s somebody there. Or an understanding in a school that there’s not just a wellbeing person who you get sent to when you’ve mucked up, but that opportunities for building resilience and emotional literacy and wellbeing are built into the curriculum.”

“Some schools are making a start and I’ve seen schools who have adopted things like school-wide positive behaviour theory and restorative justice and things like that, where emotional consciousness is being built into the daily life of schools. But, you know, sometimes too, all the posters are up on the walls but in actual practice, it’s probably not happening as best it could.”

“One of the little philosophies that I live by is that every interaction I have, whether that be with a student, or a co-worker, is an opportunity to model something positive, and that’s hard, but I think it’s important.”

## Casey – Sunshine Academy Classroom

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**Casey is 17 years of age and is currently a student at one of Melbourne City Mission’s Sunshine Academy Classrooms. She states that she has been to 13 different schools throughout her education. Casey is due to finish her studies at the end of 2016 and wants to go on to study sociology and criminology with the aim of becoming a criminologist.**

“I’ve been to heaps of schools, including primary school. It’s felt exhausting going through all that. Going back and forth to schools and especially getting used to new students.”

“All the schools I’ve been to have made me feel shitty about myself as a person. When they say, ‘we don’t want you here’, they could at least say something nice and give me more options. It made me feel guilty for being myself.”

“Even just being at school hurts, but I always push myself to go past that.”

“At my last school, I had a lot of problems with the teachers who weren’t giving me respect. They were yelling in my face and stuff. They told me that their school wasn’t for me and that they didn’t want me there. They said that if I needed to stay till the end of the year, then I could. So I stayed there. They didn’t give me the support I needed though.”

“I wanted to stay at one school for my whole life but it wasn’t really an option. We moved from Adelaide.”

“The Principal [at school name] didn’t give me options. The Principal talked to me, walked me to his office and just gave me a bit of a lecture. He told me that I wasn’t allowed to act like how I was at school. He said that I wasn’t getting enough support and that I am more of a one-on-one student.”

“I went to [school name] and there was a lot of violent situations and a girl threatened me. I reacted to the violence and I was told I could not be there anymore.”

“A door got smashed and it was blamed on me. It was me, but it was also other people. They told me I wasn’t allowed back there.”

“At [school name], the Principal just yelled at me and told me to never come back. My mum came into [school name] and just said that if I have to leave then that’s it. The school hasn’t done anything for me. She said to the school that if they had more personal time with the students, students would be less violent. They didn’t want to hear it.”

“The Principal and I had a big screaming match in the front office and I said some really harsh stuff and she said some harsh stuff too. She never liked me and always got me in trouble.”

“I was in a class I didn’t want to be in, I wasn’t comfortable being in it and it physically hurt me, so I just didn’t want to do it.”

“At the time, I wanted to be mechanical and I was really into that and then the Principal put me into designing and that wasn’t my thing. I told her I didn’t want to go into that [design] class, so I didn’t go. There were no girls in the mechanical class. She just didn’t want me to put me in there, but I already knew the teacher and he was happy to have me in there.

I did go into the mechanical class for a bit and the boys were cool about it but a problem happened because this girl’s boyfriend was in the class and we didn’t get along. The issue went to the teacher and then the Principal got me thrown out of the class. I was then put into the design class. She then told me that if I didn’t go to that class, I was going to be kicked out. So I went to the class but I chose to do different work. She just told me to get out and called my mum.”

“There were some words on the wall such as learning and being there for each other and all that. I just said to her that you shouldn’t hang words that you don’t mean. When I went to that school the Principal knew that I needed extra learning.”

“I went to [school name], which was my first VCAL school and that’s coz [school name] didn’t want me and they told me this other school was another option. They said that if I don’t go to [school name] I’ll go to [program name] instead, which is a project. But kids that have special needs go into [program name]. I was really mad at that because I don’t [have special needs]. Not that it is bad to have special needs, but that’s not what I’ve got.”

“When I went to [school name], my teacher was really good for the first few months, she let us explore the work we wanted and didn’t force us to do anything. However, she resigned. We had another teacher come in for one day and then she resigned. And then we had this other teacher who was a good teacher. But I was living in Sunshine and travelling all the way down there [to Melton] and I had some mental health problems so it made it hard for me to get there and then in front of the whole class she would just embarrass me about it so I didn’t go back. They [the school] didn’t really care. They just said you need to come to school. I would get there at 11am and I was still putting in effort to get there. I would have to take two buses and it would take an hour and a half to get there and then my teacher would just say I need to get here earlier. But I couldn’t.”

“I told her [mum] I didn’t want to go if I would be 17 [years old] and in Year 11. I wouldn’t want to go. I wanted to be in Year 12.”

“I think all schools are force fed from other schools and are just trying to compete, but really it shouldn’t be a competition it should just be looking after kids.”

“I think the main thing that needs to change is schools genuinely accepting the students. If you don’t think the student will fit into the school you need to tell them, but let them come and try. There should be more programs around helping students or letting students having more one-on-one time. No-one is going to stay till Year 12 if it is not enjoyable.”

“A lot of schools expect this and expect that. I understand that there needs to be rules and expectations surrounding swearing, violence and no phones. I get these rules because in high school they want you to be more mature. But it gets to a time where it’s like you’re not going to be mature because you’re being thrown around and being treated really badly. So why should I come to a new school when in 10 months you’re going to throw me out and you want me to be respectful now?”

“Some people enjoy these subjects but other people are smart in different ways. I mean you can have an art class, but I think it should be split up into different things with more variety and different teachers. But I guess that does take a lot of money and time.”

“If they had classes like engineering and architecture and stuff so many more kids would be wanting to go and wanting to stay till Year 12.”

“I think in primary school it is all easy and fine, but I think they don’t prep you enough for high school at all. They say it is going to be like this and it’s not like that. I didn’t know how to use my personal planner or locker. I was carrying all my books around for a week and then you get in trouble for that and then you get detention. I feel like I’m just thrown in there, especially because it is so different from state to state. Like I came to Victoria and I was expected to know my times table and I was getting thrown all this work that I couldn’t do. In Adelaide, we didn’t learn our times table ‘till we were much older. But then I came to Victoria and they said you don’t know this, you’re going to stay behind. I didn’t want to do that. As much as you say that in my old school we didn’t do this and it isn’t my fault, they [teachers] don’t really care. They just say it’s not our fault that you moved and I would think it’s not my fault either.”

“I think it needs to be all levelled and standardised across all the states. Expectations across states should be the same. Moving states is the hardest thing.”

“I think a lot of problems can be solved simply by teachers caring.”

“I think mainstream school is not for me because I think teachers have just been there for so long that they are used to the older ways and they don’t understand that kids are always learning and intellectual in different ways.”

“I really think it just depends on the teacher. If you have a good teacher, the students will be good.”

“There’s lots of good teachers at that school but the Principal is just the worst.”

“Now it’s been six months since I’ve been to school and I just started here [Melbourne City Mission, Sunshine Academy Classroom] and this is much better. I’ve only been here for a week and it’s much better. It’s more convenient.”

“My mum actually found this place [MCM Sunshine] and she thought it would be really good for me. She thought the teacher seemed like a really good person and teacher.”

“For the last six months I’ve just been trying to get better, sort myself out, and see what I want to do.”

“I want to do sociology and criminology. I want to be a criminologist and work in the lab and figure out shit, but if I don’t get this Year 12 pass I’m not going to go. I want to be a mechanic. I’m interested in how things work, but I actually can’t be one.”

“I watch Criminal Minds and behavioural stuff and I enjoy reading about, but I think they should have more stuff like that in schools. Like more intellectual and interesting things. People just don’t want to do general things like Math, English or science.”

“I think this will be the last one [school] I go to. If I don’t finish here, I’m not going to finish.”

## Julian – Sunshine Academy Classroom

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**Julian is a current student at the Melbourne City Mission Sunshine foundation-intermediate classroom. He attended and completed primary school in New Zealand before moving to Australia, where he began high school. He will be continuing on with The Academy next year for his Year 12 studies.**

“I went to two primary schools in New Zealand. I had to move from the first one because I didn’t fit in.”

“I’ve been to three high schools here [in Australia].”

“I got expelled from all my past high schools. I knew that I got expelled and I knew why. With [school name], they just told me I had to leave, so I thought I should. [School name] was different, like, it took me awhile to get along and get used to the school. It wasn’t really my type of environment. Here [Melbourne Academy] is all good though.”

“I got into trouble – a lot of violence with different people. Basically, it was our backgrounds. Like, other people talk shit about where we come from, especially if it was race. That made a difference. Basically most of the violence at [school name] was because of race. At [school name], if anything went down, it would be us, like it would be the Polynesians in trouble straight away. They would say we were there [at the fight] even if we weren’t. Even if there were witnesses saying we weren’t there.”

“At [school name], there was a teacher there, she was my coordinator, she actually kind of helped us cause there was a few of us that actually got expelled from [school name] – like, four, five of us and we were all Polynesian. We all got expelled. It was a fight between us and the others. But, the funny thing is, the others, they got suspended, but we got expelled. The coordinator took me to the careers lady and we were told – our first choice was another flexible learning school but I didn’t get into that one because of my suspension records and all that. It was hard to get in there. Then, they showed me Melbourne Academy and they told me all about it. We came to see it and it was alright. It was pretty good. I started coming here at the beginning of this year. I gotta work on my attendance, but it’s all good here. I like it here. We can be open here to everyone, like, even the teachers and that. We can tell them what’s going on and stuff.”

“At the other schools, we got separated, like, we had to sit at the back [of the classroom]. We felt like they weren’t letting us be part of the class.”

“I feel like, people have got to keep their judgements to themselves. Like, at least open your ears to everyone’s story, not just listen to one person’s side of a story. Be open to everyone. Like, that’s the thing about [school name], they would interview us last because, like, they didn’t really want to hear our side of the story.”

“Listen to people. That’s basically it. Oh, and the uniform! They’re too strict on uniform!”

“If they had listened to us, maybe it would have changed things, like, if things changed we wouldn’t have to be violent and all that. We were only acting violent because they were treating us differently so we had to act. We were acting the way they wanted us to be.”

“There was a teacher at [school name], she was on our side. She asked us questions and she even tried giving feedback to the others, but, nothing happened.”

“No-one really asked about what we wanted to do, or how we felt about the class. So, we felt like we weren’t even meant to be there. So, in our heads, basically we just never showed up to school but then they would turn that around and act as if we were trying to wag and stuff. But really, we didn’t feel like it [coming to school] because we didn’t feel like there was a point of coming to school.”

“They told my family when I got expelled. That was the thing, the more we got into trouble at school – the more we would have trouble at home. Like, we already had family problems, but the more problems we had at school added to our family problems. Like, for most Polynesian kids, it’s not easy being at home, and then to go to school and not be accepted by the school, students and teachers, that’s more frustrating.”

“For us, we really can’t talk to our parents – it’s hard because we won’t accept what they tell us to do. But the thing is – us going to school, making friends and actually talking to people, it felt like we could actually open up to them but that wasn’t the fact at these schools. It got us frustrated. We didn’t know what else to do.”

“I have a few things in mind for my future. I wanted to become a chef, but then when I came to Melbourne Academy, I did music for VET and I started getting into music. Now, I write songs. I write about my life. I write about what’s happening at home. It’s like, where I can be open.”

“In Years 9 and 10, we got to pick our subjects. We still had Maths and English and that, but we got to pick our extended subjects, which was alright. It was all good. The subjects weren’t too hard. It was at a level we could actually do.”

## Owen and Sarah – Wellbeing staff, Sunshine Melbourne Academy Classrooms

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**Owen and Sarah are both youth workers with the Melbourne City Mission Academy Classrooms in Sunshine, as part of the wellbeing team.**

“For me, the most frustrating or challenging part is definitely trying to engage the students for them to be able to finish their VCAL. You get some students who come in who are very focused and are very good at getting stuff done and getting it done quickly, and then you have some students that obviously have so much potential and have so many pathways they can lead into but they struggle to get things done because of these really bad experiences they have had in their lives, like trauma, and also really bad experiences in mainstream education, which has led to having really low self-esteem and that internal voice that says, ‘I’m not good enough.’ But, they are. They are amazing. It’s like, ‘show me what you can do.’”

“As one of our students said to us, because her brother had been a bad sheep at this particular school, she was automatically labelled when she started there as well. Her reaction was, ‘well, fuck that. If you’re just going to see me as this, then I’m just going to act out as that.’”

“We definitely, 100 per cent, see a correlation between the amount of trauma a young person has been through and their level of disengagement in education.”

“For wellbeing staff, it’s that balance between the purpose of getting an education and balancing all the other stuff that’s going on in their lives to try and keep them motivated. The focus is that they are here to complete their VCAL, but they are also trying to work out everything else that’s going on in their lives as well. We are here to make sure they are well supported behind-the-scenes as well.”

“When I think about the things that work well when working alongside young people, it’s the flexibility of the program and the support that we offer – the unique structure and support that we offer and the tailored education and support we are able to provide as a pathway within the Melbourne Academy. The educators are really good at sitting down and saying, ‘Okay, this person is really good at this and they’re really interested in that – let’s get something that engages them in that so that they can get their outcomes. Flexibility, support and tailored education pathways are the things that I see as the most important.’”

“The individualised plans for each young person are so important, which goes from the education to the wellbeing to even how they are situated in the classroom. It’s about working with that young person and to know what works best for them. An example is if they need space because they can’t work in the classroom at a particular time, finding a space that works better for them. Really doing that one-one-one work, assistance and support throughout their education.”

“Classroom dynamics can be really challenging. We all have different classrooms as well, so it depends on the make-up of young people at that time. Owen has a more senior classroom and they’re already at a stage where they can work more independently, and my [Sarah’s] classroom, we’re currently trying to lead them into that, so they’re not quite there yet.



It's quite interesting and can be quite taxing at times, because, you know, you'll have young people who are a bit louder in the way they express themselves and then you've got a whole bunch who might be a little more sensitive to noise or to what other young people are saying and think what is being said is about them when it's not, for example. It's quite interesting working with those sort of dynamics and making sure everyone has the space that they need. But, it's also about working with the young people so that they understand the needs of the other young people, so it's about letting them know that sometimes other people are going to react to the tone of your voice, it's not about you and it's not that they're having a go at you, it's just that they're getting quite upset because you're expressing yourself quite loudly. Then it's about letting them know that maybe next time, you can give me a look and we can walk outside and you can express it outside. I've got most of those things with all the young people, whether it's a look or a keyword that we've got with them – or some of them will walk out of the classroom and text me, because I've got the work mobile on me, so I know that they're okay but they're getting a bit of fresh air at the time. That dynamic for me, having just started here this year, that group dynamic has been the biggest challenge for me but also really interesting."

"Learning respectful behaviour is an ongoing thing, it's not something that can be learnt in class on your first day. I've had numerous discussions, particularly with the females in the group as we're female heavy in the senior classroom, about making this a respectful and safe place. It's also teaching them about how they don't have to like, or get along with, every other student in the classroom and that this is part of life, but that you don't have to threaten or be nasty to them because of that reason. Most of the time, those discussions go pretty well and as I said before, they are ongoing discussions. They're not something I have with someone one day and then they ultimately change their mind, because I mean, you know although we have a large number of hours, 20 hours, of contact hours in the week, the rest of the time they're at home and maybe those standards aren't upheld at home. And they also come to us after how many years of being exposed to negative environments, so not having that stuff role modelled, coming in here can be really like, "what the fuck? Well, if I don't like this person then I'm going to express that to them" because that's what's been normal for them. Potentially, respectful behaviour is not being modelled in the home or community that they're in and this is really conflicting for them. But, I think they see it and I think the relationship between the youth worker and the teacher models that really well. I think over time, they are able to ask themselves which kind of environment works for them."

"We definitely build relationships with contacts in schools and then they call us up when they have a student that they think would be better suited to a flexible learning environment. The way that it's happened this year, I think the amount of referrals I've received from mainstream schools has increased dramatically this year, definitely towards the end of Term 3 referrals seem to skyrocket. They will usually call me up and explain the situation with the young person, so this can range from severe disengagement to sickness. I had one person call up and say that they had one young person who had been really sick throughout the whole year, and that they thought this young person would be really well suited to our classroom environment. Other times we have Principals or welfare coordinators calling up and saying that they have a young person who won't be finishing the year at their school, which is a really big thing at the moment. The introduction of recent standardised testing that's been rolled out in schools has really pushed our young people, or young people that are marginalised and disadvantaged in their communities, out of the education system. I do blame schools, I get really upset at them. A really good example is we've had a young person who came to us at the end of Term 3 this year, so she came over in Term 4, and she had been at the same high school since Year 7, yet she had some significant issues going on at home and this school decided to exit her in the last term of her last year at high school because she wasn't going to be finishing her VCAL certificate.

She has only attended our classroom 4 times this term and so this is a really bad outcome for this young person because she got pushed out to a school that she doesn't know and doesn't feel comfortable in – she doesn't have any friends here, I mean, she had friendship networks from Year 7 until the last term of Year 12 at her old school and so she's been taken out of that environment. Of course she's not going to be engaged. Instead of supporting her and allowing her to do that at their school, they decided to exit her from that school. We received two young people from this same school in the same situation and anecdotally, they told me that there were a group of up to 10 students who were pushed out because they wouldn't be finishing. This goes back to major policy decisions such as schools being forced to display their results on websites so that people can choose which school to go to and that defines whether that school is good, or not. It goes nothing into the demographics or the support that is offered to the students. So, the school then says to our students, "if you're not going to be finishing the year, this is going to reflect poorly on our results and maybe that's going to affect our funding, so we're going to push you out before those results are submitted, which is in Term 3 where they get a clear indication of whose going to be finishing, or passing their VCAL – or not, because VCAL is not like VCE."

"It's not my role to be challenging those people from schools who call me up, because at the end of the day, we need to have a really positive relationship with them and we don't want to disadvantage our potential future students further."

"I think it's about offering support to schools and showing them a different way and to be able to challenge them in a positive way. Maybe these kids don't fit into their model, but how can we give these schools advice on how to handle them? How can we support them to be able to stay in school?"

"I usually have one or two students who are from the out-of-home care system. One of mine has just dropped off though due to the fact that she turned 18<sup>24</sup>. She was living in lead tenant supported housing so she had a lot of supports there and then turned 18 and lost it. We've tried to keep things consistent here for her, so she can maintain some consistency in her life, but there was an upheaval with everything. She had to move out of her lead tenant property into something else, they hadn't lined something else up for her fast enough once she left, so she had to go into another supportive housing program and the house wasn't ready yet. So, it was a period of upheaval for her and we were coming into Term 4 as that was all happening and her behaviours started to change within the classroom and became more challenging, mainly because we were the only consistent people in her life at that stage so we got the brunt of the upset and hurt. It got to the stage where the classroom also wasn't a great space for her, she just needed the space to actually manage the housing situation and get herself comfortable, but I've kept in contact with her throughout this term. She's currently got a Springboard worker with education support, so I keep in contact with her [the worker] also and we've kept her space available in the classroom for her to come back when she's ready to. We've made a bit of a plan for her to come back at the start of next term, which gives her this holiday season to settle in and go back to her education."

"The lack of transition planning for when a young person turns 18 in out-of-home care is really distressing for young people."

"Education is generally the last thing both the young people, and staff, are thinking about because the focus is on housing and other issues they are dealing with in their lives."

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<sup>24</sup> Every year approximately 400 young people aged 16 to 18 have their Victorian Custody or Guardianship court orders cease for the last time. These young people might have been in foster care, residential care or living with their relatives or siblings (kinship care). <http://www.dhs.vic.gov.au/for-individuals/children,-families-and-young-people/care-leavers/young-care-leavers>

“But, by not having at-risk young people engaged in education, it severely limits what services they are entitled to access post care as well. There are a lot of support agencies out there that young people can’t engage with because they’re not in any sort of day or educational program, or work – so a lot of supported housing opportunities are usually for young people who are already engaged in some sort of daily program like education. For those young people who aren’t ready to engage or re-engage in education it can be a bit of a barrier to accessing other services they need. It’s kind of forming two groups of young people within the out-of-home-care-system: those who do attempt [to access day or educational programs] and those who don’t. Those who do [attempt] get more options for support and those who don’t [attempt] miss out”

“Big, overarching standardised policy doesn’t work. It might work for the slight majority of students within mainstream education, but it doesn’t work for the majority and we see this in our programs. One-size-fits-all systems has led to a number of young people disengaging from not getting results. You can’t compare two young people doing the same test when they have completely different intelligence and abilities – it’s like telling a fish to climb a ladder, knowing that they can’t. I think that VCAL is an awesome thing that’s been introduced into schools in Victoria, because it shows that there’s different pathways and gives young people that option rather than forcing them to do VCE, but, what our program definitely shows is that policy is letting down vulnerable young people.”

“It’s about individualised planning and support and what we offer young people is a trauma-informed practice by not overwhelming them with loads of information and people. We work on having a strong school community around them that does actually care, and cares about the different ways they learn, noticing when they’re not okay, and working out plans with them to support their needs. I think it’s really important to provide that for our young people so that they’re actually getting something out of education.”

“Ultimately, it would be fantastic if our program didn’t need to exist and if all schools had the ability and resources to support all young people. We get that so many teachers’ hands are tied in mainstream schools because of the constraints of the schools they work within. They might know that some young people need more support, but at the end of the day, whatever the Principal says, goes. It goes back down to the policy implementation – under resourcing and undervaluing the importance of support for young people.”

“The difference is, we [the wellbeing staff] are so available that we notice things, whether it’s a mood change or noticing that a young person may not seem okay on any given day. We can actually have that conversation with the young people to see what’s going on for them. Can you imagine one chaplain in an entire school having that sort of relationship with the students at their school? Of course young people are going to slip through the cracks. And teachers aren’t trained to notice these signs either, that’s not their job.”

## Sophie and Janae – Sunshine Academy Classroom

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**Sophie and Janae are two current students at the Melbourne City Mission Sunshine intermediate classroom. Between the two girls, they have been to four different high schools and eight primary schools. They are due to finish their studies with the Academy classroom at the end of 2017.**

“We both went to four primary schools and two high schools each.”

“My primary schools were always good, but I moved to be with friends or family.”

“I never was expelled from high school, I was told that they [my school] didn’t want an 18 year old to repeat Year 10 again. They told me that I had to leave and find a job. They offered me no support, it was fucked. One of the teachers at this same school actually told me it was their job to yell at me. Because of this teacher, I had no maths class – I just floated around the school during this period every day. There was a school counsellor, but I was never recommended to speak with them.”

“The reason I had to repeat was because of attendance and this was because the teachers were so fucked up – I didn’t want to be around them so I stopped coming to school. I got accused for stealing, and I would never steal, and then when I went to go confront the teacher that told all the other teachers, she said that I tried to fight her. All I did was walk up to her and say her name and she ran away. I would not steal.”

“I never really got told to leave, I left because of the teachers. Me and Stephanie went to the same high school and were in the same class. The school was [school name].”

“Teachers never listened, at all. You’ll say one thing but they don’t give a shit. The teachers were very rude and they didn’t care about the students. When my mum went to speak with them, they didn’t even want to hear what she had to say and that was a parent.”

“My mum even hates this school. My younger brother goes there but only because of the rugby academy. That’s the only good thing about that school. The sport. That’s the only reason my brother is going to that school. And it’s only good for sport for the boys, not the girls. The girls do get to play rugby but they don’t get the same stuff as what the boys get.”

“The subjects at school would be good if the teachers were better. One of my teachers fucking cried because we wouldn’t stop talking. She cried. Like, really? She would tell us about her life story instead of teach us. She wasn’t a good teacher.”

“A good teacher is one that listens and wants to teach you in a way that you are able to learn, and that cares. Not one that just makes you write everything that’s on the board and then just says, ‘do it’.”

“I want to study business or management when I’m finished high school. I was also thinking real estate. Anything got to do with business.”

“If we had stayed at [school name], we wouldn’t be doing anything. I wouldn’t be going to school. Like, I literally had more than 200 days off last year. Throughout that whole time, they didn’t even call my parents and tell them I wasn’t going to school. I didn’t get called into meetings – nothing. That’s what annoyed me the most. They didn’t even try. And then when I tried to tell them that I’d try my hardest, no, they didn’t want to hear that. They just wanted me gone.”

“I was told, you either repeat or you leave. That’s what they said to me.”

“Like, at this school there’s no heating or air conditioners but yet they went and bought this login system for the students. My chair would be soaking wet in sweat in summer because it was so hot or I’d be sick in winter because it was so cold. Some of the teachers, the ones we liked, would even say that the school really needed to get air cons and heaters.”

“They sold these jackets at the school shop and we bought them but now we’re not allowed to wear them – but when they came out, we had to buy them. They would make us wear our blazers in 40 degree heat. We had to wear white long socks in summer and black long socks in winter and if you wore white in winter, you’d get a half hour detention. This wasn’t even a private school. Boys had to wear ties. We would get detentions if we didn’t have our calculator or diary.”

“I like being here [Melbourne Academy] heaps better. I feel respected and heard by the teachers. And you can work and do everything in your own time and at your own pace, which is the best thing about it. I actually want to come to school now. I would never want to even go to school, I’d just stay home every single day.”

“I’ve got really bad anxiety now. Really bad. I never used to. Like, I got bullied this whole year at my old school. Usually I can deal with shit like that but this time, I couldn’t. And I was bullied for things that normally wouldn’t get at me, but this time it did. I wouldn’t be able to get out of bed, my mum couldn’t even get me out of bed so she said that I had to find another school because I couldn’t keep going how I was.”

“I found this school because I actually came here to see one of my friends who goes here, and that’s how I heard about the school. Like, I was looking for other courses and schools but I found this and I thought, ‘this seems good.’ I came to talk to Owen and I spoke with him that same day.”

“We both feel so much happier. It feels like they actually care about us learning and stuff. At our other schools, they cared more about the uniforms than anything else.”

Appendix (iii)

Poster created by students from Sunshine senior classroom during group brainstorm session

