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Commission of Inquiry  
C/- Child Safety System  
Reply Paid 89453  
BRISBANE QLD 4000  
By email: [info@childsafetyinquiry.qld.gov.au](mailto:info@childsafetyinquiry.qld.gov.au)

Dear Sir or Madam

## **The Need for Long-Term, Relational, One-on-One Educational and Wellbeing Support for Young People in Out-of-Home Care**

### **Introduction**

The Change for Youth Foundation welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Queensland Child Protection Inquiry. Our submission focuses on a critical systemic issue consistently overlooked across Child Safety, Education and Youth Justice: the absence of sustained, relationship-based, one-on-one support for children and young people in out-of-home care who have fallen behind at school and who present with complex trauma-related needs.

For more than a decade, Queensland reviews have highlighted the same gap—children in care do not receive the depth, frequency, or consistency of support needed to overcome the impacts of trauma, disrupted attachment, and multiple placement and school transitions. Despite this, the service system remains largely crisis-oriented and short-term.

The Change for Youth Foundation operates the Empower Youth Program (EYP), an intensive, trauma-informed, relational mentoring and educational support model. This submission draws heavily on our experience supporting more than 1,000 children in care since 2022, alongside state, national and international evidence.

### **The Problem: Disengagement, Instability and Fragmented Support**

Young people in out-of-home care in Queensland face compounding barriers that the current system is not designed to address:

#### ***School Disengagement***

- Children in care have significantly lower attendance rates and higher suspension rates than their peers.
- Many experience years of disrupted learning due to placement moves, behavioural escalation linked to trauma, and limited academic support.

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- By the time they reach Youth Justice, more than 80% are disengaged from school.

### *Placement Instability*

- Placement instability is one of the strongest predictors of poor educational and wellbeing outcomes.
- Instability disrupts relationships, routines, attachments, connection to culture, and trust in adults.
- Behavioural escalation often reflects trauma, not defiance, yet behavioural responses frequently lead to further placement disruption.

### *Lack of Consistent Adults*

Children in care routinely interact with dozens of professionals across Child Safety, Youth Justice, allied health, school and NGO providers.

High turnover and short-term intervention models mean many never experience:

- a stable mentor
- continuity of support
- long-term attachment to at least one trusted adult.

### *Fragmented Systems*

Schools, carers, caseworkers and therapeutic services frequently operate in silos, resulting in:

- mixed messaging
- inconsistent behaviour support approaches
- gaps in safety planning
- duplication of work
- frustration for carers and educators
- children feeling misunderstood and unsafe.

### *Escalation to High-Cost Systems*

Without early, relational, sustained support, young people often move into:

- high-cost residential placements
- Youth Justice involvement
- chronic disengagement
- homelessness
- and long-term adult service systems.

This represents significant social and economic cost to government, but more importantly, profound personal cost to the young person.

### **Evidence: Why One-on-One Relational Support Works**

Research is unequivocal: long-term, consistent relationships with safe adults are the single strongest protective factor for children who have experienced trauma (Harvard Center on the Developing Child, 2015).

Evidence also shows that:

- trauma impacts executive functioning, emotional regulation, cognitive development and learning capacity (AIHW, 2023)
- stable, supportive adult relationships mitigate these effects
- individualised, flexible, relationship-based support improves school engagement and reduces behavioural incidents
- early intervention reduces Youth Justice involvement (QPC, 2020; QAO, 2022)

The Child Protection Inquiry’s own focus areas—early intervention, prevention, stability and system coordination—align directly with these findings.

### The Empower Youth Program: A Model That Fills the Gap

The Empower Youth Program (EYP) provides the sustained, relationship-based support that Queensland’s current service system does not fund or deliver.

#### *Program Overview*

- Weekly, one-on-one mentoring and educational support
- Minimum 12-month engagement
- Delivered at home, school and in the community
- Paired with one consistent Learning Support & Wellbeing Mentor
- Trauma-informed, culturally responsive, developmentally informed
- Integrated with Child Safety, schools, carers, Youth Justice and therapeutic supports

#### *What Mentors Do*

Mentors support:

- regulation – emotional, sensory and behavioural
- school engagement – attendance, homework, liaison with teachers, classroom adjustments
- routine and stability – predictable weekly contact
- social skills and communication
- protective behaviours and safety planning
- connection to culture, identity and community
- family engagement where safe and appropriate

#### *Cultural Responsiveness*

45% of participants identify as First Nations. EYP collaborates with QATSCIPP and community partners to ensure culturally informed practice and connection.

#### *Outcomes*

Independent 2024 Lumenia evaluation:

- \$5.60 return for every \$1 invested
- 82% positive year-on-year outcome retention
- Improved school attendance and engagement
- Reduced behavioural incidents
- High levels of placement stability
- Reductions in Youth Justice involvement and escalation

## What We See on the Ground: System Failures Affecting Children’s Education

While schools receive targeted funding to support students in out-of-home care, including through mechanisms such as Education Support Plans (ESPs), there is limited visibility on how consistently this investment translates into improved engagement, attendance and learning outcomes for individual children and young people. Schools are increasingly navigating complex presentations of trauma, disengagement and placement instability, alongside broader workforce and system pressures, which can constrain their ability to provide sustained, individualised support. This is not a reflection of a lack of commitment within schools, but of a system under strain. There is an opportunity to strengthen the impact of existing investment by complementing school-based supports with approaches that provide consistent, relationship-based support across the environments surrounding a young person.

Across more than 1,000 young people supported, consistent themes emerge:

1. Children in care who fall behind at school rarely catch up without sustained, one-on-one support over time
2. Schools struggle to manage trauma-driven behaviour without consistent external support
3. Short-term funding windows (12–24 weeks) are not adequate for children with complex trauma
4. Many children are assessed repeatedly but receive little ongoing intervention
5. Carers feel overwhelmed and unsupported
6. Caseworkers do not have the capacity for weekly educational or relational support
7. Young people lose connection to culture and identity during placement changes
8. Youth Justice involvement frequently begins with school disengagement

These issues are not caused by a lack of care or effort by government staff—they are caused by structural gaps and funding models that do not permit long-term, relational work.

## What Young People Need (According to Evidence and Practice)

Young people in care need:

- one trusted adult
- long-term relational stability
- trauma-informed support, not punishment
- individualised learning support
- cultural connection and identity development
- collaboration between school, home, Child Safety and allied health
- flexible support that follows the young person across placements and school changes

The Empower Youth Program delivers all of these.

## System Reform Recommendations

We respectfully recommend that the Inquiry adopt the following reforms to strengthen educational outcomes for children in out-of-home care:

*Fund long-term, relationship-based, one-on-one mentoring for all children in care who fall behind at school*

A minimum of 12 months support, with the ability to extend as needed.

*Embed relational support as a core component of Queensland's child protection system*

Relational stability must be viewed as essential, not optional.

*Ensure every child in care with educational delay receives individualised learning and engagement support*

Delivered by trained mentors or specialists who can work across home, school and community.

*Enable flexible, place-based, mobile support that follows the young person across placements*

Children should not lose critical support every time they move placement or school.

*Reduce administrative barriers and allow automatic access for eligible children*

Funding should not depend on:

- carer capacity
- individual placement budgets
- discretionary spending
- postcode or region

*Invest in programs with demonstrated social return*

Programs such as EYP reduce long-term expenditure across:

- Child Safety
- Youth Justice
- Education
- Residential care

*Strengthen cross-agency collaboration mechanisms*

Formal structures ensuring consistent communication between:

- child safety officers
- schools
- carers
- mentors
- therapeutic supports

## Conclusion

Queensland's children in out-of-home care deserve more than crisis response and short-term interventions. They need long-term, consistent, relational support—the kind that helps them re-engage with school, develop emotional regulation, feel safe with adults, build community connections, and form a stable identity.

The Empower Youth Program demonstrates what is possible when young people receive this support.

We urge the Inquiry to recognise the essential role of one-on-one, relationship-based, flexible support as a core component of the child protection system—and to recommend sustained government investment in such models.

The Change for Youth Foundation would welcome the opportunity to provide further information, case studies, data, or oral evidence to the Inquiry.

Yours faithfully,



**Lisa Honeychurch**

*On behalf of the Board for Change For Youth Foundation*