

## Educational outcomes of children on guardianship or custody orders: A pilot study

Australian Institute of Health and Welfare

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The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) has recently released a report on the educational outcomes for children and young people on guardianship or custody orders. This report, four years in the making, represents one of the first comprehensive Australian assessments based on educational performance data from multiple jurisdictions for children on guardianship or custody orders. Developed for the National Child Protection and Support Services data group, the study was funded by the Community and Disability Services Ministers' Advisory Council (AIHW 2007).

This pilot study examines how children on guardianship/ custody orders are performing compared with all Australian children in education department-based testing for reading and numeracy in years 3, 5 and 7. Mean test scores were examined in addition to the achievement of national benchmarks for reading and numeracy. These nationally agreed benchmarks are designed to assess whether children have achieved the minimum standards for years 3, 5 and 7 (AIHW 2007). Data on 895 children on guardianship or custody orders were collected from five jurisdictions – Queensland, Victoria, South Australia, Tasmania and the Australian Capital Territory – for August 2003 (AIHW 2007). The data were linked through collaborative efforts by state and territory education and community services departments.

### FINDINGS

The key findings of the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2007) report were as follows:

- The educational achievement for children on orders was below their peers across all year levels.
- The mean reading and numeracy test scores for

children on orders were lower than for all children across all 3, 5 and 7 year levels — on the whole, this finding was statistically significant.

- Children on orders were significantly less likely to achieve the national benchmarks across almost all year levels compared with all children.
- There is some evidence of a 'substantial decline' in the proportion of children on orders achieving the national benchmarks as they progress through their schooling — that is, Year 5 and Year 7 students were generally less likely to achieve the benchmarks than those in Year 3.
- Numeracy is an area where the proportion of children on orders achieving the benchmarks tended to decrease as children 'progressed' through school (years 3, 5 and 7) across all jurisdictions.
- For literacy there is some evidence of a decline for children on orders between year 3 and year 5, but year 7 results generally showed a slight improvement on the year 5 results in most states and territories.
- Indigenous children (representing 20 per cent of all children on orders in this study) had significantly lower test scores than other children on orders (AIHW 2007, p.19). AIHW estimates the disadvantage for Indigenous children is 'equivalent to about eight to twelve months of schooling' (AIHW 2007, p.19).
- There were no consistent findings regarding the effects of living arrangements, gender or length of time on care and protection orders on academic performance.

### LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Interestingly the data in this study represents only 51 per cent of all estimated children on all types of guardianship or custody orders across the 5 jurisdictions (AIHW 2007, p.8). For the 49 per cent not included in this study, we can speculate that some may have been on guardianship/custody orders which were excluded from this study (e.g. permanent care orders), some children may have been withdrawn from

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testing by their caregivers, absent on the day of testing or exempted from testing. Queensland has previously reported that between 14 and 18 per cent of children in care are exempted from the tests (CREATE Foundation 2006, p. 13). In the reporting of all children, those who are exempted are included in the results as falling below the benchmark (AIHW 2007, p.12). It is concerning that, if we 'include' the Queensland percentages exempted from the testing, the number of the children on orders not reaching the national benchmarks would increase to half of the children in some tests and years. Also, as only children on orders attending government schools were included in this study, these data point to the possibility that a sizeable proportion of children on orders are attending non-government schools.

A further limitation is that each state and territory has different reading and numeracy tests – therefore, the mean test scores cannot be compared between states and territories (AIHW 2007, p.26). The AIHW also recognises that the data collected by the states and territories does not examine socio-economic background, parents' education levels, stability in care or length of time in current living arrangement, yet each of these are likely to be important factors in the educational outcomes of children in care (AIHW 2007).

While New South Wales, Western Australia and the Northern Territory data have not been reported in this study, steps are being undertaken to collect these data. Having this larger data set will assist in further identifying the factors that influence educational outcomes. It is hoped that stage 2 of this project will track longitudinally how educational outcomes change over time while children are in care.

## WHERE TO FROM HERE

It is critical that the education and community services departments make an ongoing commitment to fund and develop this work (AIHW 2007). At the same time, there is also a vital need to stop and review the strategies that are currently in place for individual children in care. While this report, and the 2006 CREATE Report Card on Education (CREATE Foundation 2006) provide a thorough stock-take of the strategies used by various government departments and the out-of-home care sector, more action is needed for individual children in out-of-home care. This report resoundingly outlines the educational disadvantages children in care face, and we must not be lulled into inaction by the significant achievements that have been made systemically on this issue, through the development of partnership agreements, memoranda of understanding, and the implementation of individual education plans for many children in out-of-home care. There remains a critical need to act upon this evidence immediately child by child, and this report provides some pointers to direct our actions:

- Most Indigenous children in care require significant additional educational input.
- Numeracy requires a greater focus for children on orders.
- Literacy remains a significant issue for many children on orders.
- We cannot be complacent and wait for improvement over the years of schooling – action must be early and/or immediate and of sufficient intensity.

Overall we must keep in mind that the failure of students in care to meet the national reading and numeracy benchmarks indicates that these students will have 'difficulty progressing to the next level' of their education (AIHW 2007, p.5). Our failure to respond effectively to this will result in cumulative disadvantage (Kids in Care Education Committee Working Group 2003) that students will find increasingly difficult to overcome as the years progress. □

## REFERENCES

- Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2007) *Educational outcomes of children on guardianship or custody orders: A pilot study*, AIHW Cat. No. CWS 30, Canberra.
- CREATE Foundation (2006) *Report Card on Education*, Sydney.
- Kids in Care Education Committee Working Group (2003) *Educating children and young people in care of the state*, Queensland Government, Brisbane.