

# Fostering education and learning

Supporting foster carers to support educational aspiration and achievement



Children and young people in out-of-home care (OOHC) deserve a good education. Yet although many do well at school, others have poor educational outcomes. This results in negative longer term outcomes and a higher risk of homelessness, unemployment and poverty than their peers. At the same time research clearly demonstrates that when foster carers support education and learning it can have a significant impact on educational aspiration, progress and achievement.

This study documents the experiences of 113 Tasmanian foster carers in supporting education, what helps or hinders them in this role and how they can be better supported to support education.

*They are coming in with really low literacy levels and they need support and help but there is not enough support at school to bring them up to the level. It has a detrimental effect because they then say they're stupid and it's not good for their self esteem. That can carry on into the rest of their life. The school can only do so much. I think the school has bent over backwards to assist them in every way they can. It's not a teacher issue but a government and a financial issue.*

**(Foster carer)**

*For the last three years he hasn't been full time at school because there are not enough staff to give him the one on one attention he needs. Nearly every day I get a call after one or two hours, please come and pick him up because we can't handle him. At the moment he's only at school from 9 to 12. There is hardly any learning which really concerns me. When there are behavioural difficulties it's suspension. He is now getting very angry about being suspended. A lot of the behaviour is frustration. He wasn't being treated as normal. No one seems able to help me. (Foster carer)*

*My carer is really helpful and really wants me to get an education. She tries to help me whenever she can. Her encouragement has been really, really important. If she didn't come in regularly to check up on me I probably would be watching movies online. So she watches me but not too much. She gives me my space and respects that and she trusts me. (Student in OOHC)*



# What are the facts?

- There are currently 1,061 children and young people living in OOHC in Tasmania with 41% (or about 435) living in over 200 foster care households (AIHW 2016).
- Across Australia students in OOHC run a high risk of poorer educational outcomes than their peers. They have poorer grades, lower scores on standardised tests, developmental delays, special educational needs, behavioural and disciplinary problems and higher rates of absenteeism, truancy, suspension, exclusion and disengagement (AIHW 2015). This is true in all jurisdictions, including Tasmania. The most recent publically available figures for Tasmania show that students in OOHC are between 19% and 43% below National Minimum Standards compared with a range of 6% to 10% for other students (DoE 2011).
- Exposure to trauma is increasingly recognised as a key factor driving poor educational outcomes. Most children and young people coming into state care do so after experiencing some form of neglect or abuse. At the same time entering care is a major upheaval. This double dose of adversity can give rise to a set of trauma-related behaviours which can impact on learning and on school engagement and participation (Tobin 2016).
- Research demonstrates that the aspiration of carers, their active support and good links between home and school have a positive impact on educational outcomes (Sebba et al. 2015). Increasingly, academics and policy makers emphasise that a truly effective education needs to be a partnership between families and schools where parents and carers are actively engaged.

*[A care team meeting] brings every single person working with the children together in the one room so that everyone is on the same page. This is a huge support to me to know we have several other professionals that are all supporting me and the children and we can then share ideas and the struggles and get input from experts. Anything that is coming up as an issue is immediately dealt with. The assistant principal will liaise with all the teachers and bring that to the meeting. That has been the biggest support and their willingness to learn about trauma.*

**(Foster carer)**

## The research involved:

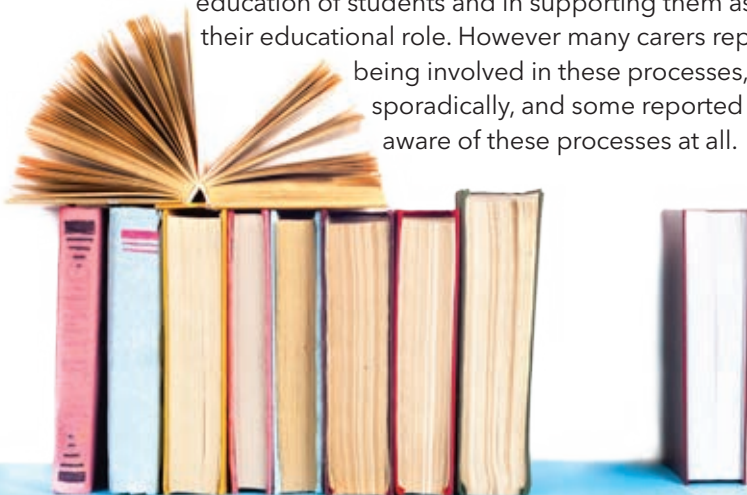
- collecting information from 113 foster carer households across the state through focus groups and a questionnaire survey about their experiences with education. They represent approaching half of the foster care households with a current placement in Tasmania;
- a focus group with eight young people about their experiences;
- six good practice case studies about building effective partnerships between carers, students, schools, child safety workers and other stakeholders which support education; and
- reviewing research, good practice literature, policy and service initiatives and available statistical information in Tasmania, Australia and internationally.

*If we are to break the cycle then we need to make sure they get the best education they are capable of achieving. All carers should have a requirement to vocalise strongly and appropriately. (Foster carer)*



# Key findings

- **Inconsistency across Tasmanian schools in their ability to meet the learning, social and emotional needs of students in OOHC.** Some carers reported very good working relationships with schools which were effectively meeting students' needs. Others were struggling and carers commented on a lack of comprehensive assessment of educational needs, inadequate 'catch up' support for those with gaps in their education and difficulties in managing behaviours in mainstream classrooms. This was especially true in the absence of adequate levels of understanding about trauma and its impact on learning and behaviour among school staff. The result is high rates of withdrawal, suspension, exclusion and part-time education among students in OOHC, which puts considerable pressure on foster carers and the stability of placements. Problems become more acute as students move from primary to high school and carers described having to employ all their advocacy skills to improve the school experiences of those they were caring for.
- **An underutilisation of existing collaborative mechanisms to support education.** A Partnering Agreement between the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) and the Department of Education (DoE) outlines a collaborative approach to supporting students in OOHC to achieve educationally. The core of this approach is requiring each student in OOHC to have a Personalised Learning Plan (PLP) as part of a Case and Care Plan. Those carers who had been involved in these collaborative processes had found them valuable in supporting the education of students and in supporting them as carers in their educational role. However many carers reported not being involved in these processes, or only sporadically, and some reported not being aware of these processes at all.





*The department doesn't offer any help with education. There are massive highs and low and you can feel overwhelmed. The department needs to understand that if the carer isn't getting the support it adds extra pressure at home. Then they run the risk of the placement breaking down if they don't feel supported. There's a problem in that if you ask for help from child protection you are seen as not coping. So we don't say anything. (Foster carer)*

- **A spectrum of levels of support with educational issues from the child protection system.** Support was very dependent on the individual child safety worker. Some carers described good collaboration and assistance with educational advocacy, being allowed to make day-to-day decisions about school life and sharing high expectations and aspirations for students. Others described being excluded from decision-making, fighting low educational expectations, difficulties in accessing funding for education-related expenses and not being treated as an integral and valued member of the care team. This mixed picture was unrelated to region, the carer's educational level or the complexity of student need. However carers outsourced to OOH provider agencies reported higher levels of collaboration and support with education and particularly valued the role of education specialists in these agencies.
- **Carers committed to providing a learning environment at home despite a number of barriers.** Carers were involved in helping with homework, providing access to computers, books and opportunities for reading, supporting hobbies and interests, broadening horizons and raising aspirations. However they also described a number of barriers to providing educationally-orientated placements. These included a lack of money and time as well as a lack of knowledge and information about strategies for learning and how best to work alongside the school curriculum. Several carers expressed high levels of frustration that limited resourcing in schools meant that they were expected to fill the gaps. They described the pressures this created and the negative impact it had on their own lives: practically, financially, socially and emotionally.

- **Carers saw their role as providing a sound platform for learning.**

Whilst foster carers identified their key role as providing a stable home and sense of security, they also identified encouragement and praise, being interested in education, providing a broad range of learning opportunities and raising aspirations as essential parts of the task. In order to perform this effectively they listed a range of supports they would like to see available to them. These included a better understanding of the impact of trauma, special educational needs, educational advocacy, how to support learning at home and more involvement in collaborative processes and decision-making. Almost two-thirds of carers identified specialist staff with educational roles as an effective model for delivering this support alongside access to ongoing training.

- **The views of young people reflected those of foster carers.** In their school lives young people wanted to see additional support available to them with academic work and a better understanding from school staff about what being in the OOHC system meant. Like carers, they wanted to be routinely involved in decision-making and developing PLPs and be fully included in the mainstream school experience. At home they highly valued the encouragement and support of foster carers with their education, in pursuing their interests and in broadening their horizons. Having carers who understood what a contemporary education looked like and what opportunities it offered was important and appreciated.

- Lastly the research found **a range of models operating in other jurisdictions to support foster carers to support education.** These were operating in the home, in assisting carers in their role as educational advocates and supporting them as valued members of collaborative processes. Of particular interest was the role of education specialists working to support both students in OOHC and those caring for them as well as peer support from Education Champions. These approaches can provide a bridge between carers, child safety staff and education staff to support education as well as offering a pool of expertise about how to tackle educational challenges.



# Anglicare recommends:

That the Government commit to improving educational outcomes for students in OOHC as a whole-of-government priority. This entails:

- **strengthening already existing collaborative mechanisms through:**
  - supporting foster carers to participate in decision-making and collaborative mechanisms
  - improving school understanding of the importance of the PLP process and its implementation
  - improving school, child protection and carer understanding of trauma and its impact on learning and behaviour
  - reviewing the current Partnering Agreement to clarify and reinforce collaborative and accountability mechanisms.
- **developing additional mechanisms to support students in OOHC through:**
  - the allocation of additional resourcing to schools and carers to meet the educational needs of students impacted by trauma
  - priority access to education assessment processes for students in OOHC to guide timely and appropriate learning and behaviour strategies
  - ensuring the regular publication of data on the educational progress and outcomes for students in OOHC to highlight trends and identify gaps
- **supporting foster carers to support education through:**
  - recognising and reinforcing the central role foster carers play in the lives and education of children and young people in foster care
  - providing better access for carers to training, information, support and decision-making processes about educational issues
  - promoting the role of education specialists to provide support to foster carers and students about educational matters
  - exploring the role of peer mentoring/support in supporting foster carers with educational challenges.



## References

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## For more information

The full report, *Fostering education: Supporting foster carers to help children and young people learn*, by Teresa Hinton is published by the Social Action and Research Centre at Anglicare Tasmania.

It can be downloaded at [www.anglicare-tas.org.au](http://www.anglicare-tas.org.au)

### **Social Action and Research Centre (SARC)**

Anglicare's SARC team works with low income Tasmanians to identify the structural barriers that impact most severely on their lives. The Centre pursues policy change on these issues at a State and Federal level.