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**WORKING WITH THE EDUCATION NEEDS OF
JUVENILE OFFENDERS IN A COMMUNITY CONTEXT**

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BACKGROUND

The Western Australian Ministry of Justice acknowledges and provides for the education needs of juvenile offenders in both custodial and community settings. Within the community context, priority is given to compulsory school aged juvenile offenders (12-15 years of age). Community Based Education Officers support juvenile offenders into meaningful education placements for the purpose of breaking the offending cycle. Education liaison and advocacy assists compulsory school aged juvenile offenders to participate in their local communities in a positive manner and develop the social and academic skills necessary to compete in the mainstream labour market.

This paper outlines the role of Community Based Education Officers, appropriate education services for juvenile offenders in their local communities and some best practise ideas in advocating education excellence for juvenile offenders in mainstream schools.

Custodial Education Services

The Western Australian Ministry of Justice custodial educational service provides detainees with individual education plans for the duration of their sentence. Approximately 10% of compulsory school aged convicted juvenile offenders receive custodial sentences.

All attempts are made to link compulsory school aged detainees with education service deliverers in their local community via Community Based Education Officers. They endeavour to establish and maintain positive relationships between detainees and education personnel in the community.

"Portable" individual education programs are developed within either the school or custodial venues. Where possible, compulsory school aged juvenile offenders entering or leaving detention have a sense of continuity with their individual education programs.

Community Based Education Officers are responsible for liaising with detention centre and community based teaching staff. They aim to secure the best possible education pathways for juvenile offenders upon release from detention.

Community Based Education Services

Approximately 90% of compulsory school aged juvenile offenders in Western Australia complete Community Based Court Orders. It is therefore vital that Community Based Education Officers focus upon accessing, promoting and supporting high quality education services for juvenile offenders in their local residential areas. Four Community Based Education Officers are currently employed by the Western Australian Ministry of Justice to provide education assistance to young offenders in the metropolitan area. These Officers share

a collective caseload of approximately one hundred and twenty young offenders These youth are alienated from mainstream education and are not receiving accredited, recognisable qualifications.

THE ROLE OF COMMUNITY BASED EDUCATION OFFICERS

It can be said that most school aged young offenders have negative views of schools and experience difficulty in maintaining regular school attendance and compliant social behaviour. It may also be said that mainstream schools in Western Australia have historically been unable to cater for the educational needs of compulsory school aged juvenile offenders. Consequently, juvenile offenders have been referred to alternative education programmes. These programmes appear to have not provided legitimate, accredited education pathways leading to either mainstream schools, vocational training programs or full time employment.

Liaison

Community Based Education Officers act as liaison agents between juvenile offenders, their caregivers and education providers in the community. The purpose of this liaison is to bring the education needs of compulsory school aged juvenile offenders to the attention of their local schools.

Linking

Community Based Education Officers always attempt to identify an Education Department of Western Australia key person and link them with the young offender. Compulsory school aged juvenile offenders may be also linked with independent education providers where appropriate, eg. Independent Schools.

Encouraging relationships between community based educators and compulsory school aged juvenile offenders assists in bringing the educational needs of juvenile offenders to the attention of schools, teachers and the community as a whole. These links are established with the assumption that these people will take up ongoing responsibility for the support of juvenile offenders' education pathways until the end of their compulsory schooling.

Advocacy

The Education Department of Western Australia has recently recognised the educational needs of, and given priority to, "alienated students" and "students

at educational risk". This focus upon the educational needs of such students includes an acknowledgment that compulsory school aged young offenders constitute a part of any school population and have lawful right to an education.

It is often the case that juvenile offenders have contact with a variety of government and non government agencies. Community Based Education Officers rely on strong professional networks consisting of employees from other agencies who also have involvement with juvenile offenders. This enables the development of collaborative approaches to providing necessary services to "mutual clients" and their families.

Offending behaviour is only one aspect of the juvenile offender's life and a variety of labels can be applied to these young people according to their particular human service needs. A young offender may attract the following labels: student, patient, client, youth, trainee.

Collaboration with workers from other involved agencies establishes a collective voice requesting quality education for juvenile offenders. Other agencies providing services to young offenders often includes:

- Family and Children's Services
- Health Department and Medical Services
- The Western Australian Department of Training
- Disability Services Commission
- Community Based, non government youth service providers

Community Based Education Officers devise education support plans in collaboration with schools and other involved agencies. This provides schools with knowledge of various other strategies in place to encourage individual juvenile offenders to attend and participate in their learning pathways. It also offers schools the opportunity to work with other agencies thus improving their knowledge of, and access to community resources and facilities.

QUALITY EDUCATION FOR JUVENILE OFFENDERS IN THE COMMUNITY CONTEXT

Compulsory school aged juvenile offenders present a challenge to mainstream schools. This student population often exhibits non-compliant behaviour, school refusal, low academic achievement and poor self esteem. Typically, juvenile offenders do not see themselves as belonging to their local school population and schools seem unable provide a flexible, interest based curriculum content.

Historically, community based alternative education programmes have provided short term interventions for juvenile offenders. These programs are costly and have not prepared juvenile offenders to achieve real long term education, vocational training or employment outcomes. Reintegration into

mainstream school settings has rarely taken place. Convenient, isolated education settings appear to have provided schools with a way of removing difficult students from the mainstream school population. Whilst most young offenders have enjoyed these alternative learning settings they have not developed academic and social skills alongside their mainstream peers.

A sensible combination of flexible timetabling, the provision of teachers skilled in dealing with non-compliant, low achieving students and a collaborative relationship with other community agencies may see schools providing an education service considered relevant by juvenile offenders. These young people may then experience a sense of belonging to their school community.

The education needs of compulsory school aged offenders in the community context include access to education services in schools that are delivered in a more flexible manner. Accredited, legitimate education services should be made available to compulsory school aged young offenders. A school commitment to the delivery of high quality education to “alienated” and “students at education risk” is essential. Literacy and numeracy skill acquisition must be the central focus of a student centred curriculum. Juvenile offenders as students require intensive support to develop skills that make them competitive in progressing through education towards employment or further training.

A mainstream school context provides staff, resources, emotional support and student access to mainstream classes, eg sport, maths, vocational education. The opportunity to belong to a school that recognises student diversity will encourage juvenile offenders to develop the necessary social skills to participate positively in the school, labour market and wider community.

The 10% of compulsory school aged young offenders serving detention sentences must have access to “portable” individual education programs. These individual education packages will assist juvenile offenders in recognising their place in the school community as a student. This educational continuity will serve to encourage positive emotional links with the learning environment available upon release.

SOME EXAMPLES OF COMMUNITY BASED EDUCATION OFFICER BEST PRACTICE

Alienated Aboriginal Student Programs in Mainstream School Settings

Community Based Education Officers are very aware of the education needs of aboriginal young offenders. These young people are highly represented in

both custodial and community contexts. Aboriginal compulsory school aged juvenile offenders occupy 40% of Community Based Education Officer caseloads in the Perth metropolitan area.

Community Based Education Officers encourage mainstream schools to establish culturally relevant programs within the school setting for alienated aboriginal students. Advocating for such services in schools requires a strong commitment to involving aboriginal community members and caregivers in the planning and delivery of student centred curriculum material.

Statistics

Accurate statistical data of compulsory school aged juvenile offenders who are not engaged in education is kept by Community Based Education Officers. These statistics highlight truancy trends on a local level. Data indicating age, ethnicity and residential areas having a high need for education services targeting the needs of compulsory school aged juvenile offenders is also available. Community Based Education Officers forward this information to The Education Department Of Western Australia to assist in the planning of adequate education services that recognise the needs of compulsory school aged offenders.

Portable Education Plans

Community Based Education Officers always attempt to secure education placements for compulsory school aged detainees prior to release. Given the recent positive changes in the Education Department of Western Australia's approach to "alienated" students, it is now possible to work collaboratively with educators in the community to develop portable education plans. These individual education packages are developed in schools. They provide custodial teachers with curriculum ideas, examples of student academic competencies and assist in providing ideas for learning activities whilst in detention.

Community Based Education Officers also encourage detainees and their teachers, (in the community) to communicate on the phone or in writing. This aims to assist detainees in experiencing education as being important, continuous and meaningful.

Creative School Based Approaches to Truancy

Traditional approaches to dealing with compulsory school aged juvenile offenders who refuse to attend school generally have not worked. These initiatives have involved prosecution and suspension from school. Such methods often reinforce truancy by keeping difficult students out of schools.

Interestingly, these students, when asked do not wish to be at school because they cannot cope with their work.

A new approach is currently being trialed in a Perth school. This trial recognises that most students truant in small groups and attempts to work collaboratively with involved agencies, caregivers and the cohort of truanting students.

School student services personnel, caregivers and staff from involved agencies (eg. Ministry of Justice, Department of Family and Children's Services) meet to plan how these students may be encouraged to attend school. Initially, the professional stakeholders meet, decide upon how to collect information and set about doing so. This ensures that a duplication of services does not occur.

Once a small number of key people identify the cohort of truanting students, their caregivers are contacted and invited to attend a meeting where the problem can be discussed and strategies of intervention devised.

This family approach is only suitable in some cases. However, this strategy brings the families of difficult students into schools as cooperative community members taking action to improve their childrens' education options.

The Community Based Education Officer promotes this strategy in schools, facilitating the process and training staff to implement as a school based approach to dealing with truancy.

CONCLUSION

The educational needs of compulsory school aged juvenile offenders can be met in an equitable, collaborative and inclusive manner by schools by involving other agencies servicing young offenders.

This paper provided a general description of the role of Community Based Education Officers within the Western Australian Ministry of Justice. The importance of advocating for the linking of compulsory school aged juvenile offenders to quality education pathways in the community was explored. Some best practice strategies employed in the community context have been briefly detailed to provide examples of the diverse and creative professional approaches undertaken by Community Based Education Officers.

Curriculum Vitae

Melanie Zan is a Community Based Education Officer with The Ministry of Justice, Western Australia. She has an extensive professional history in working with juvenile offenders and alienated students in various community based education contexts. She is currently completing a Master of Social Science (Human Services) degree at Edith Cowan University in Perth. Melanie is researching a thesis topic relating to best practice models of education service delivery in mainstream schools for juvenile offenders. Her current role involves advocating for the securing of quality education placements in the community for compulsory school aged juvenile offenders.