



Educational Outcomes: Children and Young People in Out-of-Home Care

Key messages

Children and young people in out-of-home care (OOHC) constitute one of the most disadvantaged educational groups in Australia (Townsend, 2011).

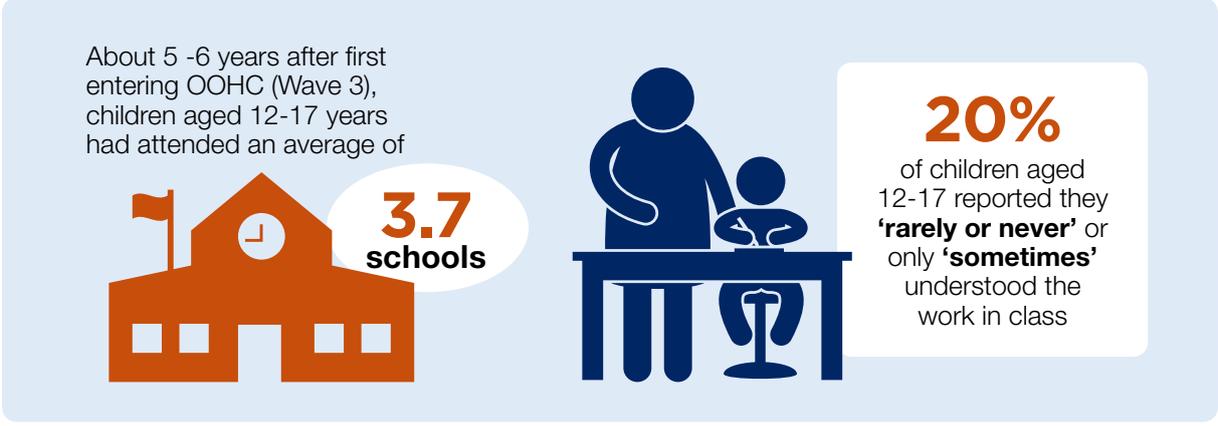
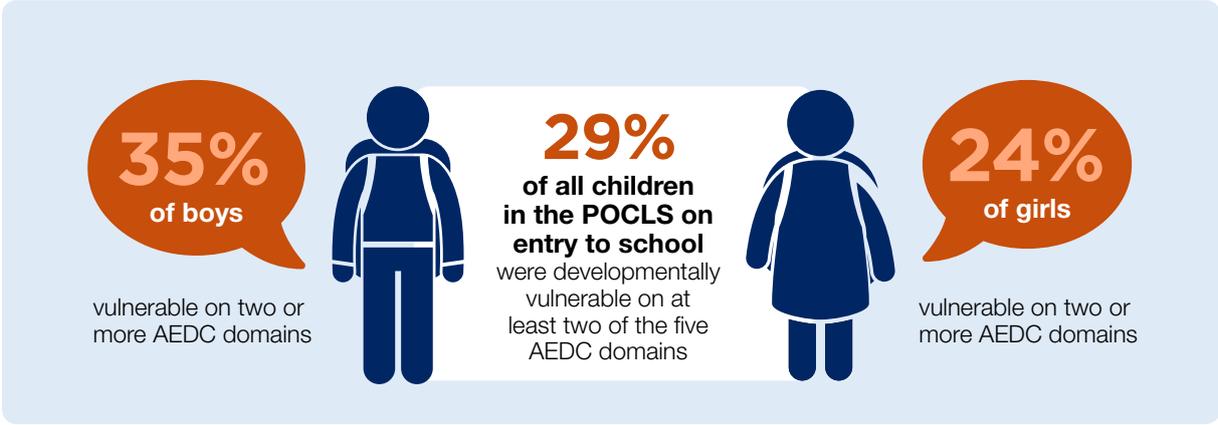
Almost 30% of children and young people in the Pathways of Care Longitudinal Study (POCLS) who completed the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) in kindergarten were developmentally vulnerable on at least 2 of 5 domains. This is 3 times greater than the rates for all children and young people in Australia.

The National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) reading and numeracy scores of the children and young people in the POCLS were substantially lower than for all children and young people in NSW across Years 3, 5, 7 and 9.

Children and young people with child protection histories are at risk of poor educational outcomes when compared to their peers in the general community. Children and young people with more Risk of Significant Harm (ROSH) reports before they entered OOHC score lower on NAPLAN in Years 3 and 5 compared to children and young people with fewer ROSH reports.

Young people aged 12-17 years who scored in the clinical range (i.e., require professional services) on the Child Behaviour Checklist (CBCL) completed by their carer were more likely to have poorer grades, behaviour and discipline issues including school suspension and exclusion, and difficulties socialising with their peers.

The POCLS provides strong new evidence that student wellbeing is directly related to educational engagement and performance. This Evidence to Action Note describes how this new evidence can inform OOHC policy and practice to improve the educational outcomes and wellbeing of children and young people who experienced child maltreatment so they can achieve their full potential.



What factors influence educational outcomes for children in OOHC?

A number of reasons have been proposed in the literature to explain the poorer educational engagement and outcomes for some children and young people (hereafter children) in OOHC. Views are divided as to whether poorer outcomes are a result of being in the OOHC system or whether children in OOHC would experience poor educational outcomes even if they had not been placed in OOHC (Townsend, et.al., 2020).

Recent large-scale research provides some evidence that a range of background adversities result in children entering OOHC with an achievement gap as opposed to adverse outcomes being caused by the OOHC system. These background adversities include socio-economic disadvantage, ethnicity, and parent and child risk factors (Berger, Cancian, Han, Noyes & Rios-Salas, 2015; Maclean, Taylor & O'Donnell, 2016).

The POCLS provides strong new evidence that student wellbeing is directly related to educational engagement and performance. The findings in this Evidence to Action Note are based on analysis of the POCLS data published by Townsend, Robinson, Lewis, Wright, Cashmore and Grenyer (2020) on the Educational Outcomes of Children and Young People in OOHC in NSW. Townsend and colleagues found that children with child protection histories are at risk of poor educational outcomes when compared to their peers in the general community, particularly children with more ROSH reports before they enter OOHC, and children who were exposed to a longer period of maltreatment before entering OOHC.

This Evidence to Action Note describes how this new evidence can inform OOHC policy and practice to improve the educational outcomes and wellbeing of children who experienced child maltreatment so they can achieve their full potential.

How is educational achievement measured in the POCLS?

The children in the POCLS are a vulnerable group of children with child protection histories that resulted in their first entry to OOHC. Standardised assessments in literacy and numeracy offer the opportunity to examine the development of children in the general population and particular populations such as children in OOHC.

Townsend and colleagues (2020) present findings from the AEDC and NAPLAN for all children in the POCLS (n=4,126) including: children who did not receive final care and protection orders (n=1,298); and children who received final orders care and protection orders (n=2,828). Note that this was the child's legal status at 30 April 2013 and subsequently they may have exited OOHC, re-entered OOHC or stayed in long-term OOHC.

The AEDC and NAPLAN were linked to the POCLS longitudinal survey data (3 waves of face-to-face interviews with children and their caregiver at 18 month intervals) to provide a more in-depth understanding of children's educational outcomes and wellbeing approximately 5 to 6 years after entering OOHC for the first time.

The AEDC is a nationwide data collection of early childhood development at the time children commence their first year of full-time school (www.aedc.gov.au/about-the-aedc). The instrument has 5 domains: physical health and wellbeing; social competence; emotional maturity; language and cognitive skills; and communication skills and general knowledge. A child's development as they commence school has a strong and persistent relationship with their performance throughout primary school (Brinkman et al., 2013). A total of 695 of 4,126 children in the POCLS (16.8%) had completed the AEDC.

The NAPLAN is a national assessment completed every year by students in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9 to assess students' ability in 3 areas of literacy—reading, writing and language conventions (spelling, grammar and punctuation)—and in numeracy (www.education.gov.au/national-assessment-program-literacy-and-numeracy). Goss and Sonnemann (2016) argue disadvantaged students are particularly at risk of falling behind and low achievers tend to fall further behind each year. Furthermore, Year 9 NAPLAN results are a strong predictor of later success in study and employment. A total of 1,691 of 4,126 children in the POCLS (41.0%) had completed at least one NAPLAN test between 2008 and 2014.

In the POCLS survey, caregivers of children aged 3-17 years old completed the Child Behaviour Checklist (CBCL) to identify emotional and behaviour problems in children. Caregivers were also asked questions about the child's education such as the number of school absences and whether the child had an education plan.

Children aged 6-16 years completed the Matrix Reasoning Test from the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children (MR, WISC-IV) to measure non-verbal reasoning. Children aged 7-17 years were also asked questions about their experiences at school including managing school work, following school rules and routines, and their social relationships.

The caseworker on-line survey included questions about schooling, education plans and any difficulties the child experiences at school.

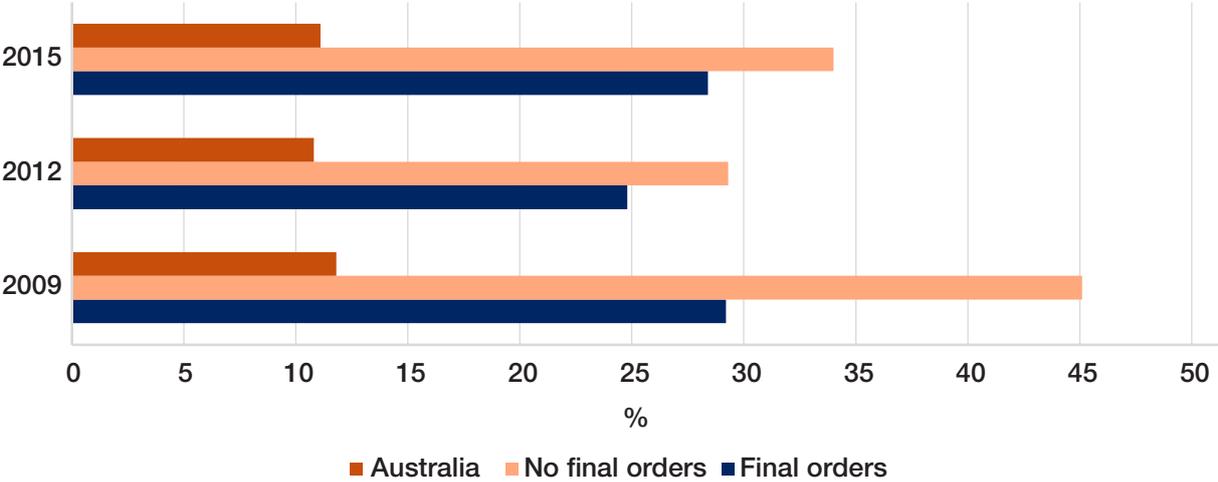
Summary of key findings

On entry to school: Australian Early Development Census (AEDC)

The AEDC results for the POCLS cohort when they started kindergarten (n=695) showed 16.1% were developmentally vulnerable on 1 AEDC domain, 12.0% were developmentally vulnerable on 2 domains, 17.3% were developmentally vulnerable on 3 or more AEDC domains, and 3.6% were vulnerable on all 5 domains. Almost 30% of all POCLS children were developmentally vulnerable on at least 2 of 5 AEDC domains – nearly 3 times greater than the rates for all children in Australia. The proportion of children who were developmentally vulnerable on 2 or more domains is shown in Figure 1.



Figure 1: Proportion of children in the POCLS who were developmentally vulnerable on 2 or more AEDC domains, by care and protection order status and compared to the general population for each AEDC cycle (2009 n=188, 2012 n=207, 2015 n=289)



Source: Linked DCJ Administrative and AEDC data. Townsend et. al., (2020).

Notes:

- Children who completed the AEDC in 2009 had not yet entered OOHC; those who completed it in 2012 had recently entered OOHC; and those who completed it in 2015 had entered OOHC a few years prior.
- The 'no final orders' and 'final orders' status was determined according to whether the child received a final order by 30 April 2013. Subsequently some children may have taken different pathways by exiting, re-entering or remaining in OOHC. These subsequent pathways are not accounted for in this analysis.

A greater proportion of children who entered OOHC for the first time but did not receive final care and protection orders by 30 April 2013 were developmentally vulnerable on 4 of 5 AEDC domains compared to children who received final care and protection orders by 30 April 2013.

There were no significant differences on the AEDC developmental vulnerabilities between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children at the start of school.

Boys were more likely than girls to be developmentally vulnerable on the AEDC, with a third of all boys vulnerable on 2 or more domains compared to a quarter of girls.

Children developmentally vulnerable on at least 2 domains were significantly ($p < .05$) more likely to spend time away from school in the first 5 months of their schooling.

National Assessment Program Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) – Years 3, 5, 7, 9

The NAPLAN participation rates for children in the POCLS were lower than for all NSW children and absences increased as children aged. By Year 9 only 67.9% of children in the POCLS participated in NAPLAN compared to around 93% for the general NSW population. Aboriginal children in the POCLS were significantly less likely to participate than non-Aboriginal children in Years 7 and 9. The number of children with NAPLAN results available each year is shown in Table 1.

Table 1: The number of children in the POCLS with NAPLAN data for each scholastic year by calendar year

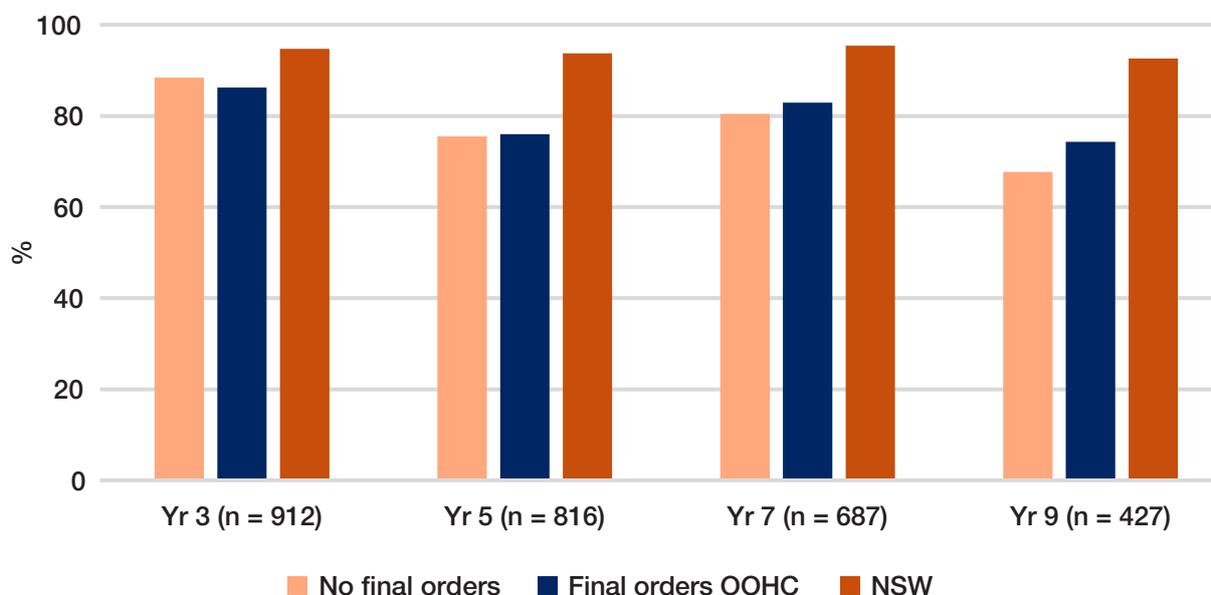
	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	Total
Year 3 n (%)	110 (10.7)	124 (12.0)	126 (12.2)	160 (15.5)	179 (17.3)	160 (15.5)	173 (16.7)	1,033 (100)
Year 5 n (%)	114 (11.8)	135 (14.0)	125 (12.0)	129 (13.3)	138 (14.3)	149 (15.4)	177 (18.3)	967 (100)
Year 7 n (%)	105 (12.3)	136 (15.9)	129 (15.1)	133 (15.5)	123 (14.4)	108 (12.6)	123 (14.4)	857 (100)
Year 9 n (%)	8 (1.3)	41 (6.4)	107 (16.7)	133 (20.8)	110 (17.2)	121 (18.9)	119 (18.6)	639 (100)
Total n	337	436	487	555	550	538	592	

Source: Linked DCJ Administrative and NAPLAN data. Townsend et. al., (2020).

Notes: Children who participated in NAPLAN in 2008/09 had not yet entered OOH, those who participated in 2010/11 had recently entered and those in 2012/14 had entered OOH a few years prior.

The NAPLAN reading and numeracy scores for children in the POCLS were substantially lower than for all children in NSW across all years. Figure 2 shows the greatest difference in the proportions meeting the minimum standard for reading between children in the POCLS and all children in NSW was for Year 9. Figure 3 shows a similar pattern for numeracy.

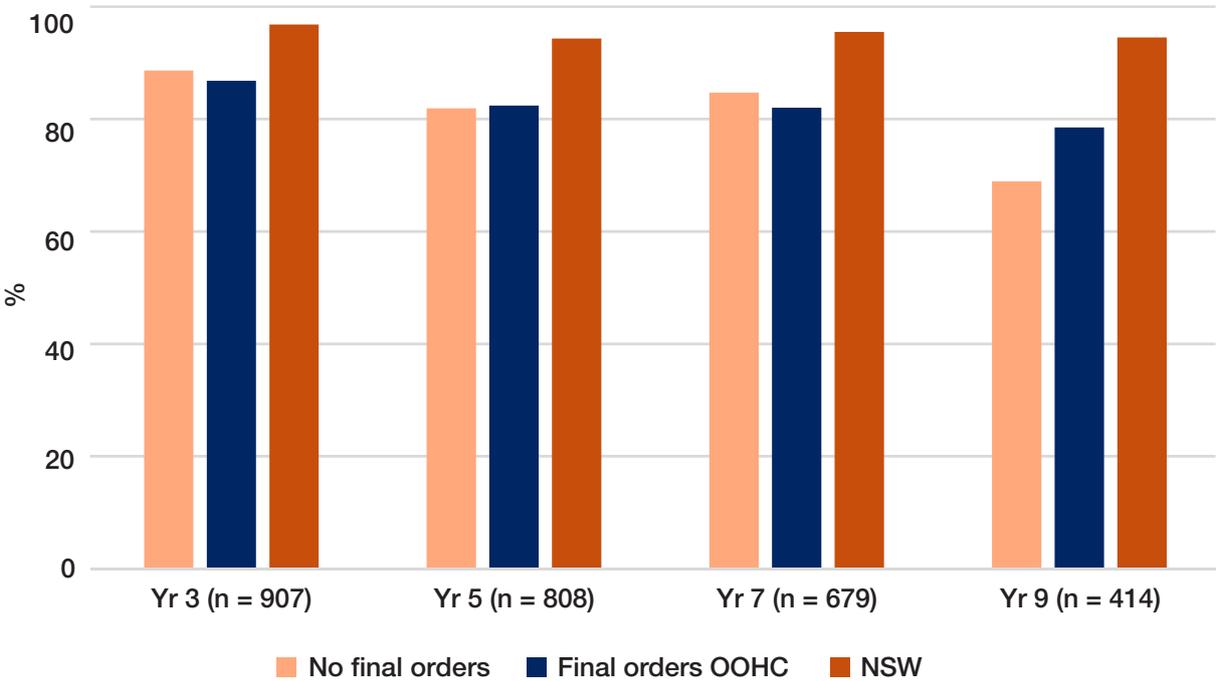
Figure 2: Proportion of children in the POCLS meeting minimum standards for reading in NSW, by care and protection order status



Source: Linked DCJ Administrative and NAPLAN data. Townsend et. al., (2020).

Note: The 'no final orders' and 'final orders' status was determined according to whether the child received a final order by 30 April 2013. Subsequently some children may have taken different pathways by exiting, re-entering or remaining in OOH. These subsequent pathways are not accounted for in this analysis.

Figure 3. Proportion of children in the POCLS meeting minimum standards for numeracy in NSW, by care and protection order status



Source: Linked DCJ Administrative and NAPLAN data. Townsend et. al., (2020).

Note: The 'no final orders' and 'final orders' status was determined according to whether the child received a final order by 30 April 2013. Subsequently some children may have taken different pathways by exiting or re-entering OOHC. These subsequent pathways are not accounted for in this analysis.

A significantly lower proportion of Aboriginal children reached minimum standards for numeracy across all scholastic years and reading across scholastic Years 5, 7 and 9.

Performance at the start of school for children appears to be predictive of later academic outcomes. As the number of AEDC developmental vulnerabilities in children increased, NAPLAN reading and numeracy scores significantly decreased in Years 3 and 5.

Child protection history, socio-emotional wellbeing and educational outcomes

Townsend and colleagues (2020) found that child protection history, socio-emotional wellbeing and educational outcomes are correlated. Children with more ROSH reports before entering OOHC scored significantly lower on NAPLAN tests in Years 3 and 5 compared to children with fewer ROSH reports. The NAPLAN scores decreased as the number of ROSH reports increased. These differences were significant for numeracy between those with 1-5 ROSH reports and those with 16+ ROSH reports ($p < .001$).

Children aged 6-16 years with more ROSH reports before entering OOHC for the first time were significantly more likely to score below average on non-verbal intelligence (MR Test, WISC IV). Higher numbers of ROSH reports were also associated with increased negative reactivity, and increased internalising behaviours (such as anxiety or depression), externalising behaviours (such as rule breaking or aggression) and overall problem behaviours over time as measured by the CBCL.

Children who were vulnerable in the AEDC emotional maturity domain had a significantly longer period of maltreatment before entering OOHC than those who were not vulnerable on the emotional maturity domain (an average difference of 1.5 years).

Many of the young people in the clinical range of behaviours indicating the need for professional services as measured by the CBCL were at risk of poorer grades, behaviour issues, discipline issues including suspension and exclusion, and difficulties with peers.

Children who experienced difficulties getting on with other children had significantly lower school engagement. Children experiencing difficulties at school also had lower task persistence scores and higher levels of negative reactivity than children without these difficulties (measured by the carer responses to the School Aged Temperament Inventory (SATI)).

Child, caregiver and caseworker views on education

At Wave 3 (approximately 5-6 years after entering OOHC for the first time), children aged 12-17 years had attended an average of 3.7 schools including primary and high schools.

Some children reported to experience difficulty in understanding the work in class, with 19.8% (n=19) of children aged 12-17 years reporting they 'rarely or never' or only 'sometimes' understood the work in class, and 31.0% (n=78) of children aged 7-11 years reporting they 'sometimes' understood the work and a further 6.2% (n=15) that they 'rarely or never' did. Almost one-quarter (24.2%, n=23) of children aged 12-17 said they 'rarely or never' or only 'sometimes' completed assignments, projects or homework on time.

Caregivers' at Wave 3 reported that about a quarter (25.4%) of children aged 6-11 years (n=100) and about one-third (34.7%) of children aged 12-17 years (n=52) have academic or other problems at school.

Caregivers' also reported that 35.8% (n=237) of children have an individual education plan (IEP¹), with children in foster care or residential care being significantly more likely than children in relative/kinship care to have a plan. Caseworkers report that 62.0% (n=852) of children have an IEP.

Implications of the research to improve child outcomes

Strategies to support children's learning, behaviour and experiences at school

Assessment, planning and intervention

- IEPs should be in place for all children in OOHC and reviewed post AEDC in kindergarten, at the start of Year 6 to prepare for high school, after the Year 7 and Year 9 NAPLAN results are available, and on change of school. Plans should be developed in collaboration with the caseworker, caregivers (including parents) and the child.

¹ IEP's are now referred to as Personalised Learning and Support Planning under the revised OOHC Education Pathway guide.

- When a student is achieving at or below the national minimum standards, NAPLAN assessments should be used as a marker for focused intervention and additional supports both inside and outside of the school.
- As many foster and relative/kinship carers have not completed high school or gone on to further study, it is important to provide ongoing support and training to carers, supporting them to understand the potential pathways and to access appropriate supports inside and outside of the education system for the child/children in their care.

Strategies to support and train caregivers

Training and development

- The roles and responsibilities of foster and relative/kinship carers in relation to the education of children in OOHC should be emphasised in prospective carer information sessions and packs, and in the initial carer training.
- Trauma informed training and resources for care workers in intensive therapeutic services on the importance of education and effective support for children.
- The critical importance of developing children's self-esteem, social skills and friendships should be understood and prioritised by adults in the school and care sectors, with effective strategies shared throughout both workforces.

Strategies to develop casework skills and casework supervision

Training and development

To expand professional learning for caseworkers and support capacity building in schools, cross sector workshops commenced in September 2019 and are being rolled out across NSW. The workshops are a key opportunity to build knowledge and improve implementation of the updated DCJ OOHC Education Pathway in local settings and form effective networks. The state-wide workshops are being coordinated by the Child and Family Directorate and are aimed at DCJ and Funded Service Providers who need to know about, or are responsible for, supporting staff to implement the OOHC Education Pathway.

The workshops explain how to implement the Education Pathways to improve education outcomes for children in OOHC. They also provide the opportunity for practitioners to identify local and state-wide barriers that impact the implementation and identify supports to address them.

The aims of the workshops are to:

- Improve practitioner understanding of the OOHC Education Pathways
- Understand how to work together to meet the needs of the child or young person
- Identify local issues and opportunities to improve implementation, monitoring and review of the OOHC Education Pathways.

Care planning

On entry to care, the caseworker and birth parents should complete a form that records the child's current educational details and school history, including any educational assessments. Cultural needs of the child should be identified in this process. This information should be provided to the Children's Court Magistrate as an Appendix to the child's care plan.

Children should attend a quality pre-school in the year before starting school.

Restoration planning should take children's educational needs into account, with consideration of the timing of school change if necessary, and the need for school stability. Support by agencies is required to ensure that children are successfully enrolled and settled into a new school after restoration. The planning should include parents' access to services to support the child's educational plan. All school-aged children who are restored to their birth parent/s should be linked into relevant support programs such as the Smith Family Learning for Life Program.

Annual reporting of education data

In order to understand the full picture of educational outcomes for children who have experienced OOHC, it will be valuable to monitor school completion rates and pathways post schooling for children who have experienced OOHC and report annually on AEDC and NAPLAN data for children in OOHC.

Where to from here?

DCJ and DoE (Department of Education) are working in partnership to streamline the OOHC Education Pathway process to ensure timely support for each child and young person in OOHC. This streamlined focus aims to enhance communication and collaboration between agencies to ensure prompt and increased support.

Under the pathway, each child receives tailored personalised learning and support planning from their school. This is reflected in the casework undertaken for and with the child by DCJ and its funded service providers, to support their learning needs and goals. Caseworkers must organise a meeting with the school within 30 days of notification that a student is in OOHC to undertake personalised learning and support planning. Caregivers including parents are invited to meet with the school, casework practitioner, support staff including the Aboriginal Education Officer and the student for an assessment of the student's learning and support needs.

Personalised learning and support planning is monitored and reviewed at least annually or when there are changed circumstances impacting on the student's ability to participate in learning. Caregivers play an important role in supporting students to get the most out of their time at school. Personalised learning and support planning requires regular child-centred and collaborative conversations between the child's key caseworkers, support people, caregivers including parents and educators.

Supplementary education funds are available as part of the Education Pathway to support students in OOHC. The DoE introduced OOHC Change Funding to support students in statutory OOHC. This funding is triggered directly by the Department receiving a Notice to a School or Change of Circumstance Notice from DCJ and Funded Service Providers and allows for additional educational planning and supports to be tailored to the child's needs.

Further research to improve evidence informed practice

The POCLS provides evidence for the need to develop and pilot early education interventions for children who have experienced OOHC as the evidence for effective interventions is limited. For example 'Foster the Future' is a free tutoring service available to high school students in OOHC.

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Pathways of Care Longitudinal Study

The Pathways of Care Longitudinal Study (POCLS) is the first large-scale prospective longitudinal study of children and young people in out-of-home care (OOHC) in Australia. The study collects detailed information about the life course development of children who enter OOHC and the factors that influence their safety, permanency and wellbeing. The POCLS links data on children's child protection backgrounds, OOHC placements, health, education and offending held by multiple government agencies; and matches it to first-hand accounts from children, caregivers, caseworkers and teachers. The population cohort is a census of all children who entered OOHC for the first time in NSW over an 18-month period between May 2010 and October 2011 (n = 4,126). A subset of those children who went on to receive final Children's Court care and protection orders by 30 April 2013 (2,828) were eligible to participate in the study. Information about the study and publications can be found on the POCLS webpage.

The POCLS acknowledges and honours Aboriginal people as our First Peoples of NSW and is committed to working with the DCJ Aboriginal Outcomes team to ensure that Aboriginal children, young people, families and communities are supported and empowered to improve their life outcomes. The DCJ recognises the importance of Indigenous Data Sovereignty and Governance (IDS & IDG) in the design, collection, analysis, dissemination and management of all data related to Aboriginal Australians. The POCLS will continue to collaborate with Aboriginal Peoples and will apply the DCJ research governance principles once developed.

About this evidence-to-action note

The POCLS data asset will be used to improve how services and supports are designed and delivered in partnership with the policy and program areas to improve the outcomes for children and young people who experience OOHC, the support provided to caregivers and families, and the professional development of staff.

This Evidence to Action Note was prepared by the POCLS team at DCJ and report authors with input and endorsement from the POCLS Evidence to Action Working Group including representation from the NSW Department of Education.

The findings presented in this Evidence to Action Note are primarily based on a report by Townsend, M., Robinson, K., Wright, I., Cashmore, J. and Grenyer, B. (2020). Educational outcomes of children and young people in out-of-home care in NSW. Pathways of Care Longitudinal Study: Outcomes of Children and Young People in Out-of-Home Care. Research Report Number 14. Sydney: NSW Department of Family and Community Services.

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Study design

NSW Department of Communities and Justice Insights, Analysis and Research; Australian Institute of Family Studies; Sax Institute, Professor Judy Cashmore, University of Sydney; Professor Paul Delfabbro, University of Adelaide; Professor Ilan Katz, University of NSW; Dr Fred Wulczyn, University of Chicago.

Data collection by I-view Social Research.

Ethics approvals

- University of NSW Human Research Ethics Committee (Approval numbers HC 10335, HC 16542)
- Aboriginal Health & Medical Research Council of NSW Ethics Committee (Approval number 766/10)
- NSW Population & Health Services Research Ethics Committee (Approval number HREC/14/CIPHS/74; Cancer Institute NSW 2014/12/570).

POCLS webpage www.facs.nsw.gov.au/resources/research/pathways-of-care

