Under-age school leaving

A report examining approaches to assisting young people at risk of leaving school before the legal school leaving age

a report to the
National Youth Affairs Research Scheme

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Introduction

Purpose of this study
The purpose of this study, commissioned by the National Youth Affairs Research Scheme, was to investigate approaches to assisting young people at risk of leaving school before the legal school leaving age. The legal school leaving age is 15 years in all States/Territories except for Tasmania where it is 16 years.

Under-age school leavers
Given that the term early school leaver is increasingly used in the literature to describe young people who fail to complete two years of post-compulsory secondary education, the term under-age school leavers was introduced to emphasise the specific policy implications associated with non-completion of compulsory education, particularly the obligation of State/Territory governments to provide appropriate education services and support to all young people under the legal school leaving age.

Research focus
The focus of the primary research, undertaken in 1996, was an investigation of the structures, processes and outcomes of specific initiatives aimed at reducing under-age school leaving. The research covered initiatives run by both secondary schools and community-based organisations under a wide variety of programs.

Methodology
Our approach was to synthesise existing material from the academic literature and reports on under-age school leaving, with in-depth primary research based on a purposive sample of initiatives. The primary research involved a detailed postal survey of 45 initiatives (76% response rate) and four regional case studies (see Chapter 2).

The advantage of this approach was that it built on existing research while constructing a coherent description of the diversity of approaches used throughout Australia to address issues of under-age school leaving. We identified “best practice” approaches to reducing under-age school leaving and provided a framework for ongoing policy development and implementation.

Issues
Factors leading to under-age school leaving
The most common factors identified by practitioners as leading to under-age school leaving were:

- continual experiences of academic failure;
- inflexible school curriculum and teaching strategies;
- alienating school environments; and
- family conflict and breakdown.

A number of consequences of these factors were commonly identified as additional factors leading to under-age school leaving:

- low self-esteem;
- poor student/teacher relations;
- student disinterest in education; and
- disruptive behaviour.
There was a diversity of views about the most important factors leading to under-age school leaving, highlighting the multifaceted nature of the problem. Actual causes of under-age school leaving need to be viewed “as forming a dense and complex web of interrelated, interacting and multidirectional forces”. The implications of this complexity are that a range of approaches are required to address under-age school leaving.

**Pathways and barriers for under-age school leavers**

The increased diversity and flexibility of pathways for education and training systems in Australia allows greater scope for under-age school leavers to rejoin an appropriate pathway, although many continue to face significant barriers. While early school leavers have the option of returning to mainstream school, the majority do not attempt to re-enter school. Of those who do return, the majority leave again before completing their secondary education. Barriers tend to be psychological and social rather than structural, such as the attitudes of the young people, responses by peers, and the attitudes of school authorities and teachers.

**Economic and social costs**

A broad perception exists that under-age school leaving represents a significant cost to the community, particularly in regions with a high concentration of at-risk students. While the magnitude of these costs is largely notional, key informants point to the types of losses incurred by individuals and society as a whole through the failure of young people to reach their full potential and be appropriately socialised through leaving school early.

**Responses**

**Policies and programs**

There are no Commonwealth or State/Territory government policy statements concerned specifically with reducing under-age school leaving in a coordinated manner. Two recent Parliamentary inquiries into the area both made this finding and concluded that this was a shortcoming which should be addressed by the development of a cohesive national policy framework.

A complex mix of programs and a plethora of school services and local initiatives was seen to exist. Some addressed under-age school leaving specifically, others dealt with it as part of broader student support measures or routine school functions. This situation reflects the combination of both “top down” implementation of policies by education and other agencies, as well as “bottom up” responses to perceived needs and local problems by schools and communities.

Such a situation is not inappropriate for the multifaceted Australian education system. However, it does lead to a number of shortcomings:

- within jurisdictions, there is little coordination of approaches to under-age school leaving;
- it is difficult to assess the extent that needs for assistance at the individual student, school or regional level are being met, or whether adequate resources are available to address the problem; and
- the diverse set of programs and initiatives means that it is a complex task to evaluate specific policy objectives or the comparative effectiveness of individual programs and approaches.

**Initiatives aimed at reducing under-age school leaving**

The main unit of analysis for the primary research was the “initiative”. We used the term in this report to refer to a local integrated strategy operated by an individual school or other organisation targeting potential under-age school leavers. Such initiatives covered interventions with individual, groups of students or whole school approaches.

Initiatives varied greatly in scope and size from large alternative programs catering for hundred of students who were unlikely to return to mainstream school to small school-based projects working with students for a few hours per week. In our sample:

- initiative funding varied from almost $1,000,000 to under $10,000;
- staffing varied from 17 full-time staff to one part-time teacher working four hours per week; and
- the number of participants at any one time varied from five to 250 students;

**Models used by initiatives**

While all of the initiatives we investigated had characteristics which made them distinct, it is possible to identify six major intervention models:
Community-based partial withdrawal: students are withdrawn from mainstream school on a part-time or temporary basis to a project operating in a community setting, with the aim of eventually reintegrating students back into mainstream schools (32% of initiatives in postal survey sample).

School-based partial withdrawal: students are withdrawn from normal classes to participate in an alternative program operating within the school. The initiative may operate as a full-time or part-time annex within a school or as a “time-out” program where students participate in individual or small-group sessions that run parallel to normal classes (23% of sample).

Community school: comprehensive education and support program operating as an alternative to mainstream school. Participants are usually not expected to return to mainstream school (18% of sample).

Outreach services: provision of specialist support services to a number of schools within a particular geographical area. Administration is usually located off-campus, with staff travelling to schools to deliver services (12% of sample).

Integrated whole school: characterised by a generalist focus on the needs of potential under-age school leavers across the whole school rather than specific initiatives which only target at-risk students. The emphasis is on innovations or enhancements to student education and welfare support measures which are undertaken within normal school processes (12% of sample).

Event-based: focus on one particular activity, such as a wilderness excursion or cultural camp. This approach aims to provide an intensive experience to help “to turn young people around” (3% of sample).

Strategies used by initiatives
Within each of these intervention models, individual initiatives pursue a range of strategies which are commonly used across all models. These include:

- providing activities to increase social skills;
- identifying and monitoring students at-risk;
- providing activities targeted at increasing self-esteem;
- providing counselling to participants;
- strengthening home/school relations;
- providing activities to increase literacy and numeracy skills;
- establishing inter-agency links, including links with government agencies and community organisations;
- developing appropriate teaching methodologies and providing flexible curriculum; and
- providing professional development for staff.

Regional response to reducing under-age school leaving
While individual initiatives were the focus of intervention, the response to reducing under-age school leaving within particular geographical regions often involved the interaction of a number of different initiatives and other support services. A simple model was developed to describe this regional response (see Section 7.4).

The key issue was the extent to which mainstream schools were able to meet the needs of potential under-aged school leavers as part of normal school functions, and their requirements for additional support in terms of access to specialist initiatives and outreach and youth support services.

Initiatives with a good record of reducing under-age school leaving
The success of initiatives in reducing under-age school leaving was investigated using available data on attendance, suspensions/expulsions, and completion of compulsory education (see Chapter 8). However, the value of a quantitative “benchmarking” approach to assessing the relative success of individual initiatives was limited by:

- an overall lack of available data on participant outcomes;
- significant variations in the characteristics of the target group of different initiatives; and
- differences in the nature of interventions (e.g. initiatives working with students over a number of years compared to short-term interventions).

While we initially investigated whether some initiatives within the same geographic area had better records of retaining potential under-age school leavers than others, we concluded that a more complex series of questions needed to be investigated to evaluate effectiveness. An outcomes hierarchy (see Section 8.3) was developed to highlight the range of intermediate outcomes which logically precede the end outcome of improved completion rates of compulsory education. Key questions raised include:

- Are potential under-age school leavers identified and are their needs assessed?
- Is education and welfare assistance provided to meet the needs of potential under-age school leavers as part of routine school functions?
• Are adequate places in specialist initiatives and adequate outreach and youth support services available?
• Do potential under-age school leavers access appropriate services?
• Do potential under-age school leavers attain personal milestones set in relation to improvements in social skills, literacy and numeracy skills and self-esteem?

Intermediate outcomes
Substantial qualitative evidence was available at a school, specialist initiative and regional level about the successful attainment of intermediate outcomes. An analysis of these findings provided a basis for assessing best practice in reducing under-age school leaving.

Best practice
In total, 34 principles of best practice were identified, grouped around seven elements. These elements were identified as common themes linking strategies, factors leading to early school leaving, outcomes, and factors contributing to the effectiveness of initiatives (see Section 9.2).

1. Explicit, planned response
   - involves strong links between schools and other service providers in working out regional approaches to reducing under-age school leaving;
   - makes optimal use of resources available within a region through appropriate collaboration and coordination;
   - involves a clear commitment and focus on potential under-age school leavers;
   - builds skills and ownership through the involvement of “front-line” practitioners;
   - involves early identification and referral of potential under-age school leavers;
   - clearly defines specifications for the collection of monitoring and evaluation data; and
   - involves regular evaluation of success in reducing under-age school leaving.

2. Non-mainstream school options and support services
   - is founded on mainstream schools meeting the needs of potential under-aged school leavers as part of normal school functions, supported by alternative options and services;
   - involves the availability of sufficient places in initiatives for at-risk students to allow partial withdrawal from mainstream school environment where appropriate;
   - involves the availability of sufficient places in regional community schools to provide a permanent alternative to mainstream school where appropriate;
   - involves the availability of sufficient outreach services to support schools with significant numbers of potential under-age school leavers;
   - involves access to specialist youth support services such as accommodation and health services;
   - provides formal links between alternative options and mainstream schools to facilitate reintegration to mainstream, where appropriate; and
   - provides formal transition plans for returning from alternative options to mainstream schools.

3. Holistic multidisciplinary approach
   - fosters a climate of care and support, including positive reinforcement of achievement;
   - offers an integrated approach to personal, social as well as the educational welfare of students;
   - operates as a component of the total response to reducing under-age school leaving rather than as a “tag-on solution” or “dumping ground”;
   - provides a physical environment which is not alienating to at-risk students; and
   - provides incentives to encourage student attendance.

4. Focus on individual success and development
   - provides opportunities for participants to experience success;
   - involves setting personal milestones in relation to improvements in social and independent living skills;
   - builds participants' basic educational skills such as literacy and numeracy; and
   - provides intensive support for participants.

5. Focus on personal responsibility
   - encourages students to take responsibility for their learning and behaviour; and
   - involves committed, voluntary participants.
6. Flexibility to respond to individual needs
- provides enough flexibility to accommodate the needs of the individual participant;
- involves organisational flexibility in responding to individual needs;
- addresses various levels of need, and the needs of groups of young people with special needs; and
- involves a low student/staff ratio.

7. Professional and personal quality of staff
- involves careful selection of staff to ensure that they have appropriate qualifications, experience and commitment;
- provides appropriate professional development for staff working with potential under-age school leavers; and
- provides support for staff working with potential under-age school leavers.

8. Involvement of parents
- involves good communication with parents/carers about the initiative; and
- provides opportunities for parents/carers to be involved in initiative activities.

Implications

Capacity of schools to address under-age school leaving
Our findings support the accumulated evidence presented to recent national Parliamentary inquiries that potential under-age school leavers require support and special assistance to remain connected to school or other formal education services.

The fundamental question in addressing under-age school leaving is the extent to which mainstream schools are capable of providing this support and special assistance by adopting best practices as part of normal school processes, or whether special initiatives are needed.

For the majority of schools, the adoption of best practices as part of normal school processes should allow effective intervention to reduce under-age school leaving. Anecdotal evidence from this research suggests that secondary schools with around 800 students may be able to manage between 10 and 20 potential under-age school leavers, depending on the at-risk characteristics of the young people. However, in schools with a greater number of potential under-age school leavers, special initiatives and intensive support services are likely to be needed.

The key issues for policy makers are to determine what is required to facilitate the adoption of best practices within schools; and how to allocate funding for special initiatives and support services to ensure funds are targeted to the minority of schools with significant numbers of potential under-age school leavers.

Coordinated policy
Based on our study, a number of principles and issues were identified which any policy response to under-age school leaving should consider:

• mainstream schools should be the focus of intervention, although this does not mean that schools should be the only site of intervention;
• the need to support school teachers through training and professional development;
• a range of non-mainstream school options to support schools in meeting the diverse needs of potential under-age school leavers. Ultimately, State/Territory education agencies must be able to demonstrate due diligence in meeting their obligation to provide appropriate education services and support to all young people under the legal school leaving age;
• the importance of community organisations as providers of alternative options for potential under-aged school leavers, particularly as these organisations have the flexibility needed to be responsive to individual students;
• improved links between schools and community support services such as youth accommodation and health services;
• plans of action for a coordinated response to under-age school leaving are best implemented at the local community level to account for differences in the needs of students, school approaches and local services;
• the involvement of individual students and their parents/carers, teachers and school administrators;
• the need for improved data collection and presentation; and
• the complex task to evaluate specific policy objectives and the comparative effectiveness of individual programs and approaches.
Regional plans of action
The implementation of a coordinated policy response to under-age school leaving is best approached through the development of regional plans of action. Typically, regions would cover a local community area servicing less than 10 schools. Such plans should specify:

- how potential under-age school leavers will be identified and their needs assessed at the local level;
- how local priorities will be identified and local ownership of the plan maintained;
- what best practices will be adopted by schools to meet the needs of potential under-age school leavers as part of routine school functions;
- what specialist initiatives are available within the region and how potential under-age school leavers can be referred;
- what outreach and youth support services are available to support schools and specialist initiatives;
- how individual students will be case managed, particularly if they are involved in partial withdrawal initiatives;
- what monitoring and evaluation data will be collected; and
- who is responsible for reviewing and updating regional plans.

Promoting best practice
There is a need for ongoing development and promotion of best practice at both regional and national levels and the development of strategies for facilitating the adoption of best practice.

Further research
Further research is required to begin to enumerate with more rigour both the scope of the problem of under-age school leaving and the direct core costs, particularly the costs of special programs and initiatives. This report has proposed a conceptual framework which can be used for this purpose. When this data is available, it will provide a firmer basis for any future research and policy discussion of the costs of under-age school leaving.
Introduction
1. Who are under-age school leavers?

The recent Parliamentary Inquiry into Truancy and Exclusion from School (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training 1996) focused on the needs of a group of young people they called “the invisible ones”—young people who leave school before the legal school leaving age, which is 15 years in all States/Territories except for Tasmania where it is 16 years.

There is a growing concern for the apparently increasingly large numbers of young people who are for various reasons missing out on the benefits of education and possibly a better future. These are the young people, the invisible ones, who are not even completing Year 10, who are becoming disconnected from education before the age of 15 or 16 when it is legal for them to leave school (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training 1996).

Young people who leave school early or who are at risk of leaving early are often referred to in the literature as early school leavers, students at-risk, chronic truants, excluded students or are identified by specific aspects of disadvantage such as homelessness, illiteracy or alienation (Box 1.1).

However, the term “early school leaver” is problematic, particularly as it is increasingly used in the literature to describe young people who fail to complete two years of post-compulsory secondary education (Years 11 and 12).

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**Box 1.1: Terms used in relation to early school leaving**

- **Truants**: persistent, habitual and unexplained absence from school of a child of compulsory school age, occurring with or without parental knowledge.
- **Chronic truants**: absent without reason for 20% or more of school time.
- **School refusers (school phobics)**: children who refuse to attend school even in the face of persuasion or punishment from parents and the possibility of school discipline measures.
- **School withdrawal**: children whose parents keep them away from school, either on a regular basis or for long periods, for reasons related to the needs and priorities of the parents.
- **Suspended student**: student temporarily removed from school for disciplinary reasons. The removal period can range from one day to one month depending on the State/Territory.
- **Excluded student**: either a general term referring to all categories of removal of students, or to specific conditions of removal from school.
- **Expelled student**: student permanently removed from the school of enrolment, or from all State schools, by school authorities (NB Excluded and expelled student definitions vary between States).
While research suggests that similar factors affect the completion of both compulsory education and post-compulsory education (Batten & Russell 1995), the term “early school leavers” has different implications in each context.

In the context of non-completion of compulsory education, there is the obligation of State/Territory governments to provide appropriate education services and support to all young people under the legal school leaving age (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Community Affairs 1995). Depending on the circumstances, early school leavers may be thought of as including both young people who make forced or unforced choices not to stay at school and those who leave because they feel the support and services that have been provided are not appropriate to their needs.

**Under-age school leavers**
In this report, we have introduced the term “under-age school leavers” to emphasise our focus on young people who leave school before the legal school leaving age and the specific policy implications associated with non-completion of compulsory education.

On the other hand, there are a number of young people under the legal school leaving age who do not physically attend school yet are strongly connected to the schooling process. Home schooling by parents or carers is recognised by State education authorities subject to certain conditions being met (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training 1996). We have not regarded this group as part of the study.

**Potential under-age school leavers**
Given our focus on approaches to assisting young people at risk of under-age school leaving, we have also introduced the term “potential under-age school leavers” which we define as young people under the legal school leaving age who require support and special assistance to remain connected to school or other formal education services.

This broad definition of potential under-age school leavers recognises that there are young people whose school achievement is significantly below their potential and who obtain limited benefits from attendance at school (Batten & Russell 1995). These marginally attached students may be regular school attenders, but with limited participation or connection to the schooling process.

1.2 How many under-age school leavers are there?
The number of under-age school leavers and potential under-age school leavers is very difficult to calculate because of the broad definitions involved and the lack of aggregated data collections. Currently, there is no uniform national data on the number of young people under the legal school leaving age who have left school, the extent of school truancy, or the number of young people excluded from school for disciplinary reasons (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training 1996). However, rough estimates of the extent of the problem can be made using available data and findings from specific research projects.

According to the 1991 Census, of those aged 15–25 years, 65,400 left school at the age of 14 years or younger (National Youth Affairs Research Scheme & Australian Bureau of Statistics 1993), representing 2% of the total population of 15- to 25-year-olds. Of those who left school at 14 years or younger, 6,900 (0.2%) did not go to school at all.

The participation rate of 12- to 14-year-olds in Australian schools ranged from 96.3% for 14-year-old males to 98.5% for 12-year-old females based on the number of full-time school students in all schools and ancillary education establishments of a particular age and sex (Australian Bureau of Statistics 1991) compared to the population of the same age and sex (ABS 1992). This would indicate that between 1–4% of 12- to 14-year-olds are not connected to school or other formal education services.

The apparent retention rate to Year 10 of secondary school students is 98.3% (97.5% for males and 99.1% for females), indicating around 2% of students leave school before the commencement of Year 10. However, these figures do not include young people who failed to make the transition to secondary school. In a study of young homeless people and education, Smith (1994) found that 16% of young people interviewed for the study left school at the point of completing or shortly after primary school.

The number of potential under-age school leavers is even more difficult to estimate because of the necessarily less precise definition of this group. Calculations of the number of potential under-age school leavers rely on correlations with at-risk experiences such as chronic truancy, school expulsions and homelessness.

The House of Representatives Inquiry into Truancy and Exclusion from School (1996) found that while schools are required to collect and maintain student attendance statistics, including data on unexplained absences, with the exception of New South Wales, these statistics are not consolidated into aggregated data collections. Evidence presented to the inquiry by several State/Territory government education agencies, based on survey work that had been undertaken in recent years on school absenteeism, revealed that the absenteeism rate, including those absent with
legitimate reason, ranged from 6–10% of students on any one day; 11,000 students truant daily from NSW schools representing approximately 1.5% of the school student population. The inquiry concluded that this data underestimated the real incidence of school non-attendance because it does not include informal exclusions (where students are encouraged to re-enrol in another school or are suspended on a continual basis) and those who “drop out” from school completely.

Another indication comes from a national census of homeless school students (MacKenzie & Chamberlain 1994) which identified about 11,000 homeless students and estimated that about 1,800 secondary school students aged under 15 years were homeless in the week that the census was taken. It was estimated that two to three times the number of students who were homeless in census week would experience homelessness each year. It was also estimated that between two-thirds and three-quarters of all students who experience homelessness do not complete the school year. Recent research by Chamberlain and MacKenzie estimated that between 10 and 14% of city-based secondary school students are at risk of becoming homeless and 4–6% are at serious risk.

The number of referrals to a school-based program targeting students aged under 15 years and which has been operating since 1982 indicates that between 7 and 17% of the school’s students are at risk of leaving school before the legal school leaving age (Horsfield 1991). The program’s coordinator suggests that this percentage range would be typical of many schools.

Regardless of the actual number of potential under-age school leavers, there is considerable evidence to show that the geographical distribution of these young people is very uneven. MacKenzie & Chamberlain’s census (1994) found two-thirds (67%) of the homeless school students came from only 17% of schools. In 1995, around one-third (34%) of secondary schools receiving funding under the Commonwealth’s Students At Risk (STAR) program because they were assessed as having a significant numbers of students at risk of leaving school under-age.

While no firm conclusions can be drawn from this piecemeal evidence, a reasonable scenario for the number of under-age school leavers would be between 1–4% of all 12- to 14-year-olds and up to 10% require support and special assistance to remain connected to school. However, in a smaller number of high-risk schools, the number of under-age school leavers and potential under-age school leavers is expected to be much higher (Box 1.2). Clearly, further research is required to confirm the accuracy of such a scenario.

1.3 Previous research and inquiries into early school leaving

There has been relatively little Australian research which focuses specifically on under-age school leaving. Batten and Russell (1995) concluded that most of the literature either did not distinguish between under-age school leaving and leaving before completion of post-compulsory schooling, or focused on secondary school students in the post-compulsory years. However, there are a significant number of reports which review and investigate aspects of under-age school leaving (Table 1.1).

Issues arising from these reports which have significant policy and program implications for under-age school leaving include:

- the need to develop a national policy on preventing under-age school leaving (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training 1996; House of Representatives Standing Committee on Community Affairs 1995; Webber & Hayduk 1995);
- the lack of systematic data on the extent of under-age school leaving and indicators of potential under-age school leaving (e.g. truancy and exclusions) at the national, State/Territory, regional and school level (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training 1996; House of Representatives Standing Committee on Community Affairs 1995; Dandenong Early School Leavers Working Party 1995; Webber & Hayduk 1995);
- the lack of systematic data on programs and facilities available for potential under-age school leavers. Regular changes in government programs and funding arrangements means a constantly changing array of initiatives which aim to assist under-age school leavers. There is currently no register or directory of such initiatives (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Community Affairs 1995);
- the need to expand Commonwealth funded programs which aim to assist potential early school leavers such as Students At Risk (STAR) and the Education Counselling for Young People Program (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Community Affairs 1995).
Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training 1996; House of Representatives Standing Committee on Community Affairs 1995; Dandenong Early School Leavers Working Party 1995; Webber & Hayduk 1995; and

- the need to expand State/Territory funded student welfare support services such as home/school liaison officers, student welfare officers and student counsellors (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training 1996; House of Representatives Standing Committee on Community Affairs 1995; Dandenong Early School Leavers Working Party 1995; Webber & Hayduk 1995); and

- advocating a holistic approach to student welfare based on a recognition of the central role of schools in addressing not only the education needs of young people but their broader pastoral and welfare needs (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training 1996; House of Representatives Standing Committee on Community Affairs 1995; Dandenong Early School Leavers Working Party 1995; Webber & Hayduk 1995).

More broadly, there are also a number of strategic issues currently under debate which have potentially significant policy and program implications for under-age school leaving, including:

- structural changes to all State/Territory education systems involving greater devolution of budget decision making and accountability to individual schools. For some, this means greater flexibility to respond to local needs whereas others claim that without sufficient commitment and resources guaranteed by a central authority, schools are less able to provide for the needs of at-risk students; and

- changes to Commonwealth Government priorities in relation to assisting potential under-age school leavers. Significant announcements in the 1996–97 Commonwealth Budget were the discontinuation of the Students At Risk (STAR) program and certain labour market programs, and the introduction of a number of new initiatives including the National Early Literacy and Numeracy Strategy and the Modern Australian Apprenticeship and Traineeship Scheme.

| Table 1.1: Examples of reports which investigate aspects of early school leaving |
|---------------------------------|-------------------------|
| Category                        | Examples of reports     |
| Parliamentary and Statutory Inquiries | Inquiry into Truancy and Exclusion from School (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training 1996) |
|                                 | Report on Aspects of Youth Homelessness (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Community Affairs 1995) |
|                                 | Achievement for Everyone: Meeting the Challenge. A paper on the success of innovative community-based approaches to education and training for young people at-risk (NSW Youth Advisory Council 1994c) |
|                                 | The Literacy Challenge, A Report on Strategies for Early Intervention for Literacy and Learning for Australian Children (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training 1992) |
| Regional and local reviews      | Leaving School Early: A report on a research study examining early school leavers, and those at-risk, aged 13–16 in the Australian Capital Territory (Webber & Hayduk 1995) |
|                                 | Students At Risk Program (1995–96) Department of Education Victoria (James 1996) |
|                                 | Early School Leavers in the Dandenong Region (Dandenong Early School Leavers Working Party 1995) |
| Program Evaluations             | Evaluation of Time Out Pilot Projects (Paterson & Holland 1994) |
|                                 | Evaluation of the Students At Risk (STAR) Component of the National Equity Program for Schools (Albany Consulting Group 1996 unpublished) |
|                                 | Evaluation of School-based Youth Homelessness Pilot Projects (Brooks et al. 1997) |
1.4 Terms of reference for this study

The objectives of the research were to:

1. provide an overview of existing policies and services aimed at reducing early school leaving;
2. identify the factors which lead to early school leaving;
3. provide an overview of the economic and social costs of early school leaving to the community and individuals affected; and
4. provide an analysis of “best practice” school and alternative programs which have good records of retaining potential school leavers.

In addition to the research objectives, the brief identified a number of specific areas of study, especially in relation to term of reference 4:

• to identify evidence of some schools within the same geographic area having better records of retaining potentially early school leavers than others;
• to identify what features schools with good records of retaining difficult or at-risk students have in common;
• to identify what features alternative programs with good records of retaining difficult or at-risk students have in common;
• to identify and review the range of pathways providing opportunities to further participate in education and training for early school leavers; and
• to develop a report which analyses the findings of the study and provides some practical strategies to assist education and training providers to optimise the meaningful participation of potential early school leavers within their settings.

Accordingly, the focus of the primary research was term of reference 4, through an investigation of the structures, processes and outcomes of specific initiatives run by schools and community-based organisations under various programs, using survey and case study methods.

In further defining the scope of our study and developing operational definitions for the research, a number of aspects of these terms of reference required clarification.

The distinction between school and alternative programs
The distinction made in the terms of reference between school-based programs and alternative programs for preventing early school leaving was not found to be useful for investigating the range of programs available for potential early school leavers. In many cases, a program involved both the school- and community-based organisations working together. In the case of alternative schools, programs could be considered as both school and alternative programs.

Focus on secondary schools
The report only considered programs and initiatives for young people of secondary school age. However, key informants interviewed during the research indicated the need for further work to investigate programs for at-risk primary school students, particularly in relation to young people who failed to make the transition to secondary school.

It is also important to note that while our focus was on programs for secondary school students, a number of these programs also included students above the legal school leaving age. This reflected the fact that for many programs, student age was not the principal criteria for defining the target group of at-risk students. Details of the profile of students participating in programs for potential early school leavers is presented in Chapter 3.

Initiatives for preventing under-age school leaving
The main unit of analysis for the primary research was the “initiative”. We used the term in this report to refer a local integrated strategy operated by an individual school or other organisation targeting potential under-age school leavers. Such initiatives covered interventions with individual, groups of students or whole school approaches. A typology of initiative models is presented in Chapter 7.

As shown later in the report, initiatives were not always easily categorised from a policy or administrative perspective. They could be funded by one or more special programs, and utilise a range of existing school and community services and resources.

Prevention, early intervention and crisis management
The research focus on reducing under-age school leaving, is used generically to cover a continuum of interventions (James 1996) which include:
• prevention – addressing the fundamental underlying causes of under-age school leaving;
• early intervention/action before chronic problems or behaviour patterns are established; and
• crisis management – responding to the immediate chronic needs and problems of potential under-age school leavers.

While initiatives which target potential under-age school leavers may place different degrees of emphasis on prevention, early intervention and crisis management, most used a mix of strategies and activities across this continuum.

Defining “a good record” of retaining potential school leavers

Term of reference 4, to analyse programs which have good records of retaining potential school leavers, required a definition of a “good record” for retention. In the absence of an established theoretical construct in the literature for the retention of potential under-age school leavers, an initial framework was developed which could be used in assessing the effectiveness of different initiatives. It was based on four variables relating to student participation:

• attendance at mainstream school;
• attendance at an initiative;
• completion of the initiative or rate of ongoing involvement; and
• completion of compulsory education.

A description of this framework and the use of other indicators for measuring the “success” of individual initiatives is discussed in Chapter 8.1.

However, at the start of the research, the identification of initiatives which have good records of retaining potential school leavers was problematic because systematic data on these variables for individual initiatives was either limited or non-existent. The implications for the methodology are discussed in Chapter 2.

Best practice in reducing early school leaving

Literally, best practice refers to initiatives which are the most appropriate, effective and efficient in reducing under-age school leaving. However, the term “best practice” is something of a misnomer. No practice is “best” for all initiatives and best practices must be evaluated in the context of the initiatives’ strategies, target groups and available resources. In this context the Truancy Inquiry (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training 1996) concluded “there is no evidence that any one model is better than another, that any one would qualify for best practice”.

We have therefore adopted a relative approach to best practice focusing on initiative features and elements which are perceived by key informants as contributing to reducing under-age school leaving. Associated with these best practices, we present practical strategies that are used by initiatives to implement these features.

1.5 Overview of the report

The methodology for the study is described in Chapter 2. The factors affecting early school leaving (research objective 2), the barriers faced by early school leavers (specific area of study 4) and the economic and social costs of early school leaving (research objective 3) are presented in Chapters 3, 4 and 5 respectively. Chapters 6 and 7 provide an overview of policies and services aimed at reducing early school leaving (research objective 1). An analysis of best practice initiatives which have good records of retaining potential early school leavers is provided in Chapter 8 and 9 (research objective 4 and specific areas of study 1, 2 and 3). The final chapter of the report, Chapter 10, discusses the implications for policy and program development and implementation of the study findings (specific area of study 5).
THE RESEARCH design for this study was informed by our initial contact with Commonwealth and State/Territory government youth and education agencies, non-government youth peak organisations and a number of initiatives targeting under-age school leavers. Several issues were raised which were significant for the research process:

• a number of informants questioned the need for “yet another report” on students at-risk. From their perspective, the key issues were how to achieve coordinated action and adequate resourcing rather than a lack of understanding of the problem. It was suggested that this may impact both on their willingness to participate in the study and the amount of time they were prepared to contribute to the research;
• the importance of building on the substantial general literature on early school leaving and recent inquiries to avoid “reinventing the wheel”;
• the lack of systematic data on school attendance and completion of compulsory education, and the lack of data on the number and location of initiatives targeting under-age school leavers meant that there was no statistical basis for identifying successful initiatives to participate in the study;
• initiatives operating throughout Australia were characterised by markedly different sizes, sponsoring organisations, intervention models and target groups. It was suggested that a sampling strategy was needed which ensured this diverse range of initiatives was represented; and
• the need to consider coordinated regional responses to preventing under-age school leaving rather than just the responses of individual initiatives.

In response to these issues, a methodology for the research project was designed that had four principal components, each of which is described below.

2.1 Literature review
A literature search was carried out on the Australian Education Index from 1995 onwards to complement the recently published literature review on students at-risk by Batten and Russell (1995) covering the period between 1980 and 1994. Reports from the recent government inquiries into youth homelessness and truancy and exclusion from school, as well as reports provided by youth agencies involved in telephone consultations were also included in the review.

The literature review was used to construct lists of key features including:

- factors leading to early school leaving;
- strategies used by initiatives targeting early school leavers;
- achievements and outcomes of initiatives targeting early school leavers; and
- success factors of initiatives targeting early school leavers.

While little distinction was made in the literature between under-age school leaving and post-compulsory early school leaving, these lists provided a useful starting point for investigating perceptions of under-age school leaving. Specifically, these lists were used to generate items for the postal survey that was sent to initiative coordinators (see below).

2.2 Key informant consultations

Telephone consultations were held with all major Commonwealth and State/Territory government youth and education agencies and non-government youth peak organisations in early 1996 to identify key issues for the research and to assist with the selection and recruitment of initiatives to participate in the research.

Written requests were also sent to the Commonwealth and State/Territory government education agencies regarding existing and planned policies aimed at reducing early school leaving, and education and training pathways for early school leavers.

2.3 Postal survey

The main purpose of the postal survey, was to investigate the range of intervention models being used, and to examine the characteristics of initiatives, their achievements and perceptions about the factors affecting their success in retaining potential under-age school leavers. The survey also obtained information about the perceptions of initiative staff concerning the factors affecting under-age school leaving.

The survey, administered in May 1996, was designed to collect reasonably detailed quantitative and qualitative data and, based on feedback from piloting the survey, was expected to take initiative staff about 90 minutes to complete. In addition, available background material on each initiative was collected and analysed.

It was agreed with the NYARS Steering Committee that 45 initiatives be included in the postal survey sample, reflecting the depth of treatment required within the limits of the available project budget.

A purposive sampling strategy was used to select a sample of successful initiatives to be asked to participate in the postal survey. Initially, all Commonwealth and State/Territory government youth and education agencies and non-government youth peak organisations were asked to nominate initiatives that they thought were successful in retaining potential under-age school leavers. From this list of approximately 100 initiatives, the following criteria were used to select the sample:

- substantial proportion of participants are under the legal school leaving age;
- the distribution of the sample across the States/Territories broadly reflected the distribution of 12- to 17-year-olds as at the 1991 Census, with the proviso that at least two initiatives would be included from each State/Territory;
- rural/urban coverage;
- the inclusion of some initiatives targeting young Aboriginal people; and
- the inclusion of a range of initiatives based on such criteria as venue (i.e. school or other premises), type of organisation operating the initiative, length of participation, complete or partial withdrawal of participants from mainstream school, and strategies used.

A number of initiatives were considered which target specific groups of young people at risk of leaving school early, including young people with intellectual disabilities, young people with psychiatric or mental health problems, young people in residential or home-
based care, and young people in juvenile justice centres. These initiatives were not included in the sample because of their specific focus.

It is important to note that in the absence of systematic information on the full range of initiatives that operate throughout Australia, no claim can be made about the extent to which our sample is representative of all initiatives aimed at reducing under-age school leaving. In fact, given that over 680 secondary schools operated initiatives for potential under-age and post-compulsory early school leavers in 1995 under the Commonwealth’s Students At Risk (STAR) program alone, it is clear our sample of 45 represents a small proportion of all initiatives. However, feedback from key informants was that the final sample adequately reflected the range of initiatives operating throughout Australia.

A response rate of 76% was achieved for the postal survey (Table 2.1) which left South Australia relatively unrepresented. Beyond this, the consultants considered that the sample provided a satisfactory base for examining approaches to assisting potential under-age school leavers.

2.4 Case studies

The purpose of the case studies was to investigate coordinated regional responses to preventing under-age school leaving. In addition, the case studies provided additional qualitative information on individual initiatives. It was negotiated with the NYARS Steering Committee that four regions would be investigated in at least three States/Territories.

The case studies sites were identified in consultation with staff of the relevant State/Territory Department of Education, who also identified schools which should be included in the regional investigation. Other initiatives included in the case studies were those which participated in the postal survey and others identified by key informants. A condition of the ethics approval for the research process was that the case study sites would not be identified.

The case studies involved interviews with participants, staff involved in operating the initiative, and key informants working with young people at risk of leaving school early, although not necessarily involved in operating specific initiatives for this group (e.g. school welfare staff and community-based youth workers). The case studies also involved the collection of data from participating schools on rates of attendance; suspension, exclusion and expulsion; and completion of compulsory education, where available.

Table 2.2 shows for each case study site, the number of school and other initiatives which were included, and the number of interviews carried out.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case study</th>
<th>No. schools</th>
<th>No. other initiatives</th>
<th>Initiative staff interviewed</th>
<th>Participants interviewed</th>
<th>Key informants interviewed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Site 1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Site 2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Site 3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Site 4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Issues
This chapter of the report investigates the factors which lead to under-age school leaving. These factors, taken individually and in combination, define the problems that initiatives attempt to address. Our purpose in investigating these factors is to provide the necessary background for later discussions of initiative strategies, outcomes and best practice.

It is not our intention to provide an explanation of the causes of under-age school leaving. Batten and Russell (1995) concluded that the relationship between factors associated with early school leaving and actual early school leaving is complex and the specific causal mechanisms are unclear.

One thing is clear, however, the concept of single cause/effect relationships in this area is a nonsense... Relationships need to be viewed as forming a dense and complex web of interrelated, interacting, multidirectional forces.

In a similar way, the Australian Curriculum Studies Association’s (1996) project on student alienation in Years 5–8 also found that alienation is multifaceted and multidimensional, and that students can be alienated at different times and in different settings. It concluded that rather than seeking to identify a single cause of alienation, the focus needs to be on understanding the extent to which particular factors interact to produce alienation in young people.

The first section of this chapter presents findings from the postal survey and case studies about practitioners’ perceptions of the factors leading to under-age school leaving. The second section investigates how different initiatives address these factors.

3.1 Practitioners’ perceptions of factors which lead to under-age school leaving

Literature review

As previously indicated, there has been relatively little Australian research which focuses specifically on under-age school leaving. However, there is a considerable literature on early school leaving in general, particularly in relation to the non-completion of post-compulsory education. Using a recent comprehensive review of Australian literature on at-risk students (Batten & Russell 1995) and other sources, 39 factors relating to the individual and their family and school life were identified as possible factors which lead to early school leaving (Box 3.1).

These 39 factors were used as a starting point for our investigation of the factors which lead to under-age school leaving, particularly as Batten and Russell (1995) suggest that similar factors are likely to affect both under-age school leaving and post-compulsory early school leaving.

In addition, Batten and Russell (1995) identified a number of societal factors which provide the socio-economic...
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Individual student factors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Low self-esteem</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boredom and lack of motivation for learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of commitment to goals relating to education and employment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excessive anxiety about attending school (“school refusal” or “school phobia”)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Factors related to gender e.g. gender-based harassment by boys and/or teachers, pregnancy and motherhood</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harassment based on sexuality/homophobia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Racism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflict with peers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Influence of peers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isolation and inability to make friends</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical illness or disability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning difficulties</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mental health problems e.g. attention deficit disorder</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intellectual disability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disruptive behaviour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Withdrawn or passive behaviour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Involvement in criminal activity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alcohol and other drug use</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor academic performance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of literacy skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor English language skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Living in rural and remote areas</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Family factors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fragmented and reconstituted family structures caused by death of a parent or marital breakdown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family conflict due to marriage breakdown, sibling rivalry, cultural conflict, rejection of parental values</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical, mental, emotional or sexual abuse or neglect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disruption to schooling caused by transiency and mobility, for example, due to unemployment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family poverty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of parental interest, support and recognition of the value of education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homelessness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frequent changes of guardianship or being a state ward</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School factors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>School teaching/learning strategies result in school being seen as boring</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Content of school curriculum is not relevant or responsive to student needs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School operation and curriculum is not culturally appropriate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class and school size too big</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor relations with teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of caring and supportive school environment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rigidity and restrictiveness in school policies/practices e.g. discipline and welfare policy, attendance, timetabling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of student participation in school decision making process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competitive pressures due to examination-dominated assessment</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
context for the individual student, family and school. These factors, including unemployment levels, the availability and cost of housing and the availability of community support and services, contributed to the strong association found between early school leaving and socio-economic disadvantage. This association is supported by research specifically on young people who leave school before Year 10 (Orr n.d.) and in the report of the House of Representatives Inquiry into Truancy (1996).

Information sought in postal survey
The postal survey was used to seek information from practitioners about the most common reasons for students either being at risk of or actually leaving school before the legal school leaving age. Specifically, practitioners were asked to think about participants in their initiative who were under the legal school leaving age and then provide:

- open-ended descriptions of up to five reasons for under-age school leaving;
- select up to five main reasons for under-age school leaving from the list of 39 factors identified in the literature. Survey respondents were able to add factors to the literature review list if they felt the list did not cover all the main factors;
- nominate the single most important factor which leads to early school leaving; and
- indicate the particular factors which their initiative aimed to address.

Close match between practitioners’ perceptions and literature review
Practitioners’ perceptions of the factors which lead to under-age school leaving closely matched the list of 39 factors identified from the literature. Over 80% (32) of the listed factors were selected by at least one practitioner as a main factor for under-age school leaving. The six factors which were not selected as a main factor were:

- family poverty;
- students in residential or home-based care;
- racism;
- school operation and curriculum is not culturally appropriate;
- lack of student participation in school decision making; and
- competitive pressures due to examination-dominated assessment.

Clearly, this does not mean that these factors are not relevant. In fact, evidence collected during the regional case studies and discussions with key informants provided insights into the relative importance of some of these factors. Family poverty may not have been included as a main factor because practitioners viewed it as an underlying, indirect contributor to under-age school leaving compared to many of the other more immediate factors.

In terms of students in residential or home-based care, a representative of the Australian Association of Young People in Care indicated that their evidence showed a strong association between students in residential or home-based care and early school leaving. Initiatives which focused specifically on young people in care were not included in the postal survey.

The low recognition of factors such as harassment based on sexuality/homophobia, racism and culturally inappropriate school operation and curriculum may reflect the proportionally smaller number of students these factors may effect. However, practitioners commented that these factors are highly significant in individual cases.

Practitioners also nominated six additional factors which were not directly covered by the literature review. These factors were:

- poor parenting skills;
- experience of alienation and failure in primary school;
- failure to develop case plans for suspended or excluded students;
- lack of commitment of school teachers and support staff;
- school staff inexperience at dealing with young people’s problems; and
- student lifestyles which are not compatible with regular school attendance (e.g. late night activities).

Young people’s perceptions
In addition to the survey data on practitioners’ perceptions, individual and small-group interviews were conducted with over 50 young people participating in initiatives aimed at reducing under-aged school leaving. In response to open-ended questions about the factors which lead to under-aged school leaving, young people cited many of the factors identified in the literature. The factors most commonly cited by young people were:

- that school was boring and irrelevant to young people;
• conflict with school teachers; and
• lack of understanding by school staff of the difficulties faced by young people.

Overall, young people’s perceptions were found to be consistent with the perceptions of practitioners.

**Significant diversity in practitioners’ perceptions**

Survey data indicated there was significant diversity in practitioners’ perceptions of factors which lead to under-age school leaving. Only one factor (low self-esteem) was cited by more than half the respondents as a major factor. Over half (54%) of the listed factors were selected as a main factor by at least 20% of practitioners. No factor was cited by

| Table 3.1: Most commonly identified factors leading to under-age school leaving |
| Source: Postal survey of initiative coordinators (N=34) |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cluster</th>
<th>Individual factors</th>
<th>% of practitioners who cited as major factor</th>
<th>% practitioners who cited as single most important factor</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Continual experiences of academic failure</td>
<td>Poor academic performance</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Learning difficulties</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lack of literacy skills</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Experience of alienation and failure in primary school</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Schools not responsive to student needs</td>
<td>School curriculum is not relevant/responsive to student needs</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>School teaching strategies result in school being seen as boring</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Alienating school environment</td>
<td>Class and school size too large</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rigidity and restrictiveness in school policies and practices</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lack of caring and supportive school environment</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Family conflict/breakdown</td>
<td>Family conflict (marital breakdown/rejection of parental values)</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Fragmented and reconstituted family structures</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Low self-esteem</td>
<td>Low self-esteem</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Poor student/teacher relations</td>
<td>Poor relationships with teachers</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lack of commitment of school teachers and support staff</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Staff inexperience at dealing with young people’s problems</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Disinterest in education</td>
<td>Boredom and lack of motivation for learning</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lack of commitment to education and employment</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Disruptive behaviour</td>
<td>Disruptive behaviour</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
more than 15% of practitioners as the single most important factor. This diversity of views is consistent with the multifaceted and multidimensional nature of a complex problem like under-age school leaving.

Key clusters

However, within this diversity it was possible to identify eight key clusters. These clusters are not statistical constructs but represent the most commonly cited factors, grouped around similar themes. The grouping process was based on practitioners' qualitative descriptions of individual factors. The clusters cover 15 of the 39 factors identified in the literature plus three additional factors nominated by practitioners.

Summary data on the relative importance of the individual factors and clusters is presented in Table 3.1, followed by a description of each cluster.

The four most commonly identified factors were cited by over 80% of practitioners as the single most important factor leading to under-age school leaving. These factors were:

1. Continual experiences of academic failure

Practitioners viewed the continual experiences of failure for young people with poor academic performance as a significant factor leading to under-age school leaving, regardless of whether this poor academic performance related to learning difficulties, inadequate literacy skills or other factors.

A number of comments from practitioners illustrate the role that failure plays in under-age school leaving.

School is about academic achievement and repeated failure creates fears. Many of these young people are intimidated by their peers and school staff because of this failure and they are pressured at home as well by parents.

Schools reward success. Failure may have its genesis in a number of other issues or factors but it is the ultimate turn off and causes failing students to seek out negative or unconventional recognition.

Failure to achieve academically in high schools triggers other related behavioural and self-esteem factors which lead to truancy.

Lack of educational success leads to frustration and low motivation to continue trying. Many of the behavioural problems we see in students are really overcompensations. Students get in a vicious cycle which makes it very difficult to learn.

Learning difficulties are just the starting point .... they lead to low self-esteem and are the source of student/teacher conflict, peer ridicule and conflict with parents.

These comments can be summarised in a generalised causal-loop diagram. This diagram does not explain the causes of under-age school leaving, but illustrates some of the important causal links described by practitioners.

2. School not responsive to student needs

Practitioners indicated that the fact that the content of school curriculum was not relevant or responsive to student needs was a significant factor contributing to under-age school leaving. Associated with this factor was mainstream teaching-learning strategies being seen as boring.

If school is not in their quality world, they will not be interested in staying ... and I hear them complaining about the purposelessness of the school experience.

School is irrelevant to students' real life and most teachers lack a good understanding of the issues that impact on students' lives.

At-risk students are usually bored ... they don't understand the relevance of what is being taught at school. It's not that they don't want to learn, but they need to know how it applies to their life.
Once students switch off, they become inattentive, unmotivated and disruptive.

Practitioners also commented on the strong links between students perceiving school as boring and irrelevant and other factors relating to experiences of failure, particularly poor literacy and learning difficulties.

It is very difficult to find the curriculum interesting, if you can’t understand a word the teacher is saying. Students often say its boring, but really mean “I don’t understand”.

3. Alienating school environment

An alienating school environment as a factor leading to under-age school leaving was described in terms of class and school size being too large, rigidity and restrictiveness in school policies and practices (e.g. discipline and welfare policy, uniform, attendance and lateness, timetabling) and a lack of a caring and supportive environment.

Alienation is the key factor. I’m not sure whether this happens because class sizes are too large or because teachers are unable to build relationships with students or because of inflexible school structures and rules. What I do know is that students end up scared, lonely and unsupported.

Early school leaving goes hand in hand with school size and need to control through structure, routine and inflexibility. Schools don’t allow for individuality or the personal needs of students.

These students generally only work when strong rapport has been established. In large schools this usually does not happen. Kids feel they don’t belong and drop out.

At-risk students hate the dominance and regimentation of mainstream schools. They feel they don’t fit in. For these kids that transition from primary school is a huge crisis.
4. Family conflict/breakdown
Half of all practitioners indicated that family conflict was a major factor leading to under-age school leaving. Family conflict was associated with marital breakdown, sibling rivalry, cultural conflict, rejection of parental values and fragmented and reconstituted family structures. Practitioners summarised the myriad sub-factors linked to family conflict and breakdown under the generic heading of “dysfunctional families”. A number of practitioners commented that while they recognised a strong correlation between dysfunctional families and under-age school leaving, it was difficult to understand the exact causal mechanisms involved.

Students with chronic family problems are often homeless or are “testing out” leaving home. This tends to mean irregular attendance at school and they start to drift away from the social context of school.

Dysfunctional families don’t provide role models or training in behaviours which are needed to survive at school.

Dysfunctional families or family breakdown often leads to dislocation and moving around. It’s easy for kids in these families to drift away from school.

Family issues can lead to homelessness, loss of self-esteem, aggressive behaviour, and emotional problems – all of which makes fitting into the school system difficult.

Batten and Russell (1995) indicated that family-related factors affect early school leaving through their effects on the psycho-social state of the young person, for example, in lowered self-esteem and motivation, and increased difficulty relating to peers and adults. This can adversely affect the young person’s behaviour and educational achievement which, in turn, has been associated with early school leaving. Family related factors have also been identified as being significant in leading to youth homelessness, which has been linked to early school leaving.

Additional factors leading to under-age school leaving
In addition to the four most commonly identified factors, a number of consequences were identified as additional factors leading to under-age school leaving.

5. Low self-esteem
While low self-esteem was the most frequently cited individual factor leading to under-age school leaving, it was not cited as the single most important factor by any practitioner. Discussions with practitioners indicated that low self-esteem was seen as a component or consequence of most other factors.

6. Poor student/teacher relations
Poor student/teacher relations were identified by half the practitioners as an important factor in early school leaving.

Without an open, communicative relationship it’s very difficult for students to see the value and worth of education. Our program is successful because we work very hard to build this relationship.

Students come to our program from school complaining that teachers pick on them and don’t give them a fair go. From our perspective, it’s more that teachers don’t always have the specialist training to work with difficult kids and the structures of the average classroom makes it impossible to give these kids the time they need.

7. Disinterest in education
Almost half (41%) identified student boredom and lack of motivation for learning, and one-quarter (26%) identified a lack of student commitment to education as important factors in under-age school leaving. However, as with low self-esteem, low commitment and motivation were not seen as intrinsic characteristics of at-risk young people, but rather as consequences of other factors.

This barrier (disinterest in education) has to be broken before we can possibly provide a relevant and productive learning environment. This relates to poor academic performance and irrelevant curriculums.

Being anti-school is part of a social attitude. It is not a matter of convincing one student that school is relevant, but providing relevant schooling to the generation of at-risk kids.

Learning is hard work and students require a lot of support to “hang in there” when the going gets tough. We need to be very flexible to maintain students’ interest in school.

If students see school as boring and irrelevant, then they see little value in education. They face lots of other pressures to pull them away from school.
Disruptive behaviour
Disruptive behaviour is perceived as part of a cycle associated with experiences of failure, poor academic performance and students feeling they don’t belong and are not valued.

If there are 25 students in a class, then the only way teachers can cope with several disruptive students is to ask for them to be removed – so begins a never ending cycle of rejection, compounded by lack of academic achievement or progress.

However, as with other factors nominated by practitioners, it is difficult to identify where or why such cycles begin. This reinforces the notion that identifying the factors that lead to under-age school leaving, while important for defining the problems that initiatives attempt to address, does not provide an explanation of the causes of under-age school leaving.

Variations in factors between target groups
The relative importance of factors which have been identified as leading to under-age school leaving varies for different at-risk students. In fact, initiatives may target groups of potential under-age school leavers based on particular factors such as disruptive behaviour or poor academic performance.

Batten and Russell (1995) also identify a number of population group differences in relation to higher rates of leaving school early including young men, young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islands people, young people in geographically isolated areas and young people in residential and other forms of out-of-home care.

3.2 Addressing factors which lead to under-age school leaving
Practitioners strongly indicated that their initiatives were able to address the factors they cited as leading to under-age school leaving. They felt they had greatest control over addressing student experiences of failure and alienation, low self-esteem, poor student/teacher relations and disruptive behaviour (Table 3.2). It was considered difficult to address underlying factors such as family conflict and breakdown.

Examples of strategies cited in relation to addressing particular factors are also included in Table 3.2. Clearly there is significant overlap and particular strategies may address a number of factors. For example, strategies to address student experiences of failure were closely linked to improving schools’ responsiveness to student needs and teacher/student relations.

In conclusion, there was a diversity of views about the most important factors leading to under-age school leaving, highlighting the multifaceted nature of the problem. As Hixson and Tinzmann (1990) emphasise “the reasons young people are leaving school early are multiple and complex ... there is no simple solution which can be applied to alleviate the problem”.

It is therefore not surprising that in investigating approaches used to address under-age school leaving in this study, we encountered a range of intervention strategies and models. Detailed information on the range of approaches used by initiatives to address these factors is presented in subsequent chapters, in particular Chapter 7 on strategies and Chapter 9 on best practices.
Table 3.2: Extent to which factors leading to under-age school leaving are addressed by initiatives

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cluster</th>
<th>Individual factors (NB: Number of clusters reflect most commonly identified factors from Table 3.1)</th>
<th>% extent to which factors are addressed by initiatives</th>
<th>Examples of strategies used by initiatives to address particular factors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>7. Disinterest in education</td>
<td>Boredom and lack of motivation for learning, Lack of commitment to education and employment</td>
<td>91, 62</td>
<td>• involve students in practical activities related to their interests and life situation;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Continual experiences of academic failure</td>
<td>Poor academic performance, Learning difficulties, Lack of literacy skills, Experience of alienation and failure in primary school</td>
<td>79, 100, 79, 26</td>
<td>• small-group work focusing on basic skills;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Disruptive behaviour</td>
<td>Disruptive behaviour</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>• adopting a flexible curriculum which caters for individual learning styles and competencies;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Poor student/teacher relations</td>
<td>Poor relationships with teachers, Lack of commitment of school teachers and support staff, Staff inexperience at dealing with young people’s problems</td>
<td>85, 85, -</td>
<td>• early identification of learning difficulties, particularly literacy skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Alienating school environment</td>
<td>Class and school size too large, Rigidity and restrictiveness in school policies and practices, Lack of caring and supportive school environment</td>
<td>79, 76, 26</td>
<td>• anger management and conflict resolution workshops</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Low self-esteem</td>
<td>Low self-esteem</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>• professional development for teachers in working with challenging students;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Schools not responsive to student needs</td>
<td>School curriculum is not relevant/responsive to student needs, School teaching strategies result in school being seen as boring</td>
<td>56, 79</td>
<td>• selection of staff who can develop good rapport with students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Family conflict/breakdown</td>
<td>Family conflict (marital breakdown/rejection of parental values), Fragmented and reconstituted family structures</td>
<td>38, 44</td>
<td>• informal “student spaces”;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Postal survey of initiative coordinators (N=34)
THE PROBLEM of under-age school leaving exists within the specific institutional and social context of the Australian education and training system. A critical feature of the system is the various “pathways” that students can follow to reach desired outcomes, where pathways refers to the different ways students can obtain the credentials necessary to participate in further education, training or employment. This chapter of the report provides an overview of the range of pathways available to early school leavers and identifies barriers to their successful participation in these pathways. This provides a necessary background for the later discussion of the policies and programs which have been established to reduce under-age school leaving.

The first section identifies pathways based on information provided by Commonwealth and State/Territory education agencies. The second section presents findings from the literature review and case studies concerning barriers to young people’s successful participation in education or training pathways.

In this chapter, the situation for early school leavers in both compulsory and post-compulsory education is considered, since under-age school leavers may seek to follow pathways to re-enter education and training once they are beyond the age of compulsory schooling.

4.1 Overview of pathways

From a national perspective, there are some pathways for students who have left school early which are available in all States/Territories, and others which are specific to a State or Territory system. Four categories of pathways are considered.

1. Training through TAFE

Institutes of TAFE in all States/Territories provide opportunities for young people who have left school early, to undertake general education courses, as well as vocational training courses. In some States/Territories, Year 10 and Year 12 Certificates can be obtained through TAFE. For example, in NSW a Higher School Certificate can be obtained through TAFE, and all courses offered in this pathway contribute to the university entrance score.

Another education pathway in NSW, while not leading to a Higher School Certificate, provides for vocational education and training to be delivered by TAFE, or by industry and private training providers. Credit transfer arrangements link this training with further education and training, including university study.

In the Northern Territory, students may undertake some of their studies at TAFE, and may also undertake work experience and training in non-school situations. For example St John’s College, Darwin allows students to undertake
pre-vocational training while continuing with Year 12 Certificate studies. In Queensland, extensive cooperative pro-
grams between schools and TAFE allow students to undertake TAFE subjects either at school (where the school is a
registered provider or operates under the supervision of a TAFE institute) or at a TAFE college.

2. Returning to school
Young people who have left school early have the option of returning to mainstream school. In particular, as part of
the implementation of the Australian Vocational Training System, all States and Territories are moving towards
expanding the senior secondary school curriculum to include vocational courses. Since one of the factors associated
with leaving school early is curriculum which is not regarded as relevant by students, the provision of such courses
which enable access to post-compulsory pathways other than the traditional school pathway (i.e. a general education
leading to university) is more likely to attract early school leavers. Some vocational courses are delivered through
schools, while others are delivered through institutes of TAFE and other training providers (e.g. Training in Retail and
Commerce in NSW). While some of these pathways still provide students with the opportunity to enter university
and a Year 12 Certificate, often the emphasis is on pursuing vocational training through TAFE, industry or private
training providers.

For example, one of the four education pathways in NSW provides for a Higher School Certificate delivered by
schools which includes both general components and recognised vocational education and training components.
Some of these vocational courses contribute to the university entrance score. However, other courses do not.
Regardless, students following this pathway will receive recognition in the form of credit transfer and/or advanced
standing towards a formal training credential (e.g. TAFE Certificate).

3. Integrated institutions
Several States and Territories have established, or are in the process of establishing, institutions providing an inte-
grated framework for upper secondary schooling, TAFE and first year university. Examples of these institutions
include “senior colleges” at Hervey Bay, Bayside, and Roma in Queensland; Centralian College of Alice Springs in the
Northern Territory; Karratha College in Western Australia; Claremont College in Tasmania; and Bradfield College in
NSW. Such institutions enable students to select an education and training pathway which suits their needs by min-
imising current institutional and sectoral constraints placed on individual choice (Lundberg 1995).

4. Special pathways
A number of pathways specifically addressing institutional barriers to education and training function in particular
States/Territories. Two examples are outlined below.

Intensive Training, Employment and Support (Victoria), funded through the Community Support Fund, provides inten-
sive support to disadvantaged and homeless young people to address barriers to participation in training and
employment programs. The program also aims to fill the gap between schools and training providers for disadvan-
taged and homeless young people.

Fast Track (Western Australia) provides a pathway back into mainstream schooling, or into further education, train-
ing or employment for students who, having failed at Year 10 standard, have fallen behind in their schooling and
want to catch up. This includes students who left school before completing Year 10. The program focuses on literacy,
numeracy and career development skills. While the program operates in a number of schools, it is also offered by the
Fremantle Education Centre in order to allow participants to regain confidence in themselves prior to joining a
school-based program. Students may earn a certificate for use in job applications or future study, or they may under-
take mainstream courses and enter a regular post-compulsory education pathway.

4.2 Barriers to pathways for under-age school leavers
There are a number of barriers associated with education and training pathways for early school leavers, particularly
those who leave school before the legal school leaving age.

Entry to TAFE courses is restricted to young people aged 15 years or over. Completion of Year 10 is also a common
requirement of TAFE courses. Courses also incur fees, although concessions may be available to those on low incomes.

While early school leavers do have the option of returning to mainstream school, whether or not they are able to
do this successfully is dependent on a number of factors. Rather than structural issues, these include psychological
and social barriers factors such as the attitudes of the young people concerned, responses by peers, and the attitudes
of school authorities and teachers.

Such barriers were highlighted in a longitudinal study of the pathways followed by a sample of young people from
Victoria who left school before Year 12 (Holden 1993). This study found that:
• there was a lack of recognisable and flexible pathways between school, work, training and services;
• there was inflexibility in terms of a student’s ability to choose schools and alternatives to school, particularly for younger students;
• academic and age prerequisites set by institutes of TAFE precluded many early school leavers from enrolling in courses; and
• there were few alternatives to “normal school” or where they existed, information about them was not readily available.

The study also found that the majority of young people did not attempt to re-enter school. However, of those that did, some were refused re-entry by schools because they were regarded as “troublemakers and uninterested in the learning process” (Holden 1992, p.25).

Of the young people who returned to school, the majority left again before completing their secondary education. The main problems they encountered were:

**Personal issues**
• lack of adequate financial support;
• finding school and the curriculum even less relevant to them once they had made the attempt to establish themselves as independent adults; and
• having to return to an environment that allows individuals the minimum of autonomy and responsibility.

**The school**
• where they enrolled late they were unable to study their preferred subjects;
• negative reactions from school staff who tended to offer little encouragement or support to young people returning to their old school; and
• lack of general support within the school because of a tendency to ignore or underplay the difficulties faced by young people returning to school.

**Peers**
• placement in classes with younger people who were not as committed to learning; and
• troublesome classroom and schoolyard dynamics associated with the age discrepancies between the young people returning to school and the other students.

In conclusion, while the increased diversity and flexibility of pathways for education and training systems in Australia allows greater scope for under-age school leavers to rejoin an appropriate pathway, many will continue to face significant barriers. The following chapter looks at some of the responses to overcoming these barriers as well as other interventions to address under-age school leaving.
5 Economic and social costs of under-age school leaving

This chapter addresses the particular term of reference which calls for the provision of an overview of the economic and social costs of early school leaving to the community overall and to the individuals affected, based on the relevant Australian literature. The purpose behind the term is to provide economic information which can be taken into account in making policy decisions regarding under-age school leaving.

The literature on early school leaving was largely limited to suggestions of various economic and social costs which resulted from early school leaving. This study aimed to move the discussion beyond listing likely types of costs to the consideration of an economic analysis of the problem. From this perspective, the costs of under-age school leaving are the value of the net resources which in a given year are unavailable to the community for consumption or investment purposes as a result of the effects of the problem, both presently and in the past. While an economic analysis of under-age school leaving is beyond the scope of this study, and as discussed below, unlikely to be feasible at this stage, this section sets out some of the important parameters and issues which need to be addressed. The first section of this chapter reviews types of costs that have been associated with under-age school leaving. It is followed by a discussion of the issues involved in estimating the magnitude of these costs to the Australian economy.

It should be noted that much of the discussion does not differentiate between under-age school leaving and early leaving from post-compulsory schooling. However, as the literature is by and large limited to the identification of the likely costs rather than quantifying them, this is not a drawback, since in most cases the costs appear to apply to both groups of early school leavers.

5.1 Classification of costs

Earlier sections of this report noted the lack of agreed definitions of some of the important concepts associated with under-age school leaving such as clear specifications of the target group, and what constitutes a relevant initiative. This difficulty emerges at a number of points in the following discussion, and it is apparent that any serious attempt at assessing the costs of early school leaving would require such definitions as a starting point.

The basis of an economic analysis is the identification of the full array of costs due to under-age school leaving. As noted above, the literature concentrated on identifying a broad collection of economic and social costs which were regarded as a consequence of early school leaving. No models for costing or any classificatory schema for costs were found in the literature, and so the consultants drew on approaches to the economic analysis of social problems from other areas of Australian social policy, and in particular drug abuse, where an extensive review of approaches has been recently undertaken (Collins & Lapsley 1994).
A useful distinction in the economic analysis of social problems which is followed here is between core and related costs, and direct and indirect costs (Collins & Lapsley 1994, pp.9–10). Core costs are those which are most immediately associated with young people leaving school early, while related costs are costs other than those associated with education. A further subdivision is into direct and indirect costs, where direct costs are those which can be readily and specifically attributed to leaving school early.

Direct core costs

Direct core costs are the costs incurred by the education system generally in dealing with under-age school leaving. In particular these are the cost of special programs for support and alternate education (Section 5), and represent a diversion of educational resources from mainstream programs. For example, in 1994–95 the budget for the Commonwealth STAR (Students At Risk) program was around $7 million.

In addition, the opportunity costs of special programs can also be included as a direct cost (i.e. the value of opportunities through alternative uses of those resources which were directed to programs aimed at reducing early school leaving). This approach was taken in a recent analysis of the costs and benefits of labour market programs which included an assessment of the costs of early school leaving (Evaluation of the Landcare and Environment Action Program, DEETYA 1995 unpub.).

In theory, the costs, or at least expenditure, of special programs for under-age school leavers should be able to be readily identified from budgetary information at the Commonwealth and State/Territory level. However, in practice the task is far from simple and would require considerable work.

For example, the consultants found that while some programs clearly directed funding to initiatives for under-age school leaving, many other initiatives were not easy to locate or classify. In addition, special programs often targeted a number of special-needs groups and not just under-age school leavers, so the relative apportionment of costs to under-age school leaving in particular was not clear. Even where the initiatives could be identified, accounting conventions between institutions also varied, and projects attributed their component costs in different ways in relation to overall school costs (for example, venue and other property costs). In addition, initiatives had different cost structures depending upon their auspice, especially whether the programs were run by schools or community organisations.

Another issue arises from the distinction illustrated in Section 5 between routine school management and support services which may address school attendance, and special programs. For example, to what extent should attendance officers or community liaison officers be regarded as constituting special programs for under-age school leaving, or simply part of the general maintenance of school attendance. In the first case, they would be identified as a direct cost of under-age school leaving. The reality is more complex again in that we saw that many initiatives had varying degrees of overlap between mainstream services and special programs.

Economic benefits of under-age school leaving

It is important to also acknowledge that there can be direct economic benefits from under-age school leaving, which would need to be balanced against the core costs in a comprehensive assessment. Schools may accrue savings through the lower number of students in attendance, although it would be assumed that marginal costs would be limited and many school costs would be fixed. Perhaps more importantly, as a number of respondents reported, when “difficult” pupils either fail to attend or are transferred to alternate programs, the quality of education for other students and the productivity of teachers may be increased. Indeed, these productivity gains are often the rationale for excluding difficult students from school.

Another benefit can be the impact of special programs for early school leaving outside their specific target group. Such programs may, for example, pioneer innovative approaches to education or student support which are later adapted to other groups of students elsewhere in the school or the education system.

In addition, some under-age school leavers may enter employment or develop enterprises themselves rather than attend school, contributing to a net gain in production for that period. For example, families that withhold their children from school in order that the children work in the family business are obviously placing an economic value on the child’s labour, and historically this has been a matter of debate in Australia in rural areas.

Indirect core costs

Indirect core costs capture the value of lost rather than diverted resources. They are associated with the loss of production and lower productivity from individuals with incomplete education and training, and are typically measured by lost potential earnings.

For the individual, these indirect costs relate to income which is reduced or foregone due to lower skills and less employment. For society as a whole, these costs aggregate to include the reduction in labour productivity through
decreased skill levels and labour market attachment, and ultimately limitations on Australia's competitive advantage in the global economy. Other costs are the consequent decreased taxation revenue and decreased consumption which follow from a lower income (DEETYA 1995).

Related costs of early school leaving

Related costs, which are costs associated with other areas of the economy outside education, have had greater attention in the literature. The two recent Parliamentary inquiries (Senate Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training 1992; House of Representatives Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training 1996) outlined a wide range of negative impacts and subsequent costs of early school leaving, which are summarised below.

**Unemployment, poverty and homelessness**

Considerable research evidence indicates that there is a strong correlation between early school leaving and unemployment, poverty and homelessness. It shows that people with a lower level of educational attainment are more likely to be unemployed than those with a higher level of attainment. In Australian society, unemployment is generally related to poverty and dependence on income support (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training 1996).

The relationship between low levels of educational attainment and unemployment was highlighted in a report by the former NSW Department of Industrial Relations, Employment, Training and Further Education (1991, cited in NSW Youth Advisory Council 1994a, p.8).

Those members of the teenage population who have already undergone some form of training at least equivalent to entry-level training, and are not currently undergoing education or training towards entry-level, are of particular concern. They are poorly equipped to compete in a labour market which will become increasingly based on proven competency rather than age or "potential".

The accumulation of evidence to the inquiries points to potential costs to the individual that follow from poor educational attainment and unemployment, including:

- poor physical and mental health due to unemployment and dependence on welfare;
- homelessness;
- poverty; and
- the breakdown of family support.

As a consequence of these impacts on individuals, the following costs to the community were identified:

- additional health care costs;
- special accommodation programs;
- income support payments and programs; and
- family and individual support services.

To include these costs in the analysis, expenditure on health care, special accommodation, income support, family support services and so on could feasibly be enumerated. However, further research would be needed into the causal relations between the social problems in order to attribute the proportion of costs directly related to under-age school leaving. For example, it would need to establish what proportion of young people who used these services had suffered these disadvantages as a result of leaving school under-age, compared with those who would suffer them anyway. In other words, the costs of these social problems which were due to under-age school leaving would be the difference between the actual cost of these programs and the notional costs that would be incurred by them if there was no under-age school leaving.

**Crime**

Another area of concern in the inquiries was the cost of crime due to early school leaving. Evidence presented to the Inquiry into Truancy and Exclusion from School (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training 1996) demonstrated that:

- students who fail, or behave disruptively at school, or who persistently truant are more likely to offend than those who do not; and
- most repeat juvenile offenders have a background of truancy.

However, beyond establishing the association between poor school attendance and criminal activity, the consul-
tants did not locate any research which addressed the extent of the impact, or the types or degree of causal linkages. For example, early school leaving could be causally linked to criminal activity through providing greater opportunity to commit crime by being outside school grounds, or through not completing the socialisation undertaken by schooling. Without such linkages, it is difficult to isolate the crime due to early school leaving from the overall level of crime associated with the age group.

Generally speaking, models which estimate the costs of crime typically aim to account for the mortality and morbidity of victims, property losses to victims, and the costs of policing, the judiciary, legal aid and offender programs. In applying this approach to under-age school leavers, it may be feasible to make estimates for relevant age groups. A major difficulty comes in estimating the proportion of the costs of crime which could be associated with the segment of the age group who are under-age school leavers or poor attenders. As some of these young people may also commit crimes outside school hours, an estimation is also needed of the proportion of their criminal activities which would have occurred irrespective of whether they failed to attend school or left prematurely.

Other social costs

Obviously, a range of costs related to early school leaving are likely to exist beyond the scope of an economic analysis. The intangible costs of under-age school leaving will include the personal suffering as a result of missing out on education, if not at the time, then in the future, as well as the suffering of parents and other relatives. While these costs are important to recognise, they do not represent a call on the productive resources of the community.

There will also be broader costs to society as a whole which cannot be clearly enumerated. The Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission Inquiry Into Youth Homelessness (1989) provided this perspective when it concluded that the benefits of preventing the alienation of young people from society were substantial.

The Australian community as a whole would benefit both from the reintegration of these young people into social life and from their enhanced productivity (p.7).

5.2 Measuring costs

As far as the consultants can ascertain, there have not been any attempts to quantify these costs in a systematic or comprehensive way, with one recent exception. It is instructive that the one attempt at quantification in this area was abandoned. As part of the evaluation of the Landcare and Environment Action Program (LEAP) carried out by the Department of Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs, consultants were commissioned to conduct a cost-benefit analysis of the program. The analysis was not able to be completed because of the difficulties involved (personal communication with Helen Johnston, Evaluation and Monitoring Branch, DEETYA).

While no models of cost estimation for early school leaving were identified, it is still useful to consider some of the issues involved in order to assess the feasibility of undertaking work in this area.

No baseline available

As noted earlier, two initial drawbacks to estimating costs are the lack of agreed definitions on basic concepts such as "under-age school leaver" and the difficulty in assessing the direct cost of programs and initiatives. Without clear operational definitions and with limited existing statistics on young people who leave school under-age, accurate base-line data will not be available to begin the quantification needed for the measurement of economic costs.

For example, the consultants' scenario was that of all Australian 12- to 14-year-olds, each year 1% to 4% (5,000 to 20,000) actually left school before reaching the compulsory school leaving age, and altogether up to 50,000 of these students were potential under-age school leavers (Box 1.2).

Methodological difficulties

However, even if agreed definitions and accurate statistics were available, quantifying economic and social costs of this nature poses serious methodological problems. The human capital approach, which is often used in measuring the economic impact of social problems, attempts to estimate the net present value of the present and future costs and benefits of under-age school leaving over the lifetime of the individual. One fundamental problem is the choice of appropriate rates to discount the future costs and benefits (such as foregone earnings). In many cases, relatively small differences in the rate selected can lead to significant differences in costs estimates, although a sensitivity analysis can be undertaken using a range of discount rates to generate an array of possible costs.

Another difficulty is the valuation of foregone future production, which involves forecasting future rates of economic growth over the period of the expected working life of the under-age school leaver. For example, if Australia was to experience a much higher level of unemployment, the economic costs of under-age school leaving would decline since the level of foregone production would also decline (see Collins & Lapsley 1994). Predictions of future
employment and economic growth for 10–30 years in an era of the global economy and rapid technological change are notoriously unreliable. A related problem comes from the need to account for regional differences in the labour market. In regions of high unemployment, individuals may have difficulties gaining employment irrespective of their educational attainment, leading to a lower cost of those with low educational levels.

Another issue is the inclusion of important intangible costs. Ideally, a costing would require the valuation of the under-age school leaver’s personal suffering as a result of missing out on education, as well as the suffering of parents and other relatives. In practice, intangible costs are often excluded from cost estimates.

5.3 Conclusions

It is apparent that a broad perception exists that under-age and early school leaving is a cost to the community, and the perception is supported by the accumulated evidence presented to the two national Parliamentary inquiries. However, to a large extent this perception is restricted to pointing to the types of losses incurred by individuals and society as a whole through the failure of young people to reach their full potential and be appropriately socialised through leaving school early. Beyond this, the magnitude of the costs, and the relationship between the different direct and related costs, is largely notional.

However, it is feasible to begin to enumerate with more rigour both the scope of the problem of under-age school leaving and the direct core costs, and particularly the costs of special programs and initiatives. This report has proposed a conceptual framework which can be used for this purpose. When this data is available, it will provide a firmer basis for any future research and policy discussion of the costs of under-age school leaving.

Another benefit of this more limited costing exercise is that it will support comparative cost-benefit or cost-effectiveness analyses of different programs and initiatives which address under-age school leaving. Information from these exercises is essential for the evaluation of programs and decisions about future policies and interventions.
Responses
6 Policies and programs aimed at reducing under-age school leaving

This chapter of the report presents an overview of the policies and programs aimed at reducing under-age school leaving based on information provided by Commonwealth and State/Territory government education agencies, and confirmed in the case studies.

The chapter is intended to provide a current picture of the scope and range of policies and programs rather than an exhaustive inventory, or a policy analysis. Its focus is on education-related policies and programs which deal more directly with under-age school leaving, rather than those which address other factors which may be associated with the problem, such as youth homelessness, offending, drug abuse and family violence and breakdown.

It should be noted that such an overview represents a “snapshot” of a constantly changing policy and program context at one time, in this case early 1996 when the research was undertaken. In respect of Commonwealth policies and programs in particular, a number of changes are expected to occur in the wake of the change of Government in March 1996. Nevertheless, the general picture which is conveyed of under-age school leaving being addressed from a number of different policy perspectives, and by programs which are variously conducted by the Commonwealth, by States or Territories, jointly, or with third parties, is more significant than the particular details at any one time.

The first section reviews the policies determined by governments which relate to under-age school leaving. The second section outlines the range of programs and initiatives that governments, schools and community organisations have undertaken, either as part of the implementation of these policies, or as separate attempts to address perceived needs and problems related to under-age school leaving.

6.1 Policies which deal with under-age school leaving

A fundamental element of the policy context is that there are no Commonwealth or State/Territory government policy statements concerned specifically with reducing under-age school leaving in a coordinated manner. The two Parliamentary inquiries into the area both made this finding and concluded that this was a shortcoming which should be addressed by the development of a cohesive national policy framework (Senate Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training 1992; House of Representatives Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training 1996).

However, in policy areas dealing with youth affairs, access to education, and schooling, there are a number of policy statements which address issues relevant to the problem of early school leaving, and which have provided mandates for programs which address it. These policies are discussed below.
6.1.1 Policies for youth

Specific policy statements which address the needs of youth have been produced by Australian governments, and include policy objectives which cover the education of young people. The most significant is the National Youth Policy, which gives priority to improving access to education for young people. It was endorsed by all Commonwealth and State/Territory Youth Ministers in 1993 (A National Youth Policy: A Statement of Principles and Objectives, Australian and New Zealand Youth Ministers 1993).

The National Youth Policy provides a clear mandate for promoting inclusiveness in education systems, indicated by the policy objective:

To ensure that the present and future educational needs of all young people are met equitably through the delivery of high quality and relevant educational opportunities (p.12).

By highlighting the educational needs of all young people, and in particular disadvantaged young people, the National Youth Policy emphasises the social justice themes of access, equity, participation and rights in relation to education. Disadvantaged young people usually include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, young people from non-English speaking backgrounds, young women, young people with disabilities, young people living in geographically isolated areas, young people disadvantaged by socio-economic circumstances and young offenders.

To adequately meet the educational needs of all groups of young people, the National Youth Policy highlights the need for a diversity of approaches to ensure relevance and appropriateness, through its policy objective:

To promote, through cooperative partnerships between educators and the community: the development of a range of options through government and non-government schools, community based education programs ... (p 12).

The National Youth Policy also commits governments to take action to actively address disadvantage and provide additional assistance for disadvantaged young people, under policy objectives which include:

To ensure that all young people have opportunities to participate in activities outlined elsewhere in this policy document. Where their circumstances inhibit this, there is a commitment to ensure that specific policies and programs are established to enhance their capacity to do so.

To develop, where necessary, specific policies and programs to assist the participation of disadvantaged young people (p.12).

The National Youth Policy provides a clear direction for all Australian governments to acknowledge and address the problems associated with under-age school leaving through the reform of education systems, through the development of alternate educational provision, and through special support programs.

6.1.2 Policies for access and equity or social justice in education

The social justice and equity themes of the National Youth Policy have been taken further in some States and Territories where specific policies relating to access and equity or social justice in education have been adopted. For example, the Queensland Department of Education’s Social Justice Strategy (Draft) 1994–1998 states:

Social Justice is the process of ensuring that we maximise educational outcomes for all students in the State taking full account of individual circumstances such as their location, their sex, their socio-economic circumstances, their language and cultural background, any impairment and special talents they may have (Book 1, p.1).

The Draft Strategy outlines a framework for action in five areas - inclusive curriculum; supportive school environment; effective learning and teaching; equitable resourcing; and planning, monitoring, review and reporting - including suggested strategies, roles and responsibilities, and accountability requirements. The Draft Strategy also describes current good practice within schools in each of the five action areas to address the following issues affecting educational access: participation and outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students; cultural and language diversity; disability; educational risk; gender; geographic isolation; gifts and talents; learning impairment and learning difficulty; and low socio-economic background.

Policies for specific groups of students

The Commonwealth and State/Territory government education agencies have also adopted policies for improving access and equity to education for specific groups of students, including:

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islands students (National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy)
- female students (National Policy for the Education of Girls in Australian Schools)
• students from non-English speaking backgrounds, and
• students living in rural areas.

**Policies to combat discrimination**

Another policy approach is to counter negative pressures on students which can impede their continuing education. State/Territory government education agencies have produced policies and guidelines concerning sexual harassment and racial discrimination in schools. For example, the NSW Department of School Education’s Anti-racism Grievance Procedures states:

The NSW Department of School Education rejects racism in all its forms. It is committed to the elimination of racial discrimination – including direct and indirect racism, racial vilification and harassment – in its organisation, structures and culture, in its curriculum, and in the learning and working environments for which it is responsible.

The Procedures document outlines the process for resolving complaints, and includes an appeals mechanism and monitoring process to ensure that recommended actions are implemented.

It is clear from the earlier chapters in this report that policies which address issues of disadvantage and discrimination in schools are consistent with reducing under-age school leaving, and can direct agencies towards undertaking preventative and remedial measures. For example, the Queensland Strategy provides schools with a clear mandate for undertaking special programs to address potential and actual under-age school leavers.

**6.1.3 Policies concerning school attendance**

Under-age school leavers were defined as young people who leave school before the legal school leaving age. It is clear from this that the fundamental policy position in Australia covering under-age school leaving is the legislation in each State and Territory jurisdiction that requires school attendance to be compulsory for all young people until the regulated school leaving age.

This legislation entails rights and responsibilities on both school authorities and parents to ensure compliance. For school authorities these include providing appropriate schooling to meet the needs of a diverse population, as acknowledged in the policy statements discussed in the previous section. It also involves having mechanisms in place to monitor and evaluate school attendance and to undertake remedial measures.

Some States/Territories have specific policies concerning school attendance. For example, the NSW Department of School Education’s School Attendance Policy and Procedures states:

Each school’s Student Welfare Policy should address attendance matters to ensure that attendance is seen as a component of student welfare and to encourage regular school attendance ... Early detection of poor attenders and prompt, positive intervention measures are essential (p.2).

The NSW Education Reform Act 1990 requires that absences be explained within seven days. The Policy and Procedures provide for action to be taken within two days of an unexplained absence and where a student has been absent without satisfactory explanation for more than three days in a school term. If attempts by the school and home school liaison officer do not restore satisfactory attendance of students of compulsory school age, the Education Reform Act provides for conciliation conferences involving the parents or caregivers which attempt to resolve non-attendance in an informal, non-threatening atmosphere. If this fails, the parents or caregivers may be prosecuted.

The NSW school attendance policy also sets out provisions for the granting of exemptions from school attendance, including cases where students are under the legal school leaving age. Acceptable reasons for granting exemptions include domestic necessity, the student’s health, continuing education and employment. The policy states:

Exemptions from school attendance should be granted only in exceptional circumstances ... In the assessment of any application for exemption from school, the welfare of the student must be paramount ... In all cases of exemptions from school attendance there should be as a positive replacement of school activity by other equivalent educational programs, employment or training (p.24).

The assumption behind special programs for under-age school leaving is that an appropriate legislative and procedural framework exists which defines and regulates compulsory school attendance in the relevant jurisdiction. The consultants found no evidence that this was not currently the case in any State or Territory jurisdiction. However, it is important to emphasise the significance of this matter as a necessary policy precondition. In the recent past, Aboriginal children in some jurisdictions were not included under legislation or at least regulations for compulsory school attendance, so that schools were not obliged to enrol or retain Aboriginal students.
6.1.4 Policies about discipline in schools

All State/Territory education departments require government schools to have a discipline policy or student code of conduct which sets out acceptable student behaviour, and appropriate disciplinary measures that can be invoked by the school. As part of the devolution of school management, these policies or codes of conduct are generally developed by individual schools, based on policy guidelines provided by the State/Territory education departments. The school principal is responsible for their implementation. In some cases, school councils are responsible for monitoring their implementation, evaluating their success, and reporting to the school community and to the Minister for Education.

**Positive intentions**

State/Territory government discipline policy guidelines aim to promote proactive approaches to discipline by creating school environments which maximise opportunities for all students to learn, value and respect each individual, and provide a safe and secure environment for students and teachers. In this way, they attempt to emphasise the promotion of positive student behaviour rather than punishment of unacceptable behaviour. For example, the Victorian Directorate of School Education’s *Guidelines for Developing the Student Code of Conduct* states that while student discipline procedures are an important part of the Code of Conduct, ...

... they are to be only one component of a document of which the overall intention is to highlight and promote positive student behaviour (p.5).

Similarly the South Australian Department of Education and Children’s Services’ policy statement, School Discipline, states:

Schools will focus on providing opportunities and support for students to experience success (p.5).

The policy guidelines are also similar in emphasising that the success of discipline policies or student codes of conduct is dependent on the commitment of students, parents/caregivers and teachers, and that this can be achieved by involving the entire school community in their development and implementation.

Discipline among peers is also often addressed in addition to, or as part of, discipline policies or student codes of conduct. Many schools have developed specific anti-violence policies in order to address bullying and other forms of violence which take place in schools.

**Problems with student discipline procedures**

Despite the stated emphasis on the promotion of positive student behaviour, much of the policy guidelines are taken up with student discipline procedures, particularly suspension, exclusion and expulsion. Suspension generally refers to the temporary withdrawal of a student, which can range from one day to one month depending on the State/Territory. Exclusion can be a general term referring to all categories of withdrawal of students, or to specific conditions of withdrawal from school. Expulsion can refer to the removal of a student from the school of enrolment, or from all State schools. The existence of these procedures is particularly relevant in relation to the problem of under-age school leaving since they represent legally sanctioned means of increasing under-age school leavers.

These policies and procedures vary markedly across State and Territory jurisdictions, particularly regarding definitions of suspension, exclusion and expulsion, and appeal and review mechanisms (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training 1996). In all States and Territories, with the exception of Victoria, school principals have the authority to suspend and exclude students (where this does not mean the permanent withdrawal of a student from school), and to make recommendations for the expulsion of students. The authority to expel a student is held by the Minister’s delegate, usually the Chief Executive Officer of the State/Territory education department.

The implementation of school disciplinary procedures received considerable criticism in evidence to the recent Inquiry Into Truancy and Exclusion From School (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training 1996). The issues included the following:

- clear and accurate information on school disciplinary procedures was often unavailable;
- the application of school disciplinary policy was often inconsistent due to conflicting policy documents and guidelines; and imprecise criteria under which students could be excluded from school;
- appeals mechanisms were not widely known, and lacked clear and consistent guidelines; and
- the use of informal exclusion, where students were told that they were no longer welcome at the school and it was suggested that their parents enrol them elsewhere. This was considered to contribute to the alienation of young people from school and subsequent truancy and “dropping out” behaviour. Another form of informal
6.2 Programs and initiatives which address under-age school leaving

This section presents an overview of the range of programs currently in place across Australia which either specifically address under-age school leaving or deal with the problem as part of wider objectives for student support. It aims to provide a context for interpreting the analysis of the specific initiatives presented later in this report. It also gives an insight into the relationship between the policies described in the previous section and their implementation by education authorities, schools and community organisations.

The main focus of this section are education-related programs, and those identified by the Inquiry into Truancy and Exclusion from School (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training 1996). The interviews conducted with Commonwealth and State/Territory educational authorities as part of this project confirmed that these programs were seen as especially relevant to the problem of under-age school leaving.

While the section is concerned with education-related programs, it should also be noted that other programs exist which address various factors linked with early school leaving, such as programs dealing with youth homelessness, young offenders, family breakdown and drug use. Some of these programs function outside the education systems (for example, the Commonwealth Attorney General’s Department funds 11 adolescent mediation and family therapy projects to deal with youth homelessness), while others are closely linked to schools (for example, in 1995 the Youth Bureau, DEETYA funded five pilot school-based projects for homeless youth). There are also a range of initiatives which target primary school students which are not included here.

The profile of the overall pattern of education-related programs discussed here has changed fairly constantly over recent years as new policies are developed, budgets cut or funds redirected by both Commonwealth and State/Territory governments. Thus it is most useful to group them by the primary body which funds and manages the programs:

- Commonwealth Government;
- education agencies - State/Territory government agencies and non-government agencies (which administer Catholic and independent schools);
- other (non-education) State/Territory government agencies (such as youth and community welfare agencies); and
- non-government organisations.

This grouping enables a reasonably clear presentation of the programs in an area where many of them have multiple target groups or functionally distinct initiatives, or involve varying degrees of shared responsibility between the Commonwealth, State/Territory governments, and non-government organisations.

6.2.1 Commonwealth Government programs

Supplementary Commonwealth funding is provided to States/Territories under a number of programs which encompass the prevention of under-age school leaving. While overall responsibility for the programs lies with the Commonwealth Department of Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs (DEETYA), detailed administration is the responsibility of the government, Catholic and independent school administering authorities in each State/Territory. They are responsible for the allocation of funds within their systems and for ensuring that funds are distributed equitably and to those most in need. In addition, the Commonwealth provides some direct financial assistance to students.

National Equity Program for Schools

The National Equity Program for Schools targets students affected by a range of factors resulting in educational disadvantage. The program has a number of components, of which the following are the most relevant to preventing early school leaving:

- **Students At Risk (STAR) Component** provides funding to schools in all States/Territories (except the ACT) to assist students who are at risk of leaving school, or who have already left school before completing Year 12 or its equivalent, or whose level of achievement or behaviour at school is adversely affected by circumstances such as family dislocation, itinerancy, violence or abuse, homelessness, truancy or substance abuse. The program provides for particular attention to be given to the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, students from non-English speaking backgrounds, boys from low socio-economic backgrounds, girls, students with disabilities, young offenders, and re-entry students not aiming at tertiary entrance in the first instance but who...
may go on to further education or training. Commonwealth funding for the STAR program will cease at the end of 1996.

- **Disadvantaged Schools Component** aims to assist schools and community groups in improving the educational participation, learning outcomes and personal development of young people disadvantaged by socio-economic circumstances. State/Territory allocations are based on an index of disadvantage which takes account of six variables: occupation, unemployment, education, family income, accommodation and crowding. Funds may be used to improve areas such as literacy and numeracy; and social, economic, political, organisational and technological skills and understanding.

- **Country Areas General Component** assists parents, administrators, teachers and other people to work cooperatively to improve the delivery of primary and secondary school educational services in geographically isolated areas by building on existing practice and developing innovative approaches. State/Territory allocations take account of remoteness and the proportion of the population in small settlements. It aims to improve the educational participation, learning outcomes and personal development of rural and isolated students.

- **English as a Second Language Component** helps to provide intensive instruction for newly arrived students of non-English speaking background so that they can become proficient enough to participate in the mainstream classroom, and ongoing support for students once they enter the mainstream classroom. Funds may be used for a variety of purposes, including the employment of specialist teachers and other staff (e.g. interpreters, translators, school/community liaison workers); curriculum development and the provision of teaching and learning materials; and the provision of in-service courses for specialist and mainstream teachers.

- **Special Education Component** aims to improve the educational participation and outcomes of young people with disabilities through the provision of assistance targeted at schools, community groups and other non-school organisations. Funds are available for the provision of capital facilities and equipment; the employment of teachers, teacher aides and consultants; and curriculum development.

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**Programs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students**

The Aboriginal Education Strategic Initiatives Program (AESIP) provides supplementary funding to State/Territory governments for such uses as the provision of capital facilities and equipment; the employment of specialist or student support staff, including Aboriginal Education Workers; the development of Indigenous language education and/or literacy programs; staff professional development; curriculum and materials development; and activities to promote parental involvement.

The Aboriginal Education Direct Assistance (AEDA) Program comprises three components:

- **Aboriginal Tutorial Assistance Scheme** provides supplementary funding for tutorial assistance to indigenous students on an individual or small group basis, or through Homework Centres for school students.
- **Aboriginal Student Support and Parent Awareness** provides funding to school/parent committees to conduct school-based activities to improve educational outcomes for Indigenous students.
- **Vocational and Educational Guidance for Aboriginals Scheme** provides funding to sponsoring organisations to conduct projects to assist Indigenous students to make informed choices about further education, training and careers.

**Financial assistance for students**

Direct financial assistance to students or their parents/caregivers is also available to assist students to remain at school. The Student Assistance Scheme provides funding to government schools for families who need assistance with educational expenses.

The Department of Social Security does not generally provide income support for young people under 15 years. However, it can make payments to young people aged under 15 years where they have no other means of support. Special Benefit is paid to young people experiencing hardship, and who are able to live independently. The Sole Parent Pension is paid to single people who have a dependent child whom they are maintaining. The Carer Pension is paid to people who provide full-time care for a pensioner or beneficiary who is severely handicapped.

6.2.2 Programs conducted by State/Territory governments and non-government education agencies

In addition to contributing to the special Commonwealth programs described above, State/Territory government and non-government education agencies provide a range of services and programs. These include programs within mainstream schools, alternative programs, specific funding programs, coordination mechanisms, and direct financial assistance.
Mainstream programs and services within schools

A major part of the response to under-age school leaving is through programs which have wider “mainstream” objectives for school management or student support, and encompass problems of attendance and under-age school leaving to varying degrees.

Individual schools are responsible for developing their own student management policies and procedures which cover a range of issues relevant to early school leaving, including behaviour management, school attendance and student welfare. These policies and procedures are usually administered by a student welfare committee comprising teachers and specialist staff available to the school, and can form the basis of the school’s approach to under-age school leaving.

A significant resource for addressing under-age school leaving is the set of specialist personnel available to schools in all States/Territories who offer a wide range of school and/or regionally-based support services. These services include the following:

- school counsellors and guidance officers provide a range of support services to teachers and students including advice on personal and career issues, referrals, crisis intervention, development of effective learning programs to meet remedial and learning difficulty needs, and work experience programs;
- itinerant support teachers advise and assist teachers in relation to behaviour management and learning difficulties;
- educational psychologists identify learning and behavioural problems and assist teachers to develop an appropriate response;
- social workers and school welfare officers work with students and their families on issues which affect school behaviour and performance, and make referrals to other support agencies;
- school-based community police officers focus on attendance and related problems and where they exist, form part of the home/school liaison team;
- Aboriginal education workers and community liaison officers work with students, their families, schools and the community to assist Aboriginal students; and
- home/school liaison and attendance officers work with students who have poor school attendance, their families and the school.

It is apparent that the extent to which these services address problems related to under-age school leaving will vary with the services and between different schools and regions, with for example, home/school liaison officers and attendance officers giving it high priority.

Funding for special initiatives in schools or community organisations

Education agencies also fund a wide array of initiatives for students experiencing difficulty with mainstream schooling, including:

- community or alternative schools which provide ongoing schooling;
- special education units for limited term referral. These include units for students with severe behaviour or conduct disorders, and those clinically diagnosed as having an emotional disturbance or psychiatric problems;
- teaching units or tutorial centres, usually attached to mainstream schools, which offer students from nearby schools specialised teaching for a limited term to overcome educational and behavioural problems;
- distance education provides schooling by correspondence to students living in isolated areas and other students who, because of extreme behavioural problems or school phobia, are unable to attend mainstream schools;
- homework centres which offer educationally disadvantaged students a work space and teacher support after school;
- specific initiatives for young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, and young people who are in detention or in residential care; and
- wilderness camps and other locally developed initiatives which involve partial withdrawal from mainstream school.

Two examples of specific programs which provide funds and/or staff to government schools, or funds to community organisations to provide programs for young people at risk of leaving school early are:

**Staying On Program (NSW)** provides funding to individual schools with relatively low retention rates and levels of academic performance in the School and Higher School Certificates to introduce strategies to increase retention rates and improve educational outcomes. These strategies focus on quality teaching and learning, improved middle school preparation, access to and participation in pathways, and enhanced community awareness and participation.
Youth Support Service (ACT), a recently established program, will enable community organisations to provide an after hours street-work service involving an advocacy and brokerage role in relation to young people presenting with complex problems who are not served by existing services.

Coordination mechanisms
Some education agencies have programs or have funded projects to coordinate the delivery of education and support services to students at risk of leaving school early. These coordination mechanisms often involve a number of agencies, as illustrated by the following examples:

Extra Edge Program (Victoria) involves the establishment of Student and Youth Services Centres to coordinate and, where appropriate, co-locate government and non-government youth support services in the local area. The program supplements STAR funding, through funding from the Directorate of School Education and provision of an extra teacher, a subsidy for a youth worker or project support from the Office of Youth Affairs, and funding from the former Department of Health and Community Services through the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program.

The recently introduced Youth Connection Program in the ACT comprises an interagency coordinating committee and a team of youth workers who will establish links with young people and liaise with schools, families and youth organisations.

In South Australia, Interagency Referral Managers provide an information and referral service for schools.

Direct financial assistance for students
Some State/Territory governments contribute to the Commonwealth’s Student Assistance Scheme to provide direct financial assistance to families who require assistance for their children to remain at school. For example, the ACT Department of Education and Training provides low income families with a payment of $450 per year for a 14-year-old to assist with education expenses through its Junior Bursary Scheme.

Some governments also provide specific forms of financial assistance to low income families. For example, the NSW Department of School Education assists parents/caregivers to purchase textbooks through the Secondary Textbook Allowance.

6.2.4 Programs conducted by other State/Territory government agencies
In some States/Territories, government agencies other than education agencies administer funding programs which aim to assist secondary school students at risk of leaving school early, often as part of the implementation of State/Territory youth policies. The programs may be operated in conjunction with the education agency and possibly other departments, and often involve the delivery of services by funded community organisations. Examples include:

Time Out (NSW Department of Training and Education Coordination) is a youth portfolio program involving a coordinated strategy with the Department of School Education, secondary schools and community organisations. It aims to assist educationally disadvantaged young people overcome barriers to effective participation in the school education system, particularly those in Years 7 and 8 who are, or are at risk of becoming chronic non-attenders, and experiencing behavioural difficulties. Community organisations are funded to conduct part-time courses to increase participants' literacy, numeracy, social skills, and self-esteem.

Koori Youth Program (NSW Department of Training and Education Coordination) is also a youth portfolio program and aims to assist young Aboriginal people aged 12–24 years who are at risk of leaving school early, to continue in education or training. It also encourages those who have already left school and are unemployed to undertake further education, training or employment. Community organisations are funded to conduct part-time courses covering literacy, numeracy, social skills, and self-esteem.
Youth Support Program (Victorian Office of Youth Affairs) which aims to assist young people aged 12-25 years, especially those aged 12-19 years who are not in stable education, employment or training or are at risk of long-term unemployment; and/or are homeless or at risk of homelessness. One of the Program’s priority areas is supporting young people to remain at school and support re-entry to school for those who have left school early, and to support access to alternative curriculum and education or training programs/pathways for early school leavers. Organisations eligible for funding include local government and non-government organisations.

Kickstart for Youth (South Australian Department of Employment, Training and Further Education) aims to assist 13- to 15-year-olds who are not succeeding in mainstream education and are at risk of truanting, offending, and leaving school early. This program is being jointly developed with the South Australian Department of Education and Children’s Services, and in conjunction with the Commonwealth DEETYA.

Alternative Education Initiative (Western Australian Department of Education, Department for Community Development and Ministry of Justice) targets young people aged 12–15 years who are alienated from school, society and often from their families. It aims to increase their participation in education, training, employment and society by concentrating on developing appropriate social behaviours, improving academic skills and assisting students to resolve non-educational problems.

6.2.5 Programs conducted by non-government organisations

A number of large church and other non-government organisations are funded directly by the Commonwealth or State/Territory governments to operate initiatives to assist students at risk of leaving school early, under the programs described earlier.

These organisations may also operate independently of government to provide a range of relevant services, including family support, parent education, out-of-home care, youth services as well as educational support. Some organisations are invited into schools to conduct programs for individual or groups of students in such areas as conflict resolution, anger management and social skills.

The Ardoch Youth Foundation works with mainly Victorian schools and their communities to help establish programs and curriculum options for homeless and disadvantaged young people. Its activities include:
• student support programs, including housing assistance; breakfast and lunch programs; health services, including counselling; tutors, mentors and homework help; camps and excursions; bursaries sponsored by companies and individuals; professional development workshops with teachers, community workers and volunteers;
• consultancy and advocacy with schools, governments and community organisations to implement support programs for homeless and disadvantaged students in schools;
• referral services for young people; and
• community education concerning youth issues including education, homelessness and family breakdown.

6.3 Conclusions

This overview of policies and programs which can address under-age school has a number of implications for future policy in the area.

First, it is apparent that through policy statements in the youth and education areas in particular, Commonwealth and State/Territory ministers have strongly reinforced the mandates of education agencies to address the problems of under-age school leaving.

Youth and access policies on the one hand suggest that under-age school leaving should be dealt with as a special problem. School attendance and discipline policies suggest that it is an integral part of the management of the school. Obviously, the problem is multidimensional and extends across these boundaries.
This leads to the second conclusion. A complex mix of programs and a plethora of school services and local initiatives was seen to exist. Some addressed under-age school leaving specifically, others dealt with it as part of broader student support measures or routine school functions. This situation reflects the combination of both top down implementation of policies by education and other agencies, as well as bottom up responses to perceived needs and local problems by schools and communities.

Such a situation is not inappropriate for the multifaceted, devolving Australian education system. However, it does lead to a number of shortcomings:

- as pointed out by the two Parliamentary inquiries in 1992 and 1995, there are no Commonwealth or State/Territory government policy statements concerned specifically with reducing under-age school leaving in a coordinated manner. As a result, a cohesive national policy framework does not exist;
- within jurisdictions, there is little coordination of approaches to under-age school leaving, resulting in inconsistencies such as those noted in the area of school discipline policies;
- the array of programs and initiatives being undertaken across the country makes it difficult to assess the extent that needs for assistance at the individual, school or community level are being met, or whether the resources available to address the problem are adequate; and
- the assessment of changes in the extent of under-age school leaving may be possible with improved statistical collections. However, the diverse set of programs and initiatives means that it will be a complex task to go behind the outcomes data to assess the affect of causal factors operating in different locations, or the evaluation of specific policy objectives, or the comparative effectiveness of individual programs and approaches.
7 Initiatives aimed at reducing under-age school leaving

This chapter outlines the features of initiatives used to reduce under-age school leaving, based on data from the 34 initiatives included in the postal survey and the case study analysis. Our focus was on gaining insights into best practice approaches to reducing under-age school leaving within this sample, rather than attempting to quantify the Australia-wide pattern of approaches.

The first section investigates the diversity within the initiatives included in this study. Building on this, Section 7.2 presents six generalised models of initiatives representing different approaches to assisting under-age school leavers. Details of the different strategies used by individual initiatives are presented in Section 7.3 and regional responses to under-age school leaving are examined in Section 7.4.

7.1 Characteristics of initiatives included in this study

The diversity of initiatives is highlighted by comparative data on four key characteristics – funding, staffing, number of participants and proportion of participants under the legal school leaving age (Table 7.1). Initiatives ranged from small school based projects working with students for a few hours per week, to large alternative programs catering for hundreds of students who are unlikely to return to mainstream school. Across the sample:

- funding varied from almost $1,000,000 to under $10,000;
- staffing varied from 17 full-time staff to one part-time teacher working four hours per week;
- the number of participants at any one time varied from five to 250 students; and
- approximately 35% of initiatives exclusively enrolled participants under the legal school leaving age whereas 12% had less than half of their participants in this age group.

Funding

Given the different scope of initiatives, it is not surprising that funding levels varied considerably. The smaller initiatives typically operated within one school with a part-time teacher, while the largest were major projects often involving students from a number of schools.

The majority of initiative funding was administered by State and Territory education departments which provided more than half (53%) of all funds to initiatives included in this study. Other important sources included non-education State/Territory government agencies (25%), local governments (12%) and Commonwealth Government agencies (7%). It is important to note that these figures may not reflect the primary funding source as significant
Commonwealth funds, notably STAR funding, is administered by State and Territory education authorities.

In addition to direct financial contributions, initiatives relied to a varying degree on different types of in-kind support. The most common type of in-kind support was administrative services which almost half (48%) of all initiatives received, while 31% used computer equipment without a charge. Table 7.2 summarises the main kinds of in-kind support received by initiatives.

In addition, almost one-third (28%) of initiatives used extra voluntary staff. Several initiative coordinators commented that volunteers not only provided additional work force capacity and skills, but they often provided a vital link to the community.

**Target group**
Initiative participants are characterised by multiple risk factors associated with early school leaving (Table 7.3). Across all initiatives, the majority of participants had social, emotional and behavioural problems and had been
suspended from school in the past. Most initiatives (88%) had the majority of their participants under the legal school leaving age, reflecting our purposive sample selection. However, only one-third (35%) of the sample were exclusively for potential under-age school leavers. Survey respondents commented that student age was not the principal criteria for defining the target group, and the multiple risk factors that characterised initiative participants were seen to apply equally to young people under and above the legal school leaving age.

### Number of participants and funding per participant

The number of young people at any one time participating in initiatives varied from five to 250 which reflected other initiative characteristics such as funding and the length of time participants were involved in the initiative. For example, while some initiatives worked intensively with a small group of students over a relatively long time period, others had worked with a larger number over a shorter time.

These differences led to considerable variations in funding per participant, which ranged from $200 to $18,000 per participant, with a median value of $5000.

The diversity of characteristics of initiatives is highlighted by the examples presented in Boxes 7.1 and 7.2.

### 7.2 Models used by initiatives

While all of the initiatives we investigated had characteristics which made them distinct, it is possible to identify a number of different intervention models based on whether:

- participants are withdrawn from mainstream school for a period of time;
- participants are expected to return to or continue at mainstream school;
- the intervention occurs within mainstream schools;
- the initiative is staffed by mainstream school staff; or
- the intervention focused on a particular event or activity.
Box 7.1: Small school-based initiative

This initiative was developed within a secondary school located in a disadvantaged area with high unemployment rates and a large proportion of young people from a non-English speaking background. The school estimated that over 10% of students were potential under-age school leavers.

The school received $22,000 STAR funding which was used to pay the salary of one teacher to work part-time with at-risk students. Administrative support, office and teaching space, and some educational resources were supplied by the school. The initiative was structured around groups of 10 to 12 students meeting two mornings per week. These sessions focused on independent living skills. Outside agencies were sometimes invited to work with students on relevant topics (e.g. health or crime). Students received individual literacy and numeracy tutoring. The initiative arranged overnight camps once or twice per year. The length of involvement varied depending on individual need, but averaged about two months. About 45 students were involved in the initiative each year.

Box 7.2: Bowden Brompton Community School

Bowden Brompton Community School, with a budget of close to $1,000,000, is funded entirely by the South Australian Department for Education and Children’s Services. It targets students aged 12–18 years who have been excluded from mainstream schooling.

The school aims to enhance learning outcomes for these students by developing models of alternative education and the provision of educational, social and emotional support. The school was established 20 years ago and mainly operates from two campuses. It has an enrolment target of 110 students, accepting students from a wide geographical area. More than 200 students attended the school during 1995.

As well as providing full-time in-school programs, the school also offers home-based study programs. More than 90 different subjects were offered during 1995, including some subjects developed to address the specific educational needs of students. Each student has a Student Development Plan which sets out broad behavioural, learning and attendance goals and specific work contracts for each subject. The school provides special initiatives for specific groups of students, including young offenders, Aboriginal students, female students and students with intellectual disabilities.

Table 7.4: Intervention Models

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source: Postal Survey (N=34)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Intervention model</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Community-based partial withdrawal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. School-based partial withdrawal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Community school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Outreach service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Integrated whole school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Event-based</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Using these criteria, six intervention models were identified (Table 7.4). It is important to emphasise that these models are artificial constructs to help understand the range of approaches to reducing under-age school leaving, rather than models of the real world. Some initiatives undertake activities which cross the boundaries between models whereas others pursue multiple strategies that cover several models. For example, a community school may also operate an outreach program to feeder schools. However, all 34 initiatives included in the postal survey were able to be classified as operating predominantly in terms of one of the six intervention models. These are described in more detail below.

**Community-based partial withdrawal**
These initiatives are characterised by two key features - students are withdrawn for a period of time from mainstream schools and the intervention occurs in a community setting. However, withdrawal is either a part-time or temporary intervention and participants remained enrolled in their regular secondary school. Typically students either attend the initiative on a part-time basis (e.g. three days per week at the initiative and two days per week at mainstream school) or for a fixed period of time (e.g. two months full-time attendance). The usual aim of these initiatives is to reintegrate students back into mainstream schools.

Community-based initiatives take students from a number of schools and provide an alternative curriculum and other intensive support services. The term "community-based" is particularly appropriate for this type of initiative because they are often operated in cooperation with community organisations. Examples are provided in Boxes 7.3 and 7.4.

**Box 7.3: Passport Program, Grassmere Youth Services, Victoria**
The Passport Program is operated by Grassmere Youth Services under the auspices of the Uniting Church. The initiative is funded by the Community Support Program through the Office of Youth Affairs.
The initiative targets young people aged 13-18 years who have experienced interrupted or unsatisfactory schooling or who have left school before the successful completion of Year 10, who have limited literacy and numeracy skills, and who have limited personal and social skills.
The program takes up to eight participants from 20 schools for three days per week over a period of eight weeks during each school term. Those participants still attending school, attend school on the other two days of the week. After an initial assessment and the development of a case plan, participants have an individual program set up for them to address those issues which may impact on their ability to remain in education or training. Depending on participants’ needs, program components may include numeracy, literacy, communication skills, social skills, drug and alcohol issues, independent living skills, and job search skills. One day per week is spent in work orientation which involves participants being placed with an employer to gain practical experience and an understanding of the realities of the workplace. A three day camp involving outdoor activities, evaluation of what participants have learnt and discussion of future directions is held at the end of the eight weeks. On completion of the program, and where possible, participants return to mainstream school and continue to receive support from program staff if this is requested by either the student or the school.

**Box 7.4: The Outpost Learning Centre, Tasmania**
The Outpost Learning Centre targets students aged 12-15 years attending schools in the Barrington District. It was established to provide support to students for whom schools had exhausted their capacity to cope due to behaviours exhibited in the school context, to provide short to medium term placement until alternative arrangements could be made for students at new schools or in training programs, to respond to crisis situations by providing continued access and participation in education for referred students, and to continue individual case management of students.
About 12 students attend the Centre at any one time. Students attend the Centre on a full- or part-time basis. A separate program for girls operates for a half a day three days per week. While the amount of time spent in the program is determined by each student’s needs, students usually spend at least two months in the program.
An Individual Education Plan is developed for each student referred to the Centre based on their abilities and needs. There is an intensive focus on literacy and numeracy, as well as a health and physical recreation program. Students may also participate in work-based placements and home-based programs. Other activities include anger management, educational games, and budgeting and money management. Where possible, students are fully reintegrated into a mainstream school. For students who attend the Centre on a full-time basis, students are reintegrated by gradually increasing the amount of time they spend at their regular school, supported by the Centre’s inclusion officer.
School-based partial withdrawal initiatives are similar to the previously described community-based initiatives except the intervention is specific to a particular school and is run by the school.

The initiative may operate as an annex within a school, or as a time-out program. For example, students may attend the annexe three days per week or participate in small-group sessions that run parallel to normal classes for half a day a week.

Community schools attempt to provide a complete alternative to mainstream school by operating an education and support program for students with special needs. The distinguishing feature of community schools is that students are not expected to return to mainstream school.

Community schools may be established for different target groups including behaviourally challenging students, students with severe learning difficulties and school refusers. While different strategies may be used to meet the needs of different target groups, community schools can be characterised by their particular educational philosophy for supporting these potential under-age school leavers. A community school has been defined as:

- a small school with an alternative educational philosophy to the regular secondary colleges, which emphasises pastoral care,
- a high level of participation of students, parents and teachers in the decision making processes, a relevant individualisation
of the education program and a supportive learning environment ... it is not a “sin bin” at which neighbouring secondary colleges “dump” their problem students rather than developing strategies, whereby they cater for students at-risk (Dandenong Early School Leavers Working Party 1995).

**Outreach services**

Outreach services provide intensive support services in relation to under-age school leaving within a particular geographical area, usually covering a number of schools. The administration of the initiative is usually located off-campus, with service providers travelling to schools to provide specialist support. Outreach services are staffed by people who specialise in working with potential under-age school leavers.

Participants continue to attend mainstream schools although in some cases outreach service may provide “time-out” activities off-campus. Participants are case managed through activities such as one-to-one counselling, small-group anger management workshops or literacy tutoring with at-risk students. Case management activities may include working with the families of participants.

These initiatives may also provide professional development services for teachers (e.g. developing strategies for working with students with challenging behaviour) and schools (providing advice on appropriate curriculum changes).

**Box 7.7: Park Road Centre, New South Wales**

The Park Road Centre is an educational initiative funded by the NSW Department of School Education and the Police Citizen Youth Club. The initiative was established in 1991 in response to concerns by the Department of School Education about a significant number of unresolved cases of school refusers under the age of 15 years. It was considered that it would be highly unlikely that these students would return to mainstream schooling, having been repeatedly involved with the home school liaison officer, counselling services and other support services.

The community school caters for around 6 to 10 students.

**Box 7.8: Bowden Brompton Community School, South Australia**

Bowden Brompton Community School targets students who have been excluded from other mainstream schools in Adelaide. The school was established in 1976 and is funded by the South Australian Department for Education and Children’s Services. The initiative provides a comprehensive education and support program operating as an alternative to mainstream school. The community school has an enrolment target of over 100 students. Students are not generally expected to return to mainstream school.

**Box 7.9: The Marist Education Centre, New South Wales**

The Marist Education Centre targets students aged 12–18 years attending Catholic schools in the Parramatta Diocese who have potentially serious emotional and/or behavioural difficulties. The Centre provides an outreach service based on a case management approach. The Centre can handle about 30 cases at any one time. Individual students are referred to the Centre and after an initial meeting with the student, their parents and school staff, and if the parents agree, the student and the family are formally assessed through meetings and interviews.

A Case Plan is developed which is discussed with all parties. The Case Plan sets out the role of the Centre’s teacher consultant who works with students and their teachers in the school setting, and family counsellor who works with students and their families. Referrals are also made to other agencies where appropriate. The Centre usually works with students, their parents and the school over at least two terms, although some cases may involve a shorter period and others a longer period of up to 12 months. When the Centre ceases its involvement, cases are handed over to a member of the school staff to ensure that there is ongoing monitoring of the student. While there is no formal follow up of cases, parents, students and school staff are encouraged to contact the Centre if they require further assistance.
Whole school approach

Whole school initiatives are characterised by a generalist focus on the needs of potential under-age school leavers across the whole school rather than specific initiatives which only target at-risk students. The emphasis is on innovations or enhancements to student education, and welfare support measures which are undertaken within normal school processes. Examples of such innovations include structured primary to secondary transition programs and alternative teaching approaches such as students having the same teachers from Year 7 through to Year 10.

Box 7.10: Student and Youth Services Coordination Project, Queensland

The Student and Youth Services Coordination Project is based on one resource person who works with five secondary colleges. Students are referred to the project with a wide variety of needs. The main roles of the resource person are to 1) to work one-to-one with students within schools (e.g. anger management, study support etc.); 2) link students with outside agencies for support. This sometimes involves students doing work experience one or two days per week; and 3) negotiate curriculum change within schools in order to better suit students with problems.

The initiative works with participants on both an individual and a group basis. The length of involvement of participants varies substantially based on individual needs.

Box 7.11: Holsworthy High School, New South Wales

Holsworthy High School operates a number of elements of its whole school approach to reducing under-age school leaving. Central to these elements is strong leadership and commitment to finding solutions that can work within the normal school environment.

The school had formal links with three of the main feeder primary schools through “literacy teams” and “numeracy teams” involving both primary and secondary teachers. These teams are used for early identification of students with problems and for planning strategies for individual students identified as likely to experience problems during the transition to high school. A formal primary/secondary transition program operates within the school.

A high priority is placed on parent involvement. Weekly meetings with the principal or deputy principal are held and are open to all parents. The school had adopted a policy that the principal would always return a concerned parent’s phone call within one hour.

A STAR program operates within the school as time-out for about 10 students who require more intensive support.

Box 7.12: School sub-system, Caroline Chisholm High School, Australian Capital Territory

The sub-school system operated by Caroline Chisholm High School involves students having the same teachers from Year 7 through to Year 10. Teachers are generally responsible for more than one subject providing both teachers and students with continuity and greater opportunity to develop an understanding of educational and welfare problems so they can be dealt with quickly and effectively. Because sub-school teachers are working with the same students, it is easier to find out if a particular student is having difficulties and assist in implementing strategies to address the problem. All teachers are responsible for the welfare of students rather than this responsibility being allocated to a student welfare committee.

The sub-school system contributes to both teachers and students feeling part of a “big family”. Because the school is not organised by subjects, “the common issue amongst teachers in the sub-school is students so when sub-school teachers get together they talk about students rather than subject-related matters. The system was introduced when the school was opened to focus on students rather than curriculum”.

The system allow teachers to get to know the parents very well, so that parents are willing to discuss issues with them. Parents will also ring them to let them know if a student has a problem.
Event-based
Event-based initiatives focus on one particular activity, such as a wilderness excursion or cultural camp. This approach aims to provide an intensive experience to help "to turn young people around". Typically, event-based initiatives are associated with follow up outreach services.

Box 7.13: Northern Challenge Project, Queensland

The Department of Education’s Northern Challenge Project targets students aged 12-14 years attending schools in the Northern Region who demonstrate severe antisocial behaviours. Two intakes of eight students are selected each year to participate in the project. The project comprises an initial 10 day wilderness component followed by support for the student, their school and their family for a period of up to two years.

Non-direct intervention techniques are used which emphasise the role of staff as facilitators and mediators rather than leaders. The project adopts a solution focused approach which emphasises promoting positive behaviour, rather than a problem focused approach which emphasises identifying the causes of socially unacceptable behaviour. Specific strategies include providing a comprehensive report and information to all teachers of students who participate in the project; helping parents establish effective management practices; mediating between students and teachers, school administration and parents in order to build effective and mutually respective relationships; and helping teachers design effective management strategies in the classroom. The project aims to reintegrate students into mainstream school.

7.3 Strategies used by initiatives
The six major intervention models presented in the previous section broadly describe the structures used by individual initiatives to assist and support potential under-age school leavers. Within each of these models, individual initiatives pursue a range of strategies and activities to reduce under-age school leaving.

Literature review
Using a recent comprehensive review of Australian literature on at-risk students (Batten & Russell 1995) and other sources, 27 generic strategies used by initiatives to reduce early school leaving were identified (Box 7.14).

Practitioners’ perceptions
Information was sought from practitioners about the main strategies and activities they used in their initiatives. Specifically, practitioners were asked to read through the list of 27 generic strategies which had been identified and indicate which strategies they used and up to five strategies which they considered to be their main strategies. Practitioners were also asked to describe how each of their initiative’s main strategies was put into practice.

Data provided by practitioners indicated that initiatives pursue a broad range of strategies and activities with the aim of reducing under-age school leaving. All of the listed strategies were used by at least one initiative, while 92% of strategies were considered main strategies by at least one initiative.

Summary data on the most commonly used strategies are presented in Table 7.4, with examples of how such strategies were implemented by practitioners. It is important to note that the examples provided by practitioners often overlapped several categories of strategy. For example, activities to increase social skills (strategy 1) were often used in order to increase self-esteem (strategy 3), and counselling activities (strategy 4) were often aimed at strengthening home/school relationships (strategy 5).

All the strategies which practitioners indicated they used can be divided into three main categories:

- strategies which primarily target students;
- strategies which include changes to school systems and structures to better cater for students at-risk; and
- strategies which to some extent involve students’ families/care givers.

All initiatives used strategies which primarily targeted potential under-age school leavers, and almost all (92%) used strategies which included changes to school systems and structures. In addition, 84% of initiatives also used strategies which involved students’ families/care givers. More than three quarters (84%) of initiatives combined the use of strategies from all three categories. This use of a diverse range of strategies is consistent with the multifaceted
Table 7.4: Most common strategies used by initiatives

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy (examples of activities)</th>
<th>% initiatives used strategy</th>
<th>% initiatives used as one of the main strategies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>1. Provide activities to increase social skills</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• anger management and conflict resolution workshops</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• peer mediation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• curriculum based around independent living skills</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>2. Identifying and monitoring students at-risk</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• monitor attendance and suspension records</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• establish links with feeder primary schools to identify students at-risk before they enter high school</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• educate general school staff about how to recognise at-risk signs</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>3. Provide activities targeted at increasing self-esteem</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• negotiating work contracts with students with achievable goals</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• caring and supportive environment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• social and cultural excursions</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>4. Provide counselling to participants</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• case management with needs-based counselling</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• family therapy and mediation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• referrals to support services</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>5. Strengthen home/school relations</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• automatic notification of parents when changes in students’ attendance and/or behaviour is noticed</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• regular meetings with parents/care-givers</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>6. Provide activities to increase literacy and numeracy skills</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• specialist literacy and numeracy tutoring</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• temporary withdrawal with intense work on basic skills</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• flexible curriculum to cater for students’ varying literacy and numeracy levels</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>7. Establish interagency links, including links with government agencies and community organisations</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• referral of students to services in local community</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• training and education on relevant topics provided by community agencies</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• membership in local interagency committees</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>8. Develop appropriate teaching methodologies/provide flexible and/or alternative curriculum</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• flexible timetable to fit individual student needs</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• small-group work and one-to-one teaching</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• negotiable curriculum to cater for students’ needs and preferences (often involve TAFE options)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>9. Provide professional development for staff</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• workshops for school staff on managing challenging students</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• informal training for school staff by initiative staff</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
and multidimensional nature of the problem of under-age school leaving identified by practitioners.

Given the broad range of strategies used by most initiatives, it is not surprising to find a low correlation between strategies and intervention models. In fact, a consequence of the range of factors that lead to under-age school leaving is that most initiatives use a broad range of strategies.

Detailed information provided by practitioners on initiative strategies and activities is presented under the categories of best practice identified in Chapter 9.

7.4 Regional responses to reducing under-age school leaving

While individual initiatives were the main unit of analysis for this research, the responses to under-age school leaving within particular geographical regions often involved the interaction of a number of different initiatives and services. This regional response to under-age school leaving was investigated in this study through four case studies.

A simple model was developed based on common elements identified in each of the case study regions (Figure 7.1), with the six intervention models of individual initiatives included as sub-elements. The model consists of five elements:

1. **Mainstream school**: includes both educational and welfare support measures undertaken as part of routine school functions (e.g. classroom management and discipline procedures) and additional school-based initiatives which focus on reducing under-age school leaving;
2. **Alternative options**: initiatives operating outside mainstream school for students who require support and assistance not available within mainstream schools;
3. **Outreach**: regionally-based personnel providing specialist support services to schools such as counselling and case management services;
4. **Youth support services**: supportive services available in the community such as youth accommodation and health services;
5. **Planning and coordination**: mechanisms to optimise the effectiveness of available resources for reducing under-age school leaving.

Box 7.14: Strategies to reduce early school leaving cited in the literature

- Implement process for identifying students at-risk prior to their leaving school
- Implement system for monitoring students identified as being at-risk e.g. attendance, literacy achievement
- Provide outdoor education/wilderness activities
- Provide activities to increase literacy and numeracy skills
- Provide activities to increase self-esteem
- Provide activities to increase social skills e.g. courses in anger management and conflict resolution
- Provide activities which cater specifically to participants’ interests e.g. craft
- Provide activities aimed to increase living skills e.g. cooking, budgeting
- Establish interagency links, including links with government agencies and community organisations
- Strengthen home/school relations
- Provide counselling to participants
- Provide alternative curriculum
- Provide professional development for teachers
- Provide flexible school curriculum
- Develop appropriate teaching methodologies
- Provide mentor for participants
- Develop peer support networks for participants
- Provide information regarding at-risk students to teachers, students, parents and the broader community
- Promote existing school services and facilities to students, parents, teachers and the broader community
- Provide advocacy support to participants through government and community organisations
- Provide mediation for young people and their families
- Provide material assistance for participants e.g. breakfast/lunch programs, emergency funds
- Provide activities that develop enterprise skills
- Develop flexible school structures e.g. exit and re-entry policies, flexible schools hours, part-time work/study
- Incentive schemes
- Collect data on students at-risk
- Resource sharing between schools
3. OUTREACH
Education Department programs and services to mainstream schools
- District guidance officers
- Home/school liaison officers
- Counsellors

Outreach Initiatives

1. MAINSTREAM SCHOOL
Routine School Support
Student educational and welfare support measures undertaken as part of routine school function

- School-based partial withdrawal initiative
- Integrated whole school initiative

2. ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS
- Community-based partial withdrawal initiatives
- Event-based initiatives
- Community school

4. YOUTH SUPPORT SERVICES

5. PLANNING AND COORDINATION

Figure 7.1: Simple model of regional responses to reducing under-age school leaving
Regional response - a case study

1. Mainstream school
Four government high schools operate within the region and provided a range of educational and welfare support measures as part of routine school functions. Two of these schools with significant numbers of potential under-age school leavers also run school-based partial withdrawal initiatives using STAR funding.

High school 1
This High School has about 1000 students, of which about 60 received help to some extent from the initiative operating within the school. Approximately three-quarters of these students were below the legal school leaving age and around 15–20 students were without any stable accommodation.

The aim of the initiative was to retain students in the mainstream school system while reducing their experiences of alienation. The initiative was operated on a “low-key” basis with some students unaware that they were participating in the STAR program. A central part of the program was the “time-out” room where students could work if conflicts arose with other students or teachers. A breakfast program was also running each morning for homeless students. The initiative provides a 24-hour support service whereby students were able to call initiative staff at any time for emergency help.

Strong links had been established with a number of support agencies (see Youth Support Services). The project also had formal contact with feeder primary schools whereby information about at-risk students was passed on to the school before new students started Year 7.

High School 2
The STAR initiative in this school operated on a relatively small scale with 14 students from a school population of around 1000.

The initiative was operated by a teacher who was allocated three periods per week to coordinate the program and work with participants. However, the project was about to employ a community liaison officer six hours per week to handle referrals to outside agencies and contacts with parents.

The program provided a “checkpoint” for students who had trouble coping at school. Assistance involved counselling and referrals to outside agencies. In addition, the program provided some emergency financial assistance to students.

2. Alternative options
Two main initiatives were operating outside mainstream schools in the region for students who required additional support and assistance.

Alternative option 1
This community-based partial withdrawal initiative, funded by the State Education Department, had a maximum enrolment of six students at any time and provided a specialised service catering for students who were not functioning in the mainstream school system, and who had exhausted their welfare and/or discipline options within the home school prior to referral. Most students had severe behavioural problems.

Referrals to the initiative were through the district guidance officer or the home school liaison officer (see Outreach below). However, before enrolment, students were assessed by an independent psychiatrist and a series of interviews were held with the student and their parents/carers. Students had to show a willingness to change in order to be accepted. They signed a contract in which they agreed to certain rules and committed to change their behaviour.

The aim of the centre was to provide a customised education and welfare program for individual students, focusing on the development of the skills necessary to return to mainstream school.

Alternative option 2
This community school was jointly funded by the State Education Department and a local community organisation. The initiative was a response to concerns by the department about a number of unresolved cases of school refusers in the region.

The initiative targeted students with poor social skills and phobias about school who are considered highly unlikely to return to mainstream schooling, having been repeatedly involved with the home school liaison officer, counselling services and other support services. The main difference compared to alternative option 1 is that these students tend to be school refusers, whereas students in alternative option 1 usually want to go to school, but their challenging behaviour makes mainstream participation inappropriate.
The initiative aimed to provide a different environment to the mainstream schooling which students refused to attend. Studies were undertaken in small groups with each student progressing at his or her own pace. In order to manage students of different age and ability, each student was enrolled in distance education. This provided an opportunity for all students to reach their educational potential and gain formal accreditation. Distance education also allowed students to complete some of their work at home while attending the initiative at least three days per week.

3. Outreach

Home school liaison officer
The home school liaison officer, employed by the State Education Department, worked across all the high schools in the region and provided a link between the school and students' families, and in some cases with other local support services. The officer was routinely contacted by schools in the region when a student was absent for more than 10% of the time. There were more than 100 referrals per year in the region, usually involving students with severe problems.

When a case was referred to a home school liaison officer, background documentation from the school was collected and the officer would proceed to interview the student and the parent/caregiver in order to assess why the student was not attending. Case management plans were developed to assist students, including possible referral to alternative option initiatives.

District guidance officer
Each school had a district guidance officer attached to it who worked across a number of schools. They were the supervisors of the school counsellors and they assisted in assessing students and linking them to alternative options. They also provided a link to other community services.

4. Youth support services

All service providers involved in a regional response to under-age school leaving relied to some extent on access to other community support services. Local support services were provided by the Department of Community Services, a local youth accommodation agency, a local refuge and hostel, police and juvenile justice agencies, a youth crisis centre, and a health centre.

5. Planning and coordination

The regional office of the State Education Department provided coordination of education services to under-age school leavers, particularly through the funding of a range of regional initiatives, and administration of the regional STAR program.

In an effort to make the STAR initiatives within the region better focused, the regional STAR coordinator undertook a major mapping exercise in 1995 to provide a snapshot of homeless and at-risk students in the region and to provide data to support a model for intervention.

District guidance officers have promoted and supported the development of local welfare committees, involving not only local schools, but other youth support service agencies. These committees have improved links between schools and other services for young people. One school is now providing a “shop front” for advice on services provided by local agencies.
This chapter investigates intended and actual outcomes of initiatives which aim to reduce under-age school leaving, based on data from the 34 surveyed initiatives and the case study analysis. The first section examines the success of individual initiatives using a quantitative benchmarking framework developed at the start of the study. Given the limitations revealed in this approach, a revised framework has been developed based on practitioners' perceptions of the main achievement of their initiatives and an analysis of regional responses to reducing under-age school leaving.

8.1 Success in reducing under-age school leaving - initial framework

In the absence of an established theoretical construct in the literature for the retention of potential under-age school leavers, an initial framework was developed which could be used in assessing the success of initiatives, based on improved school attendance, completion of participation in the initiatives and completion of compulsory education.

In order to collect comparative data, formal definitions were developed which took account of the different types of initiative interventions. For example, improved attendance may have a different meaning for initiatives where students are not expected to return to mainstream school than for initiatives which aim to reintegrate participants into mainstream schooling.

The initial definitions developed for use in the postal survey are presented in Table 8.1.

Summary data was sought from initiatives about past participant attendance, completion of the initiative and completion of compulsory education. Specifically, they were asked:

- whether they had the required data (e.g. data on school attendance rates for the three months after participants completed their involvement in the initiative);
- to provide actual summary data, where available;
- to provide estimates, where data is not available; and
- to indicate whether they considered that the data they presented indicated their initiative was successful or not and the reasons for their view.

**Improved participant attendance**

All initiatives reported improvements or stabilisation of student attendance as a result of participation in their initiative (Figure 8.1). Regardless of the size and nature of the improvement, all initiatives indicated that their attendance
data indicated that their project had been successful. Across the 20 initiatives who were able to provide data, the proportion of students with satisfactory attendance overall, doubled from 12 months before the intervention to one month after intervention.

However, this average hides the great diversity in attendance outcomes for individual initiatives. In some cases, the proportion of participants with satisfactory attendance rose from close to zero to almost 100%. In other cases, satisfactory attendance rates changed very little, whether starting from a high or low level of satisfactory attendance. Despite these differences, very little can be concluded about the relative success of individual initiatives because of issues of data quality, availability and interpretation.

Most initiatives indicated that they did not keep systematic records on student attendance before and after participation. Only 60% of initiatives were able to provide any comprehensive attendance data and of those that did, 70% were only able to provide estimates rather than actual data. The availability of data relates less to poor record keeping than the fact that initiatives often draw participants from a large number of different schools or classes within schools who had primary responsibility for maintaining attendance records. Staff of initiatives indicated that they were usually provided with qualitative information about the attendance patterns of participants before enrolment, and few recorded quantitative data.

More importantly, initiative staff strongly indicated that improvements in attendance needed to be interpreted in light of the characteristics of each initiative and their target group. An initiative working with students in the community school over a number of years would be expected to have a greater chance of influencing attendance rates than a small-scale project working with students a few hours per week. Also the needs of the target group of different initiatives can vary significantly.

We work with students before they become chronic truants and there is a high level of pastoral care within their schools [Initiative with 90% satisfactory attendance before and after intervention].

We only take students who have exhausted all other avenues. For example, a student who attacked a teacher with a pair of scissors [Initiative with 15% satisfactory attendance before intervention and 35% after intervention].
Participant completion of the initiative
An average of 84% of participants completed their intended participation in initiatives. More than half of the initiatives had more than 90% of their participants completing their participation. No initiatives had a completion rate below 50% and only a small proportion (6%) had a completion rate below 75% (Figure 8.2).

However, practitioners indicated that this data needs to be treated with some caution because of difficulties experienced in defining what constitutes initiative completion. Initiatives were often designed to be flexible and participants are usually enrolled on an “as needed” time basis. Participants are usually able to discontinue participation at any time, with success measured in terms of participants being able to “stay as long as needed”. Participants may also be involved in the initiative over a number of discontinuous periods.

Participant completion of compulsory education
The proportion of participants who completed compulsory education varied considerably between initiatives (Figure 8.3), with just over half the initiatives (56%) indicating that between 75-90% of their participants completed compulsory education. However, all practitioners claimed their rates of compulsory education completion indicated that their initiative was successful.

As with improved participant attendance, completion rates were heavily dependent on the nature of the initiative target group and the nature of the intervention.

Given the extreme reasons for referral to our team, keeping any participants within mainstream schooling from Years 6 to 10 is very good [Compulsory education completion rate <50%].

Many of our kids are either homeless or just one step away. There are too many other factors preventing them completing Year 10 [Compulsory education completion rate <50%].

Participants in our initiative don’t usually have a problem with attendance or staying on until year 10, but rather not achieving while attending [Compulsory education completion rate >90%].
In addition, summary data was not readily available from initiatives. More than three quarters of practitioners provided estimates rather than actual data. Initiatives mainly relied on informal contact and feedback from referring schools for information about completion of compulsory education.

Evidence of some initiatives within the same geographic area having better records of retaining potential under-age school leavers than others

An intended focus of the case studies was to determine if there was evidence that some initiatives within the same geographic area had better records of retaining potential under-age school leavers than others. Our initial approach was to collect data from schools and other initiatives using the same framework as the postal survey (see Table 8.1).

However, it became obvious at an early stage in the research that such an approach would be very difficult. In particular systematic data was generally not available or was unable to be provided within the research time frame and, given the comments in the previous section, available data was difficult to interpret because of the range of contextual factors. These difficulties are highlighted by examining comparative data from the case study sites.

Within one case study region where there were four government schools, comprehensive data was available on student suspensions in Years 7–10 (Figure 8.4). School C was found to have almost three times the level of student suspensions than School B, although there was less variation in the proportion of students with multiple suspensions.

Given the link between suspensions and under-age school leaving, school principals and other key informants were asked what conclusions could be drawn about the relative success of these schools in retaining potential under-age school leavers.

There was a strong consensus that conclusions were very limited. Clearly, the effectiveness of each school needed to be assessed in terms of their relative number of at-risk students. The principal of School C claimed that their higher rate of suspensions reflected greater numbers of at-risk students than other schools in the region. It was also pointed out that they took a significant number of students expelled from other schools in the region and that they directed considerable effort into avoiding multiple suspensions. School B agreed that it was difficult to compare schools but pointed to a system operating within the school which involved students having the same teachers from Year 7 through to Year 10. This system was seen to contribute to a reduction in behaviours leading to suspensions.

In another case study region, broad school attendance data was available from two school-based initiatives and two community-based initiatives (Figure 8.5). Again, key informants indicated that this data said little about the relative effectiveness of these initiatives given the different target groups involved. In fact, initiative schools A and B refer highly difficult students to initiatives C and D.

Despite the lack of quantitative evidence of some initiatives within the same geographic area having better records of retaining potential under-age school leavers than others, key informants at case study sites recognised qualitative
differences between initiatives and were able to articulate features of best practice associated with effective initiatives. For example, within one case study regions, principals at two government schools recognised significant differences in their effectiveness in addressing the needs of potential under-age school leavers although no claim was made about how this translated into actual retention rates (Table 8.2).

Figure 8.5: Student attendance at schools and initiatives within case study region (1996)

Table 8.2 Comparison of effectiveness in addressing the needs of potential under-age school leavers within one case study site. Source: Case study interviews

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Effectiveness in addressing the needs of potential under-age school leavers</th>
<th>School A: Self-assessed as very effective</th>
<th>School B: Self-assessed as not effective</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Whole school approach to student welfare</td>
<td>“High priority is given to early school leaving. The deputy principal has responsibility for coordinating efforts across the school ... There is strong support for our approach from the school leadership and staff”</td>
<td>“We have tried a number of things but there has been a history of appointing temporary staff as coordinators of special initiatives so it is difficult to build any long-term momentum”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intervention start early</td>
<td>“We have formal links with the three main feeder primary schools to make student transition from primary to secondary school as smooth as possible. This includes teacher exchanges and student visits”</td>
<td>“Information about students at-risk in primary school is passed on to the Year 7 adviser, but we have no formal links to feeder schools. We need to do more in this area”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability and dedication of staff</td>
<td>“There is considerable voluntary input from all staff, especially in operating the transition program from primary to Year 7 which operates during school holidays”</td>
<td>“Staff are so busy with looking after the ordinary students, there is very little time and energy for special initiatives. While a number of staff have showed interest in welfare committee responsibilities, many resist getting involved in activities beyond their main educational responsibilities”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent involvement</td>
<td>“Weekly meetings are held between parents and the principal or deputy principal. About 25 parents are present each week. We have a formal policy that the principal must respond to urgent parent enquires within one hour”</td>
<td>“I acknowledge that more contact with parents is necessary but the school has no specific strategies to ensure this”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Conclusions about the initial framework

There appears to be limited value in a quantitative benchmarking approach to assessing the relative success of individual initiatives, implicit in the initial framework. Nonetheless, two of the three indicators of success used in the initial framework, namely improved school attendance and completion of compulsory education, are extremely relevant for monitoring effectiveness at the regional, state and national level. This is discussed in more detail in Section 8.3 where a revised outcomes framework is presented.

However, in order to develop this revised framework, additional information was needed on a broader range of intended outcomes and achievements associated with individual initiatives. Data on practitioners’ perceptions of the main intended outcomes of initiatives is presented in the next section.

8.2 Additional outcomes

Literature review

While the literature contains no comprehensive definition of the success of individual initiatives in retaining potential early school leavers, a wide range of achievements and outcomes relating to reducing early school leaving are cited (Box 8.1). These outcomes relate to both under-age and post-compulsory early school leaving.

It is important to note that the outcomes in this list are not all of the same type or level. Some refer to the “high-level” outcomes or ultimate results that are hoped to be achieved by the intervention (such as participant completion of compulsory education and decreased costs to the community from reduction in early school leaving), while others refer to intermediate outcomes that are expected to lead to higher level outcomes (such as a decrease in disruptive behaviour in school or improvement in self-esteem).

In addition, the relative importance of these achievements and outcomes will vary depending on the target group and objectives of individual initiatives. For example, an initiative which aims to reintegrate behaviourally challenging students back into mainstream schools may focus on outcomes relating to changed attitudes and behaviours, whereas initiatives where students are not expected to return to mainstream school may focus on initiative attendance rates and student participation in activities.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Box 8.1: Outcomes relating to preventing early school leaving cited in the literature</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Increase in literacy skills of participants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase in numeracy skills of participants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase in social skills of participants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase in self-esteem of participants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase in independent living skills of participants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants have access to safe, secure housing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decrease in disruptive behaviour in class/school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase in participation in class/school activities by participants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improvement in academic performance of participants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improvement in school attendance of participants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants complete compulsory education in mainstream school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants complete compulsory education in some other form of education or training option</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants continue on to post-compulsory education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants complete post-compulsory education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decrease in rate of suspension</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decrease in rate of exclusion and expulsion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decrease in rate of using school disciplinary procedures other than suspension/expulsion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improvement in participants’ peer relations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improvement in relations between students and their parents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improvement in student/teacher relations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase in ability of school staff to identify students at-risk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advantages to other students because of removal of students displaying disruptive behaviour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase in skills of teachers and other school staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improvement in school structures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improvement in school curriculum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strengthened home/school relations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase in cooperation between schools and government and non-government agencies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase in community awareness about students at-risk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase in community awareness about school services and facilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decreased costs to the community from reduction in early school leaving</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Practitioners' perceptions

Information was sought from practitioners about the main intended outcomes of their initiative. Practitioners were asked to select up to five main outcomes from the list of 30 outcomes identified in the literature (Box 8.1). Survey respondents were able to add outcomes to the list if they felt it did not cover all the main outcomes.

As expected, there was a diverse response, reflecting both the different levels of intended outcomes and different aims of initiatives. Data is presented in Table 8.3 on the proportion of practitioners who cited outcomes from the literature review list, as well as aggregated data for groups of outcomes that have been clustered on the basis of similar context and scope.

Outcomes associated with improved attendance and completion of compulsory education (both elements of the initial outcomes framework) were the most commonly cited achievement of initiatives. Additionally, there were 11 other outcomes that were cited as achievements by a significant number of practitioners. Significantly, out of these 11 outcomes, the six most commonly cited related to individual participants and the remaining five related to school and the family.

In terms of the single most important achievement, there was even greater diversity of views. Fourteen different outcomes were selected as the most important and no outcome was cited by more than 15% of practitioners as the most important. However, three-quarters (74%) of practitioners cited an outcome relating to individual participants as the single most important result.

Improved academic performance of participants:

- Our main achievement is changing their perceptions of themselves as non-learners or dumb. This leads to more confidence and greater involvement in regular school activities.

Personal development and increasing self-esteem:

- Without providing individual coping skills, no amount of programs will assist the student and prevent them leaving school early.

- Our job is to help them in planning and setting life goals, and then see clearly what they must do for themselves. Most start out “floating” and without goals.

Decrease in disruptive behaviour in school/class:

- First we need to achieve an improvement in student behaviour in class. Once this happens, the student/teacher relationship improves, therefore the desire to remain at school increases.

- With a decrease in disruptive behaviour, students become self motivated to make good choices, they take responsibility for own learning and are happier with less conflict.

In addition, one-quarter of practitioners cited outcomes relating to the school or family as the single most important result. School-related outcomes were improvement in teacher/student relations; improvements in school structures; and increased skills of teachers and other school staff. Family related outcomes were improvements in student/parent relations; and strengthened home/school relations.

Outcomes associated with regional responses to preventing under-age school leaving

Discussions with key informants within the case study sites raised the issue that in addition to the success of individual initiatives, consideration needed to be given to outcomes associated with the regional responses to preventing under-age school leaving. Particular emphasis was given to the adequacy of available placement options for potential under-age school leavers in terms of:

- the total number of places available in alternative options compared to the number of potential under-age school leavers; and
- the type of available alternative options compared to the range of needs among potential under-age school leavers.

Other regional outcomes related to aspects of best practice such as appropriate coordination mechanisms (ensuring students with the greatest need receive support and services which best matches their need) and optimum use of mainstream resources within schools.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cluster/outcome</th>
<th>% practitioners citing as one of the five main outcomes</th>
<th>% initiatives citing as the single most important outcome</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Individual outcome</td>
<td>Cluster</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Improved participation and attendance</td>
<td>42               62</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improvement in school attendance</td>
<td>42               7</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase in participation in school/class activities</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Completion of compulsory education</td>
<td>38               54</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants complete compulsory education in mainstream school</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants complete compulsory education in some other option</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Increase in self-esteem</td>
<td>46               46</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase in self-esteem of participants</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Decrease in disruptive behaviour</td>
<td>46               46</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decrease in disruptive behaviour in school/class</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Personal development</td>
<td>37               42</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase in social skills of participants</td>
<td>13               4</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase in independent living skills of participants</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Increase in literacy and numeracy skills</td>
<td>33               38</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase in literacy skills</td>
<td>29               4</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase in numeracy skills</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Decrease in suspensions/exclusions/expulsions</td>
<td>17               0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decrease in rate of suspensions</td>
<td>29               37</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decrease in rate of exclusions</td>
<td>17               0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decrease in rate of using disciplinary procedures</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Improved academic performance of participants</td>
<td>29               29</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improvement in academic performance of participants</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Improvement in teacher/student relations</td>
<td>25               25</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improvement in student/teacher relations</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Improvement in school structures</td>
<td>29               29</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improvement in school structures</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Increased skills of teachers and other school staff</td>
<td>29               29</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increased skills of teachers and other school staff</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Improvements in student/parent relationship</td>
<td>21               21</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improvement in student/parent relationship</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Strengthened home/school relations</td>
<td>17               17</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strengthened home/school relations</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Access to alternative options

Key informants in all four case study sites reported that the number of places available in alternative options was significantly less than the number of potential under-age school leavers. One school reported that they currently had 20–30 students who were highly likely to leave school under the legal leaving age, yet were only able to obtain placements for one to two students per year in specialist initiatives. A regional officer for the Department of Education within this area acknowledged that it usually took around six to 12 months to find a placement for an at-risk student, which meant many young people drifted away from school before a suitable option could be found.

Initiatives catering to all target groups

Potential under-age school leavers are not a homogeneous group and a range of different options reflecting local needs within a region was seen by key informants as a critical outcome. A common distinction was between the needs of school refusers, behaviourally challenging students and students with learning difficulties. In addition, it was recognised that needs of specific groups such as Aboriginal students may be best met through targeted initiatives.

8.3 Success in reducing under-age school leaving - revised framework

The range of outcomes associated with reducing under-age school leaving, identified in the previous section can be organised in terms of an outcomes hierarchy whereby the broad relationships between the outcomes are depicted in a logical order based on assumed cause/effect links (Figure 8.4). The outcomes hierarchy does not explain how the end outcome of compulsory education completion is obtained, rather it highlights the links between process outcomes and intermediate outcomes that contribute to the achievement of this end outcome.

The outcomes hierarchy starts with identifying potential under-age school leavers within a school or region and assessing their needs (outcome 1). In particular, individual students are assessed to determine what support and special assistance they require to remain connected to formal education options. In order to respond to all potential under-age school leavers within a region, appropriate structures and support services which match the profile of the target group need to be available (outcome 2). This includes appropriate structures within schools to respond to the needs of the target group, adequate places in specialist initiatives, and adequate outreach and youth support services.

Outcomes 1 and 2 are prerequisites for potential under-age school leavers to access support and special assistance (outcome 3). This support may be provided as part of the routine school function, through special service providers who support schools, or through referral to an appropriate initiative targeting potential under-age school leavers.

The primary focus of these interventions is changing participants’ knowledge, skills, attitudes and behaviour (outcome 4), principally through improving social and basic educational skills, and activities aimed at increasing self-esteem. While these changes in themselves can lead to positive community benefits (outcome 9), the immediate focus of the intervention is usually on affecting changes in participants’ behaviour to allow them to function appropriately within mainstream schools (outcome 6) in order to improve the likelihood of retention until they reach the legal leaving age (outcomes 7 and 8). For potential under-age school leavers who are unlikely to function appropriately within mainstream schools, the intended outcome of changing participants’ skills, attitudes and behaviour may be on improved participation within alternative education activities, outside school, until they reach the legal leaving age. The secondary focus of interventions is improved student/home/school relations (outcome 5) which often needs to be addressed in order to facilitate the changes in outcome 4.

A comprehensive assessment of success in reducing under-age school leaving requires an analysis of the range of outcomes presented in the outcomes hierarchy. However, it may be appropriate to measure the successful attainment of particular outcomes only in particular contexts. For example, outcomes relating to changing individual knowledge, skills and attitudes (outcome 4) would be most appropriately monitored in the context of individual initiatives, whereas improved school attendance and reduced disciplinary actions (outcome 7) may be best monitored within schools.

A revised framework for monitoring success in reducing under-age school leaving is presented in Table 8.4, based on four different contexts – individual initiatives, mainstream schools, regional responses and national.

8.4 Conclusions

While we initially investigated whether some initiatives within the same geographic area had better records of retaining potential under-age school leavers than others, we concluded that a more complex series of questions needed to be investigated to evaluate effectiveness. The outcomes hierarchy developed, highlighted the range of intermediate outcomes which logically precede the end outcome of improved compulsory education completion rates. Key ques-
Potential under-aged school leavers are identified and their needs assessed

Adequate places are available for potential under-aged school leavers in specialist initiatives

Adequate specialist outreach services (e.g. counselling, home/school liaison) are available

Adequate youth support services (e.g. accommodation and health services) are available

Education and welfare assistance is provided to meet the needs of potential under-aged school leavers as part of routine school functions

Additional educational and welfare assistance is provided, where appropriate, by specialist service providers

Students are referred, where appropriate, to a specialist initiative for potential under-aged school leavers

Inadequate specialist outreach services (e.g. counselling, home/school liaison) are available

Inadequate youth support services (e.g. accommodation and health services) are available

Inadequate places are available for potential under-aged school leavers in specialist initiatives

Adequate specialist outreach services (e.g. counselling, home/school liaison) are available

Adequate youth support services (e.g. accommodation and health services) are available

Figure 8.6: Outcomes hierarchy for reducing under-age school leaving
Table 8.4: Revised framework

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Context</th>
<th>Link to outcomes</th>
<th>Attitudes for defining success</th>
<th>Comments on performance measurement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Initiative | Outcome 4        | • Young people attain personal milestones set in relation to their participation in the initiative in terms of improvements in:  
  - social skills  
  - independent living skills  
  - literacy and numeracy skills  
  - self-esteem  
  - behaviour in formal education  
  - academic performance | Practitioners commented that changes for individual participants needed to be monitored in terms of the relative progress of individual students rather than absolute standards. Particular emphasis was placed on negotiating and monitoring individual learning contracts which specified goals and milestones. |
| School     | Outcome 7        | • School achieves annual decrease in rate of unexplained absences for all students within the school  
  • School achieves annual decrease in rate of unexplained absences for potential under-age school leavers within the school  
  • School achieves an annual decrease in rate of suspensions, expulsions and other school disciplinary procedures for all students within the school  
  • School achieves an annual decrease in suspensions, expulsions and other school disciplinary procedures for potential under-age school leavers within the school | The Truancy Inquiry (1996) identified the inadequacy of school data collections in relation to potential under-age school leavers. It recommended examining the feasibility of collecting national data on the incidence of truancy, formal and informal exclusions and expulsions in the National Schools Statistics Collection. |
| Regional   | Outcomes 1 & 2    | • Up-to-date data is available on the distribution and needs of potential under-age school leavers within the region  
  • Adequate places are available in specialist initiatives for potential under-age school leavers  
  • Adequate outreach and youth support services are available to support schools in the region | Commencing in 1996, Victorian schools will be required to provide attendance data in their annual report. The electronic recording system used in schools is being updated to enable access to state-wide data on a regular basis. |
| National   | Outcome 8        | • Annual national increase in the participation rate of young people under the legal school leaving age in school or other education and training options | Access to data on needs and available services is best collected as part of the planning process within regions. Such activities required inputs from all schools, initiatives and support services within the region. |

Because of difficulties at the school or regional level in accounting for student transfers, the end outcome of completion rates may be best monitored at the state or national level. However, significant improvements are needed in data collections to allow accurate calculations.
tions associated with these intermediate outcomes included:

- Are potential under-age school leavers identified, and are their needs assessed?
- Is education and welfare assistance provided to meet the needs of potential under-age school leavers as part of routine school functions?
- Are adequate places in specialist initiatives and adequate outreach and youth support services available?
- Do potential under-age school leavers access appropriate services?
- Do potential under-age school leavers attain personal milestones set in relation to improvements in social skills, literacy and numeracy skills and self-esteem?

Substantial qualitative evidence was available at a school, specialist initiative, and regional level about the successful attainment of these intermediate outcomes. An analysis of these findings provided a basis for assessing best practice in reducing under-age school leaving. These findings are presented in the next chapter.
Best practice in reducing under-age school leaving

Literally, best practice refers to initiatives which are the most appropriate, effective and efficient in preventing early school leaving. However, the term “best practice” is something of a misnomer. No practice is best for all initiatives and best practices must be evaluated in the context of the initiative’s strategy, target group and available resources. In this context the Truancy Inquiry (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training 1996) concluded “there is no evidence that any one model is better than another, that any one would qualify for best practice”.

This chapter presents a range of initiative features and elements which are perceived by practitioners as contributing to reducing under-age school leaving. Associated with these best practices, we present practical strategies that are used by initiatives to implement these features. However, it is important to remember that these features and strategies should not be thought of as “the answer” to reducing under-age school leaving, but rather as the principles that need to inform local responses to under-age school leaving.

9.1 Factors affecting the effectiveness of initiatives

Using a recent comprehensive review of Australian literature on at-risk students (Batten & Russell 1995) and other sources, 40 factors affecting the effectiveness of initiatives aiming to reduce early school leaving were identified (Box 9.1).

In order to assess the relevance of these 40 factors for under-age school leaving, information was sought from practitioners about the most important factors affecting the effectiveness of initiatives addressing under-age school leaving. This information was collected through the postal survey of coordinators of initiatives and regional case studies. Specifically, practitioners were asked to think about the effectiveness of their initiative in relation to students at risk of leaving school under the legal school leaving age and then:

- provide open-ended descriptions of up to five factors affecting effectiveness of their initiative;
- select up to five factors affecting effectiveness of their initiative from a list of 40 factors identified in the literature. Survey respondents were also able to add factors to the literature review list if they felt it did not cover all the main factors;
- nominate the single most important factor affecting effectiveness; and
- provide examples of what their initiatives did under each of the factors.
Box 9.1: Factors cited in the literature as preventing early school leaving

- The school makes clear its commitment to, and focus on, students at-risk
- The school has a commitment to the identification and monitoring of at-risk students
- The school has a commitment to the development of effective educational provision for all students within the context of the whole school program and philosophy
- The school gives careful consideration to the nature and limits of its responsibility in relation to the needs of students
- The school allocates active responsibility to key individuals with appropriate skills
- The school provides access to relevant professional development programs for key staff including classroom teachers
- The school provides student choice within a broad range of curricular offerings
- The school monitors and guides student choice to ensure curriculum coherence and appropriateness
- The school maintains high standards in relation to course delivery
- The school provides access for students to courses and other options outside the school
- The school has flexibility of organisation/timetable to accommodate students’ out-of-school learning and commitments
- The school allows for easy re-entry to school programs
- The school has flexible but clear rules and discipline procedures, fairly applied
- The school has introduced modes of conflict resolution
- The school emphasises positive reinforcement and a non-punitive environment to encourage appropriate behaviour
- The school encourages active involvement of students in decision making about what and how they learn
- The school encourages students to take responsibility for their learning and their behaviour, including involvement in negotiating the use of incentives and contracts
- The school has explicit, high and positive expectations of students, and provides programs which challenge and extend
- The school uses contracts to achieve academic and behavioural objectives
- The school provides incentives to encourage achievement of behavioural objectives
- The school demonstrates concern for the personal and social as well as the educational welfare of students
- The school provides access to outside help for participants with serious behaviour problems
- The initiative provides a climate of care and support, including positive reinforcement of achievement
- The initiative aims to increase participant confidence and self-esteem
- The initiative emphasises positive, visible results of learning, and builds on participants’ strengths
- The initiative focuses on practical learning related to participants’ life experiences
- The initiative focuses on the individual needs of each participant and is flexible in responding to individual needs
- The initiative provides participants with the experience of working cooperatively and the benefits of working with others
- The initiative involves the removal of participants from the normal school environment for a period of time
- There is careful selection of staff to ensure that they have appropriate qualifications, experience and commitment
- There is a low student/staff ratio
- Staff are provided with professional development opportunities
- There is appropriate evaluation of participant progress
- There is follow up contact and monitoring of participants
- Education and training options are provided for participants who are unwilling to remain at, or return to school
- The appropriateness and effectiveness of initiatives is evaluated
- Parents are encouraged to be more involved with their child’s academic and behavioural learning
- There is good communication with parents about the initiative
- There is good communication with the community to raise awareness of the needs of students at-risk and foster an understanding of the initiative
- Links with other agencies are fostered

In addition, initiatives included in the regional case studies were asked to provide a detailed open-ended description about factors affecting their effectiveness.

Practitioners’ views of the factors affecting the effectiveness of their initiative closely matched the list of 40 factors identified in the literature. More than 90% of the factors were selected by at least one practitioner as a main factor affecting effectiveness.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cluster/Factor</th>
<th>% initiatives citing as main factor</th>
<th>% initiatives citing as the most important factor</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Caring and supportive holistic approach to student welfare</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• A climate of care and support, including positive reinforcement of</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>achievement</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• School makes clear its commitment and focus on students at-risk</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• The school has a commitment to the development of effective</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>educational provision for all students within the context of the whole</td>
<td></td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>school program and philosophy</td>
<td></td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• The school demonstrates concern for the personal and social as well as</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the education welfare of students</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Ability and dedication of initiative staff</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• There is careful selection of staff to ensure that they have appropriate</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>qualifications, experience and commitment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• The initiative allocates active responsibility to key individuals with</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>appropriate skills</td>
<td></td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Flexibility in responding to the individual needs of all students</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• The initiative focuses on the individual needs of each participant and</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>there is organisational flexibility in order to respond to individual needs</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• School has flexibility of organisation and timetable</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• The school has flexible but clear rules</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Focus on individual success and development</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• The initiative aims to increase participant confidence and self-esteem</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• The initiative emphasises positive, visible results or learning, and builds</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>0</td>
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<tr>
<td>on participants’ strengths</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• The initiative provides participants with the experience of working</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cooperatively and the benefits of sharing and working with others</td>
<td></td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Low student/staff ratio</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• There is a low student/staff ratio</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• There is a low student/staff ratio</td>
<td></td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Encouraging individual responsibility</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• The school encourages students to take responsibility for their</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>learning and behaviour, including involvement in negotiating the use of</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>incentives and contracts</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• The school emphasises positive reinforcement and a non-punitive environment</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>to encourage appropriate behaviour</td>
<td></td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Parent involvement</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Parents are encouraged to be more involved with their child’s academic</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>and behavioural learning</td>
<td></td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• There is good communication with parents about the initiative</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Professional development of staff</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• The school provides access to relevant professional development</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>programs for key staff including classroom teachers</td>
<td></td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Staff are provided with professional development opportunities</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Removal from school environment for period</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• The initiative involves the removal of participant from the normal</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>school environment for a period of time</td>
<td></td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 9.1: Main factors affecting effectiveness of initiatives
Source: Survey of initiatives and case studies
However, within this diversity it was possible to identify nine clusters grouped around similar themes. The grouping process was based on practitioners’ qualitative descriptions of individual factors. Summary data on the relative importance of the individual factors and clusters is presented in Table 9.1, followed by a description of each cluster.

**Caring and supportive holistic approach to student welfare**

The effectiveness of initiatives in reducing under-age school leaving was seen to be heavily dependent on a philosophy which emphasised a caring and supportive holistic approach to student welfare. This involved:

- having a clear and explicit commitment and focus on potential under-age school leavers;
- creating a climate of care and support with positive reinforcement of achievement;
- providing effective educational provision for all students within the context of the whole school program and philosophy including support and special assistance to students who require help to remain connected to school or other formal education services; and
- demonstrating a concern for the personal and social as well as the education welfare of students.

A number of comments from practitioners illustrate the importance of the context within which initiatives operate:

Initiatives which operate within schools where welfare is woven into the whole school fabric and is not only for the welfare committee, but for all staff including front office staff, are most effective.

We need to work within a supportive environment where students’ basic needs are met … it can’t be one person waving a magic wand. Rather a total environment where students feel valued.

According to practitioners, a caring and supportive holistic approach to student welfare linked in to many other success factors including:

- flexible organisation structures and rules that recognised the needs of individual students;
- improved personal relationships with staff;
- low student/staff ratio to allow greater responsiveness to the needs of individual students; and
- professional development of staff.

This holistic approach was contrasted with situations where initiatives operate as “tack-on programs” or “dumping grounds” for problem students.

**Ability and dedication of staff**

Initiatives were often reported to “stand and fall” on the ability and dedication of the people who ran them. Practitioners recognised that the success of initiatives was strongly correlated both with the skills and experience of staff in working with potential under-age school leavers, and their energy and commitment to the initiative.

... ability to establish and maintain positive relations with students. Persistence and the ability to see beyond the initial emotional difficulty in establishing a relationship with the students.

... strong commitment to students at-risk and ability to be flexible and creative in working with these young people.

... being prepared to commit the time needed to develop rapport and trust with the student. Initiatives only start to work once the students feel that they have someone who cares.

While about 5 staff had attempted to teach on the program, only one had been really successful. The students were able to talk to her about anything and even though the program has ceased they still come to her with issues or problems. Trust was critical.

Staff need to have empathy and understanding in order to break through the self-fulfilling prophecy cycle students are in where they are told by one teacher at their primary school that they are hopeless and then go to high school to be told by 10 teachers that they are hopeless – consequently that’s how they behave. Initiative staff have to believe that all students have an ability to learn.

Commonly, initiatives were associated with an “energetic entrepreneur” who was recognised as having strong rapport with the target group and innovative and creative ideas for addressing problems. However, it was also recognised that over reliance on one staff person was a potential weakness because if that person left, the initiative would have to be substantially rebuilt.
Flexibility in responding to the individual needs of all students
Practitioners viewed a flexible response to the needs of students at-risk as very important in ensuring initiative effectiveness. A number of comments from practitioners highlight ways in which initiatives maintained flexibility:

Participants negotiate programs and are responsible for their own timetable of work.

We have a whole school discipline policy, however, individual circumstances are acknowledged before consequences are set.

We use a case management approach supported by extensive counselling to ensure that participants receive the most appropriate intervention for their needs.

According to practitioners the most important elements of flexibility were:

- flexible timetable;
- continual reviewing of participant progress and needs with constant adjustment to intervention strategies; and
- flexible rules (e.g. different rules regarding absence may need to apply to homeless students who may not be able to produce a signed note from parent/guardian).

Focus on individual success and development
In addressing continual experiences of failure and low self-esteem, the successful initiatives were seen to build participant confidence and emphasise positive, visible results, by building on participants' strengths.

Low student/staff ratio
A logical consequence of success factors which emphasise meeting the needs of individual students with complex and multifaceted needs, is the requirement of a low student/staff ratio. This allows one-to-one interventions and small-group work. Practitioners recognised that this success factor had significant resource implications.

Encouraging individual responsibility
Practitioners identified a lack of student commitment to education and employment and a lack of motivation for learning as important factors. Similar to low self-esteem, low commitment and motivation were not seen as intrinsic characteristics of at-risk young people, but rather as consequences of other factors.

Parent involvement
Initiatives regarded contact with parents as important in order to reinforce strategies applied at school. However, parent involvement varied considerably between initiatives. Some reported:

We are in constant contact with parents.

Parent participation is excellent.

Other initiatives reported considerable difficulties in involving parents:

Attempts to actively involve parents are often seen as a failure of the school to do its job.

The level of contact with parents was dependent on both the structure of initiatives, and strategies to ensure parental involvement. Initiatives involving the removal of participants from mainstream school environments often required involvement with parents/care givers for formal reasons. Other initiatives, operating within schools did not require any parent involvement. However, many of the latter types of initiative applied strategies which had ensured considerable parent involvement.

One initiative which did not require formal input from parents/care givers reported having been successful in promoting involvement by the following strategy:

The school had a weekly meeting with parents who wanted to drop in. It was an informal gathering where parents could drop in for a cup of coffee and talk to teachers, deputy principal, or principal. The meetings usually consisted of about 12–25 parents and have developed good and honest links between the school and parents. By involving parents, and keeping them well informed about what is going on at the school, parents' input to the school has become more constructive rather than critical.

Initiatives which required the withdrawal of students from the mainstream school environment, needed a more formal initial contact with parents:

Parents are contacted formally through an initial meeting involving program staff, student and parents/care givers. Once referral is received parents are talked to separately and advised to contact initiative staff at any time if there is a problem at
Parents/caregivers are also advised that the initiative will contact them if problems occur at school. Initiatives also provide parents with counselling via phone or home visit, and referral to other agencies if appropriate.

**Professional development of staff**
In recognition of the importance of student/teacher relations, a number of initiatives cited the provision of professional development opportunities for school and initiative staff as contributing to the effectiveness of projects. Particular emphasis was given to helping teachers design effective learning and behaviour management strategies in the classroom.

**Removal from school environment for period**
Implicit in the intervention model adopted by the majority of initiatives was the partial or total withdrawal of potential under-age school leavers. While less than 20% of practitioners cited this as one of the five main factors affecting effectiveness, 75% of surveyed initiatives used this strategy. Comments from practitioners highlighted the underlying importance of the availability of sufficient places in initiatives based on withdrawal from the mainstream school environment.

**Early intervention**
This factor was not part of the list of factors identified from the literature, but was identified by many practitioners in the case studies as an important factor affecting effectiveness. It was argued that because at-risk symptoms such as behaviour problems and truancy are often caused by long-term problems originating in primary school, such as learning difficulties and low literacy skills, they have to be identified early, preferably before the entry to high school.

When students enter high school and the individual attention disappears, all sorts of problems occur. If potential problems can be identified in primary school, a number of things can be done to prevent them.

### 9.2 Linking success factors to strategies, mechanisms and outcomes

In addition to the data presented in this chapter on factors contributing to the effectiveness of initiatives, previous chapters have investigated factors leading to early school leaving (chapter 3), strategies used by initiatives (chapter 7) and intended outcomes of initiatives (chapter 8). A number of common themes or elements have arisen which highlight links between strategies (the nature of the intervention), factors leading to under-age school leaving (what the intervention is trying to address), outcomes (what the intervention is trying to achieve), and factors contributing to the effectiveness of initiatives (what makes the intervention successful).

Eight of these common elements were identified as providing a framework for synthesising the material presented in this report on approaches to reducing under-age school leaving (Table 9.2). Details provided in the table represent the key headings used in previous sections of this report covering factors affecting effectiveness (column 2), strategies (column 3), factors leading to school leaving (column 4) and intended outcomes (column 5).

The eight elements in the framework are:

- **explicit, planned responses** in order to achieve the end outcome of all young people completing compulsory education;
- the availability of a range of **non-mainstream school options and support services** within a region;
- the adoption of a **holistic multidisciplinary approach** (NSW Youth Advisory Council 1994) based on the recognition of the personal, social and economic needs of potential under-age school leavers in addition to their education needs;
- a **focus on individual success and development** to address participants' continual experience of academic failure and low self-esteem;
- a **focus on personal responsibility** particularly in terms of participant behaviour and learning;
- **flexibility to respond to individual needs**;
- **professional and personal quality of staff** who work with potential under-age school leavers; and
- **strong involvement of parents** in decisions and intervention activities.

### 9.3 Best practice

As highlighted in the introduction to this chapter, no practice or approach is best for all initiatives and best practices must be evaluated in the context of the target group, available resources and nature of the intervention. However, within each of the eight elements identified in the previous section, a range of features of successful approaches to
### Table 9.2: Linking success factors to strategies, mechanisms and outcomes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Elements</th>
<th>Factors affecting</th>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>Mechanisms/Causes</th>
<th>Intended outcomes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Explicit, planned responses</td>
<td>Clear statement of commitment and focus on students at-risk</td>
<td>Identifying and monitoring students at-risk</td>
<td>Interaction of all factors leading to under-age school leaving</td>
<td>All young people complete compulsory education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Development of effective education provision for all students within context of whole school program/philosophy</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Availability of non-mainstream school options and support services</td>
<td>Withdrawal from normal school environment or routine for period of time</td>
<td>Intervention models based on partial or total withdrawal</td>
<td>Interaction of all factors leading to under-age school leaving</td>
<td>All young people complete compulsory education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Early intervention</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Holistic multidisciplinary approach</td>
<td>Caring and supportive holistic approach to student welfare</td>
<td>Whole school intervention model</td>
<td>Alienating school environment</td>
<td>Improvement in school structures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Concern for personal and social as well as educational welfare of students</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Focus on individual success and development</td>
<td>Building participant confidence and self-esteem</td>
<td>Provide activities targeted at increasing self-esteem</td>
<td>Continual experience of academic failure</td>
<td>Increase in self-esteem</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Emphasising positive, visible results or learning, and builds on participants' strengths</td>
<td>Provide activities to increase literacy and numeracy skills</td>
<td>Increase in literacy/numeracy skills</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Experiences of working co-operatively and the benefits of sharing and working with others</td>
<td>Provide activities to increase social skills</td>
<td>Improved academic performance of participants</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Increase in social skills</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Increase in independent living skills</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Focus on personal responsibility</td>
<td>Encouraging students to take responsibility for their learning and behaviour</td>
<td>Provide counselling to students</td>
<td>Disruptive behaviour</td>
<td>Decrease in disruptive behaviour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Emphasising positive reinforcement and a non-punitive environment to encourage appropriate behaviour</td>
<td>Negotiating contracts and use of incentives</td>
<td>Disinterest in education</td>
<td>Decrease in suspensions and exclusions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Flexibility to respond to individual needs</td>
<td>Focus on individual needs of each participant</td>
<td>Develop appropriate teaching methods (e.g. one-to-one or small-group work)</td>
<td>School teaching strategies result in school being seen as boring</td>
<td>Improved participation/attendance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Organisational flexibility to respond to individual needs (e.g. timetable, structures, rules)</td>
<td>Provide flexible and/or alternative curriculum</td>
<td>Curriculum is not relevant or responsive to student needs</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Low student/teacher ratio</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Professional and personal quality of staff</td>
<td>Ability and dedication of initiative staff</td>
<td>Provide professional development for staff</td>
<td>Poor student/teacher relations</td>
<td>Improvement in student/teacher relations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Professional development of staff</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Increase in skills of teachers and other school staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Involvement of parents</td>
<td>Parents are encouraged to be more involved with their child's academic and behavioural learning</td>
<td>Strengthen home/school relations</td>
<td>Family conflict/breakdown</td>
<td>Improvement in student/parent relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Good communication with parents about the initiative</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Strengthened home-school relations</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
reducing under-age school leaving have been identified. These features have been drawn from across all sections of the report and represent our synthesis of the research findings (Table 9.3).

In total, 34 principles of best practice were identified. Associated with these practices, a selection of practical approaches used or suggested by successful initiatives is presented. Clearly, the information in this table does not represent the complete solution to reducing under-age school leaving. Rather, it provides a checklist and guide for improving responses to a complex and multifaceted problem.

Table 9.3: Best practice in reducing under-age school leaving

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Best practice</th>
<th>Practical approaches used by successful initiatives</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 1. Explicit, planned responses to under-age school leaving | • Working Party representing local schools, specialist initiatives and key agencies (DEETYA, State Education Department, community-based service providers) within the local region, convened with the goal of preparing a report and recommendations on reducing under-age school leaving  
• Regional Youth Interagency Committee forms a subcommittee to improve links between schools and local service providers, particularly in relation to assisting potential under-age school leavers |
| 1.1 Involves strong links between schools and other service providers in working out regional approaches to reducing under-age school leaving | • Development of a Regional Strategic Plan for assisting homeless and at-risk school students. The plan specifies roles and responsibilities of local schools and support agencies in terms of identification, intervention and referral  
• Negotiation of a service agreement with local youth workers to visit the school two to three times per week to run programs for at-risk students  
• Undertaking a mapping exercise to provide a profile of regional services available to assist potential early school leavers. Results are to be published in a booklet for schools and local agencies |
| 1.2 Makes optimal use of resources available within a region through appropriate collaboration and coordination | • Active promotion by school leadership of holistic approaches to reducing under-age school leaving demonstrated by:  
- school policy outlining approach to reducing school leaving  
- appointment of senior staff to school welfare positions  
- formal links to specialist initiatives and support services  
- willingness of school staff to commit voluntary time  
• A case plan is developed for all suspended and expelled students which specifies supervision responsibilities and follow up activities |
| 1.3 Involves a clear commitment and focus on potential under-age school leavers | • All school teaching and administration staff attend an annual planning meeting to discuss school strategies for reducing under-age school leaving |
| 1.4 Builds skills and ownership through the involvement of “front-line” practitioners | • Formal program between the secondary school and feeder primary schools to identify at-risk students before they enter high school. In addition, the school operates a primary to secondary transition program involving teacher and student exchanges  
• School subprogram involving students having the same teachers from Year 7 through to Year 10. Because teachers are dealing with the same students, it is easier to find out if a particular student is having difficulties and assist in implementing strategies to address the problem. All teachers are responsible for the welfare of students rather than this responsibility being allocated to a student welfare committee.  
• Weekly meeting of a Student Welfare Committee comprising the Deputy Principal and all Year Coordinators to discuss strategies and referrals for individual cases across the school |
| 1.5 Involves early identification and referral of potential under-age school leavers | • Clearly defines specifications for the collection of monitoring and evaluation data |
1. Under-age school leaving

- Major regional survey of students was undertaken to quantify the number of potential under-age school leavers and their needs
- State wide review of Students At Risk Program

2. Availability of non-mainstream school options and support services

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>Is founded on mainstream schools meeting the needs of potential under-aged school leavers as part of normal school functions, supported by alternative options and services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>Involves the availability of sufficient places in initiatives for at-risk students to allow partial withdrawal from mainstream school environment where appropriate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>Involves the availability of sufficient places in regional community schools to provide a permanent alternative to mainstream school where appropriate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>Involves the availability of sufficient outreach services to support schools with significant numbers of potential under-age school leavers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>Involves access to specialist youth support services such as accommodation and health services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>Provides formal links between alternative options and mainstream schools to facilitate reintegration to mainstream schools, where appropriate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>Provides formal transition plans for returning from alternative options to mainstream schools</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3. Holistic multidisciplinary approach

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>Fosters a climate of care and support, including positive reinforcement of achievement</td>
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</table>

Best practice Practical approaches used by successful initiatives

- Major regional survey of students was undertaken to quantify the number of potential under-age school leavers and their needs
- State wide review of Students At Risk Program

- see “integrated whole school initiatives” (Section 7.2)
- see “school-based partial withdrawal initiatives” (Section 7.2)
- see “community-based partial withdrawal initiatives” (Section 7.2)
- see “event-based initiatives” (Section 7.2)
- see “community schools” (Section 7.2)
- see “outreach initiatives” (Section 7.2)
- see Section 7.3

- Community-based partial withdrawal initiative provides an alternative program for four days per week, with one day per week spent in school. Previously, the alternative program operated five days per week but reintegration was difficult because participants tended to lose contact with the school
- Each student participating in the partial withdrawal initiative is appointed a mentor from the school who is responsible for monitoring progress in the alternative program and negotiating the transition back to mainstream school
- Students are reintegrated back into the mainstream school with a staggered timetable building up from two days per week to full-time over a period of two months
- When involvement in the initiative is completed, a comprehensive report on the participant is prepared and presented to the school. A teacher within the school is responsible for monitoring ongoing progress over the next two school terms

- When new students are referred to the initiative, staff spend a significant proportion of time simply building rapport, and understanding the young persons needs
- Learning activities are structured around tasks which are challenging yet achievable by the participant
3.2 Offers an integrated approach to personal, social as well as the educational welfare of students

- Initiative is operated by a youth support service, which in addition to the program for potential early school leavers, provides a range of referral services and labour market programs. Participants have access to these services on site.
- Each student has a Student Development Plan which sets out behavioural, learning and attendance milestones which is reviewed regularly with students, school, staff and parents.

3.3 Operates as a component of the total response to reducing under-age school leaving rather than as a “tag-on solution” or “dumping ground”

- Referrals to a school-based partial withdrawal require an extensive assessment phase before withdrawal. In most cases, referring teachers are required to monitor and report on intervention approaches adopted within the classroom over a four week period before referrals are accepted. Referring teachers have responsibly for maintaining contact with the student during partial withdrawal periods.

3.4 Provides a physical environment which is not alienating to at-risk students

- The initiative operates in an informal physical environment “without the hallmarks of a regular school environment such as bells, uniforms and rows of chairs”.
- Initiative participants have access to a games room/time-out space.

3.5 Provides incentives to encourage student attendance

- School organises recreational activities before school and during lunch time because these are seen as the two critical times for truancy activities.
- Initiative provides a breakfast program before school both to ensure students have at least one nutritious meal a day, and as an incentive to arrive “on time”.

4. Focus on individual success and development

4.1 Provides opportunities for participants to experience success

- In determining programs for individual students, particular attention is paid to areas in which interest or success already exists.
- Modular approach is used whereby students complete small units one at a time. Units are selected to reflect students’ ability and provide positive, visible results as students work through units.
- Event-based initiative focusing on experiences of working cooperatively with other students to achieve practical goals.

4.2 Involves setting personal milestones in relation to improvements in social and independent living skills

- Student Development Plans document agreed milestones and attributes of successful attainment of milestones.

4.3 Builds participants’ basic educational skills such as literacy and numeracy

- Initiative focuses on remedial literacy, although learning activities are usually orientated towards vocational and living skills goals.

4.4 Provides intensive support for participants

- Mentoring system adopted where each participant works with a “significant other” (who may be a member of staff or someone outside the program) to define goals and monitor progress in the initiative.
- Involves participants selecting a mentor from the school staff to provide ongoing support up until the compulsory leaving age.

5. Focus on personal responsibility

5.1 Encourages students to take responsibility for their learning and behaviour

- Intensive support was provided to students in Years 7, 8 and 9 with a gradual transition into mainstream school. Students are required to complete Year 10 in mainstream school, as part of taking responsibility for their learning.
- For each unit of work, students are provided with information about what skills they will learn, tasks to be completed and assessment requirements. They are required to sign the unit to acknowledge their understanding of what is required of them.
- Peer support and assessment program whereby new participants are placed on a two week probation period and assessed by their peers before admission to the initiative.
### Best practice

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>5.2 Involves committed, voluntary participants</th>
<th>Practical approaches used by successful initiatives</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• A behaviour and learning contract is negotiated with students and their parents and school teachers before they are enrolled in the initiative, outlining agreed behaviour and attendance. All parties sign the contract</td>
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</table>

### 6. Flexibility to respond to individual needs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>6.1 Provides enough flexibility to accommodate the needs of the individual participant</th>
<th>• Each student has a Student Development Plan which sets out behavioural, learning and attendance milestones</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• A Case Plan is developed for each participant which is discussed with all parties – students, parents, teachers and initiative staff. After an initial assessment and the development of the case plan, participants have an individual program developed to specifically address those issues which may impact on their ability to remain in education or training</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• An individual work plan is negotiated with each student based on his/her preferences and needs. Some students pursue a course of study entirely within the initiative whereas others include some subjects from the regular school timetable</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>6.2 Involves organisational flexibility in responding to individual needs</th>
<th>• Initiative staff negotiate weekly attendance and work timetables with each participant ensuring an agreed minimum number of hours is spent in formal education or training activities and attendance at compulsory core units</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Initiative offers combined home-based study and formal initiative attendance</td>
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<tr>
<th>6.3 Addresses various levels of need, and the needs of groups of young people with special needs</th>
<th>• The school operates two school-based partial withdrawal initiatives – one for young women and the other for young men</th>
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<tr>
<td>• The region offers specialist initiatives for Aboriginal students, students with challenging behaviours and students with learning difficulties</td>
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| 6.4 Involves a low student/staff ratio | • Most of the initiative activities are conducted in small groups with a maximum of five students per teacher |

### 7. Professional and personal quality of staff

| 7.1 Involves careful selection of staff to ensure that they have appropriate qualifications, experience and commitment | • Specific selection criteria are used in recruiting initiative staff. Particular emphasis is given to the ability to relate to young people and the ability to advocate on behalf of young people |

| 7.2 Provides appropriate professional development for staff working with potential under-age school leavers | • The school provides access to relevant professional development programs for key staff including classroom teachers focusing on developing effective behaviour and learning management strategies in the classroom |

| 7.3 Provides support for staff working with potential under-age school leavers | • Local interagency network provides a forum for initiative staff to express their frustrations, in an environment where comments will not be misinterpreted by other staff and reinforcing negative perceptions about students participating in the program |

### 8. Involvement of parents/carer

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>8.1 Involves good communication with parents/carers about the initiative</th>
<th>• Student Development Plans are fully discussed with parents before implementation starts</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Weekly meeting with parents are held to provide information on the initiative and to allow informal discussion on issues and concerns</td>
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| 8.2 Provides opportunities for parents/carers to be involved in initiative activities | • Parents provide voluntary supervision of initiative participants for one morning per week |
Implications
THIS CHAPTER of the report summarises the broad policy and program implications of the findings from this study. They are primarily intended for policy and programs managers with responsibilities for formulating recommendations on how governments should respond to their obligation to provide appropriate education services and support to young people at risk of leaving school before the legal school leaving age.

10.1 Capacity of schools to address under-age school leaving

Although accurate data is not available, there may be of the order of 20,000 students aged 12-14 years (roughly the equivalent of 10 students in Years 7-9 in every high school in Australia) at risk of under-age school leaving. However, the geographical distribution of these young people is very uneven, with a relatively small proportion of schools, say 15%, likely to have around two-thirds of all potential under-age school leavers.

Regardless of the precise numbers, a broad perception exists that under-age school leaving represents a significant cost to the community, particular in regions with a high concentration of at-risk students. While the magnitude of these costs are largely notional, key informants point to the types of losses incurred by individuals and society as a whole through the failure of young people to reach their full potential and be appropriately socialised, through leaving school early.

Our findings also support the accumulated evidence presented to recent national Parliamentary inquiries that potential under-age school leavers require support and special assistance to remain connected to school or other formal education services. The fundamental question in addressing under-age school leaving is the extent to which mainstream schools are capable of providing this support and special assistance by adopting best practices as part of normal school processes, or whether special initiatives are needed.

Initial analysis of special initiatives highlights the high cost per participant based on the need for individualised strategies and low student/teacher ratios. If the figure of 20,000 potential under-age school leavers is accurate and we assume an initiative cost of $5,000 per participant, then we would estimate that annual funding of $100 million is required to fund special initiatives for the target group. While aggregate figures are not available for current funding for special programs and initiatives, we can compare this $100 million figure with the 1995-96 budget for STAR of $7 million. While the STAR program will not continue after 1996, the new Commonwealth Literacy and Numeracy Program may include a number of initiatives which will assist under-aged school leavers.

In the context of the overlapping problem of student homelessness, it has been argued by MacKenzie and Chamberlain (1994) that the potential for effective intervention using existing mainstream school resources is rela-
tively low once the number of homeless students in a school is greater than 10. A similar situation is likely to exist in relation to under-age school leaving. For the majority of schools, the adoption of best practices as part of normal school processes should allow effective intervention to reduce under-age school leaving. Anecdotal evidence from this research suggests that secondary schools with around 800 students may be able to manage between 10 and 20 potential under-age school leavers, depending on the at-risk characteristics of the young people. However, in schools with greater numbers of potential under-age school leavers, special initiatives and intensive support services are likely to be needed.

The key issues for policy makers to determine are:

- what is required to facilitate the adoption of best practices within schools; and
- how to allocate funding for special initiatives and support services to ensure funds are targeted to the minority of school with significant numbers of potential under-age school leavers.

10.2 Coordinated policy

There are no Commonwealth or State/Territory government policy statements concerned specifically with reducing under-age school leaving in a coordinated manner. Two recent Parliamentary inquiries into the area both made this finding and concluded that this was a shortcoming which should be addressed by the development of a cohesive national policy framework.

Based on our study, a number of principles and issues were identified which any policy response should consider:

- **Mainstream school should be the focus of intervention** in reducing under-age school leaving through the adoption of best practices as part of normal school processes. However, this does not mean that schools should be the only site of intervention. Part of best practice involves providing options for student withdrawal from the normal school environment or routine for periods of time. During periods of withdrawal strong links should be maintained with the mainstream school;

- **The need to support school teachers** through training and professional development is required if mainstream schools are the focus of intervention;

- **A range of non-mainstream school options** is needed to support schools in meeting the diverse needs of potential under-age school leavers. These options should reflect both top down implementation of policies by education and other agencies, as well as bottom up responses to perceived needs and local problems by schools and communities. Ultimately, State/Territory education agencies must be able to demonstrate due diligence in meeting their obligation to provide appropriate education services and support to all young people under the legal school leaving age;

- **The importance of community organisations** as providers of alternative options for potential under-aged school leavers, particularly as these organisations have the flexibility needed to be responsive to individual students;

- given that under-age school leaving is strongly correlated with other problems for young people (e.g. homelessness, mental health problems, offending), an important component of reduced under-age school leaving is **improved links between schools and community support services** such as youth accommodation and health services;

- **Coordinated responses** to under-age school leaving are needed;

- plans of action for a coordinated response to under-age school leaving are best implemented at the **local community level** to account for differences in the needs of students, school approaches and local services;

- **Individual students in consultation with their parents/carers, teachers and school administrators** should be involved in determining the support and special assistance required by a potential under-age school leaver to remain connected to school or other formal education services. Where appropriate, youth support services may also be involved;

- the array of programs and initiatives being undertaken across the country makes it difficult to assess the extent that needs for assistance at the individual student, school or regional level are being met, or whether the resources available to address the problem are adequate. In line with the recommendations of the Truancy Inquiry, there is a need for **improved data collection and presentation** including numbers of under-age school leavers, truancy rates and student participation in programs and initiatives;

- the assessment of changes in the extent of under-age school leaving may be possible with improved statistical collections. However, the diverse set of programs and initiatives means that it will be a complex task to evaluate specific policy objectives or the comparative effectiveness of individual programs and approaches, and

- the need for a coordinated policy response to under-age school leaving should not be interpreted as meaning
that programs and initiatives should only target young people under the legal school leaving age. At the local level, it may be appropriate and effective for an individual initiative to target both potential under-age school leavers and post-compulsory early school leavers.

10.3 Regional plans of action
The response to reducing under-age school leaving within particular geographical regions often involves the interaction of a number of mainstream schools, specialist initiatives and community support services.

The implementation of a coordinated policy response to under-age school leaving is best approached through the development of regional plans of action. Typically, regions would cover a local community servicing less than 10 schools. Such plans should specify:

- how potential under-age school leavers will be identified and their needs assessed at the local level;
- how local priorities will be identified and local ownership of the plan maintained;
- what best practices will be adopted by schools to meet the needs of potential under-age school leavers as part of routine school functions;
- what specialist initiatives are available within the region and how potential under-age school leavers can be referred;
- what outreach and youth support services are available to support schools and specialist initiatives;
- how individual students will be case managed, particularly if they are involved in partial withdrawal initiatives;
- what monitoring and evaluation data will be collected; and
- who is responsible for reviewing and updating regional plans.

10.4 Promoting best practices
In total, 34 principles of best practice were identified. Associated with these practices, a selection of practical approaches used or suggested by successful initiatives was presented. Clearly, the information presented in this report does not represent the complete solution to reducing under-age school leaving. Rather, it provides an initial checklist and guide for improving responses to a complex and multifaceted problem.

There is a need for ongoing development and promotion of best practice at both a regional and national level and the development of strategies for facilitating the adoption of best practice.

10.5 Further research
It is apparent that a broad perception exists that under-age and early school leaving is a cost to the community. However, to a large extent this perception is restricted to pointing to the types of losses incurred by individuals and society as a whole through the failure of young people to reach their full potential and be appropriately socialised through leaving school early. Beyond this, the magnitude of the costs, and the relationship between the different direct and related costs, is largely notional.

Further research is required to begin to enumerate with more rigour both the scope of the problem of under-age school leaving and the direct core costs, particularly the costs of special programs and initiatives. This report has proposed a conceptual framework which can be used for this purpose. When this data is available, it will provide a firmer basis for any future research and policy discussion of the costs of under-age school leaving.
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