

Submission

No 59

INQUIRY INTO CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE 9-14 YEARS IN NSW

Organisation: Lake Macquarie Adolescent Support

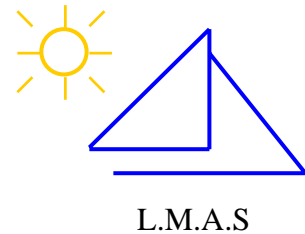
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April 28, 2008

Committee on Children and Young People
Parliament House
Macquarie St
Sydney NSW 2000

Dear Sir or Madam,

Please find attached Lake Macquarie Adolescent Support's (L.M.A.S) submission to the **Inquiry into Children and Young People 9-14 Years in NSW.**

L.M.A.S is a supportive service for adolescent students enrolled in Department of Education and Training secondary schools within the Lake Macquarie, Newcastle and Maitland districts in NSW. L.M.A.S provides individual support programs to students with special education needs relating to conduct disorders and poor social functioning that cannot be addressed at their local high schools.

We welcome the decision to conduct this inquiry and believe it provides us with the opportunity to raise important issues, which may be otherwise overlooked.

We would appreciate any information about the outcome of the committee's consideration of this submission, and are available to attend the inquiry and address any issues at a public hearing.

Kind Regards,



Ruth Chalker
Head Teacher



Submission to

CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE COMMITTEE

**INQUIRY INTO CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE 9-14
YEARS IN NSW**

From

LAKE MACQUARIE ADOLESCENT SUPPORT

Prepared by Amanda Douglas on behalf of L.M.A.S and authorised by

Ruth Chalker

Head Teacher

APRIL 2008

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PART 1 – INTRODUCTION

As a supportive service for adolescent students, L.M.A.S is in constant contact with young people in the middle years with a range of different needs, disadvantages and challenges.

L.M.A.S welcomes this inquiry into children and young people as we recognise the lack of services and support for students in this vital age group.

L.M.A.S will respond in this submission to three points on the terms of reference set by the inquiry:

1. The needs of children and young people in the middle years i.e. between about nine and fourteen years of age;
2. The extent to which the needs of children and young people in the middle years vary according to age, gender and level of disadvantage;
3. The activities, services and support which provide opportunities for children and young people in the middle years to develop resilience.

The submission will discuss the needs of children and young people at L.M.A.S associated with emotional and behavioural disorders, gender and level of disadvantage.

The submission will also focus on the activities, services and support provided by L.M.A.S and the ways in which they provide opportunities for their students to develop resilience and skills to better deal with challenges and issues in their lives. However, in order to provide the best services possible, L.M.A.S believes some changes need to be made to give all students an

Amanda Douglas
L.M.A.S

equal opportunity to develop resilience. These changes will be discussed in detail and recommendations suggested.

L.M.A.S has an interest in policy surrounding the issues affecting children and young people in NSW as they have first-hand experience in working with high needs students in this age group.

L.M.A.S is particularly interested in policy affecting the NSW Department of Education and Training (NSW DET) and other policies in relation to services for children and young people with behavioural and emotional disorders, as they have a direct impact upon their organisation, its operation and effectiveness.

PART 2 – BACKGROUND

Lake Macquarie Adolescent Support (L.M.A.S) was set up at West Wallsend High School in 2000 and is run by the NSW Department of Education and Training. L.M.A.S provides supportive services to adolescent students enrolled in NSW DET secondary schools in the Lake Macquarie, Newcastle and Maitland districts. Students at L.M.A.S generally range from 13 – 15 years of age and have special education needs relating to behavioural and emotional disorders. Students who are placed at L.M.A.S have experienced extensive development and remedial programs in their home high school, and have failed to respond to these programs. The aim of L.M.A.S is to return students to their local school or support their transition to other education or employment opportunities. Through a range of teaching methods, L.M.A.S aims to teach students how to direct their own lives, make more effective choices, and to develop the skills needed to address related issues in their lives.

Under the *Guidelines for Attendance in BD/ED Settings* set by the NSW DET, L.M.A.S works together with students' home schools to support their transition either back to school or into employment or other training options. L.M.A.S consists of a number of staff including a head teacher, two teaching support officers, three teachers and one administration staff member. Each teacher, including the head teacher, has a caseload from 3-6 students. L.M.A.S aims to provide a network of support for its students and all people associated with them. Through a healing environment, L.M.A.S supports adolescents and families in the acknowledgement of existing problems and the development of skills and goal plans for their future resolution.

PART 3 – SUBMISSION DETAILS

3.1 Needs of Children and Young People at L.M.A.S

From the experience of the staff at L.M.A.S, students have a range of different needs including those associated with mental health conditions, emotional disorders and behavioural disorders such as; Conduct Disorder (CD), Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD), Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD), Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder (ADHD) and Emotional Disturbances (ED).

3.1.1 *Children and Young People in Middle School*

Children and young people attending school in this age group (13-15 years) are at the highest risk of disengagement with their studies. From the experience of the staff at L.M.A.S, teaching methods at this level of schooling are often out of synch with the needs of their students, and in particular of those with emotional and behavioural disorders. Students at L.M.A.S have experienced personal conflicts between themselves and teachers at their home school where teachers are untrained in special needs and therefore unable to handle such students. In several cases this has resulted in the home school not following the guidelines set by the DET, and therefore disadvantaging the students who are left without a home school. Currently there are two students at L.M.A.S who are without a home school due to this situation. This demonstrates the need for more training for teachers in NSW schools in relation to students with emotional and behavioural disorders, as well as the need for stricter compliance of NSW schools with the *Guidelines for Attendance in BD/ED Settings*.

3.1.2 *Impact of Parents on Needs*

Parenting styles employed by the parents of the students at L.M.A.S have been found to have a significant impact on their needs and level of assistance required by teaching staff at both L.M.A.S and their home school. Currently there are several different ‘dysfunctional’ factors affecting parents of students: three of the 21 students at L.M.A.S have parents with known drug and alcohol problems, four have parents known to be dealing with domestic violence and six students have parents experiencing mental health issues. These factors also affect their children because they have shaped the environment the child has grown up in and therefore students at L.M.A.S often haven’t gained the appropriate social skills required to function effectively in society.

3.1.3 *Gender Differences*

In the experience of staff at L.M.A.S, students with needs relating to emotional and behavioural disorders vary according to their gender. There are currently 18 male and four female students who are involved in programs at the school. This shows an imbalance in the gender of students who require supportive services and individually tailored programs. Despite this imbalance being in the males favour, female students at L.M.A.S have been found to require more teacher time than males, with extra time taken to control subtle behavioural patterns. Therefore, despite their low number, female students at L.M.A.S consume more time and resources than their male counterparts.

3.1.4 *Level of Disadvantage*

Students needs also vary according to the level of disadvantage experienced within their homes. Of the 21 students currently enrolled at L.M.A.S, eight are in a situation of disadvantage and come from households with parents who receive government benefits. This level of disadvantage impacts on students' literacy level and therefore L.M.A.S services include literacy testing and support such as reading programs and a 'reading corner'. The low literacy level of some students at L.M.A.S also impacts upon their ability to access services. Therefore, students needs often include support with everyday tasks and activities such as reading bus timetables and filling out forms. However, this is a symptom of something much bigger that needs to be addressed on a much larger scale. Eight students at L.M.A.S have families who live on government support payment. In some instances their families have been living on these payments for several generations and is often ingrained into their life, resulting in a cycle of hopelessness. Consequently, students at L.M.A.S also require support and training in life and employment related skills such as interviewing and dressing appropriately. L.M.A.S aims to break this cycle of hopelessness by giving their students the tools and skills needed to gain employment or continue on to further education.

3.3 L.M.A.S SERVICES DEVELOPING RESILIENCE

Services provided by L.M.A.S aim to assist their students in directing their own lives, making more effective choices and developing the skills needed to successfully address and deal with issues in their lives. Staff are trained as special educators and work as a team in partnership with the students, parents/carers and home school to design individual programs to prepare students for post school work or reintegration into their home school.

Students develop resilience through learning coping strategies, replacement behaviours and identifying and managing behaviours that have been damaging for them in the past.

A variety of subjects are offered through Individual Education Plans (I.E.P's) including numeracy, literacy, geography, history, woodwork, music, photography, computer studies, food technology, creating problem solving, critical thinking, horticulture, art and craft and social skills. L.M.A.S also offers students when relevant an outdoor education program, girls program, sport and work placements and the opportunity to enrol in distant education courses.

Work placements enable students to pursue their interest in any career they may have, as well as giving them practical hands-on experience in a real workplace dealing with the stresses and every day challenges involved. Work placements also enable students to better develop and refine their coping and behaviour management skills learnt throughout their time at L.M.A.S, while setting them up with possible future employment.

Girls programs include various courses that deal with personal presentation and responsibility. Such courses give female students at L.M.A.S important tools regarding personal presentation

and self-esteem. These programs reinforce students' self esteem and the taking of responsibility for sexual activity, while teaching them how to dress appropriately for different situations. Such programs give female students at L.M.A.S skills, knowledge and the ability to present themselves appropriately for situations they may face in the future.

L.M.A.S also provides services that aim to help their students develop resilience through giving them the knowledge and skills for use in everyday life. L.M.A.S links their students into places they are likely to be access later, such as TAFE, Centrelink and Links to Learning. As a part of the preparation for future employment and/or education, L.M.A.S teaches their students important basics such as how to fill out forms and how to read maps and timetables. Such skills give students the ability to deal with everyday issues and challenges whilst also preparing them for their future beyond their time at L.M.A.S.

3.4 CHANGES NEEDED FOR BETTER SERVICES

There are several changes L.M.A.S believes would help them in providing a better level of service for their students to develop resilience and the skills needed to succeed in their goals. These include changes to the Special Transport system and counsellor availability.

3.4.1 *Special Transport*

Special Transport is offered to approved students who are unable to make their own way to the L.M.A.S campus. The campus is situated at West Wallsend, a semi-rural area not efficiently accessed by public transport from many parts of the district. If a student is placed at L.M.A.S by the District Behaviour Services Placement Panel, they are required to make their own way to the campus each day. However, if a letter is provided by the parents, stating they are unable to transport the student due to unchangeable factors, Special Transport can be arranged. From the experiences of staff at L.M.A.S the criteria set by Special Transport sometimes prevent students from being able to attend their classes. A criterion set by Special Transport states that students must be in the company of a responsible adult at the time of pickup and drop-off. Currently there are two students at L.M.A.S who are unable to access Special Transport because of this. These students do not meet this criterion as they have parents who are unable to be there due to work or other reasons, and they do not have friends or relatives available to be there when the students are picked up or dropped off. As many students come from dysfunctional families, they also often don't have good relationships with relatives or neighbours. Special Transport does not make any allowances for such situations, and therefore some students are unable to attend L.M.A.S because they cannot obtain transport. This puts these students at a disadvantage, as it results in effective denial of access to L.M.A.S' services.

3.4.3 *Counsellor Availability*

As a part of the support services offered at L.M.A.S, students have access to a counsellor one day per week. As students do not attend L.M.A.S every day, many do not have access to the counsellor. Students at L.M.A.S (the most high-needs “behaviour” students in the district) have needs resulting from emotional and behavioural disorders, and therefore counsellor access is vital to their programs, care and development. There are currently 10 out of the total 22 students at L.M.A.S who do not have access to the counsellor because they do not attend on the day the counsellor is there. Based on the guidelines set by the NSW DET, students theoretically should have access to a counsellor from their home school. However, as some home schools do not follow the NSW DET guidelines, some students are without a home school. There are two students currently in this situation, who do not have a home school and therefore do not have access to a school counsellor at all. Guidelines regarding travel, set by the NSW DET, also mean that counsellors are unable to split their time over two days to accommodate for the students who are not there. This means many students are denied access to the counselling services, which ultimately affects their progress in successfully completing the program at L.M.A.S. and their effective integration in society.

PART 4 – CONCLUSION

The needs of children and young people are under-catered for in NSW. Students with behavioural and emotional disorders have high needs associated with a number of different factors such as gender, level of disadvantage, parenting styles and home environment. In NSW there is a growing demand for behavioural support services, and settings like L.M.A.S find themselves under the strain of trying to providing effective programs for an ever-increasing population, while being under-resourced. L.M.A.S believes that the problems they are facing are typical of all behavioural support settings throughout NSW. While the support services in NSW for children and young people with behavioural and emotional disorders are limited and under-resourced, we cannot solve the problems, but merely provide bandaids.

L.M.A.S does as much as possible to assist our students in addressing their problem behaviours and setting goals for their future, but believe more quality early intervention programs would give children and young people a better chance for a brighter future.

In addition, L.M.A.S believe specific changes need to be made to Special Transport and counsellor availability in order for them to equally meet the needs of children and young people, which have been mentioned in this submission, in the Newcastle, Lake Macquarie and Maitland districts.

PART 5 – RECOMMENDATIONS

L.M.A.S would like to make several recommendations in relation to services supporting young people in NSW:

- More counsellor hours and flexibility from the NSW DET in their conditions regarding rationalising travel and splitting days between settings so all students have equal access.
- More discretion for operators of Special Transport regarding the operational guidelines for pick-up and drop-off of students. Changing the criteria stating students must be accompanied by an adult, as this is impractical for many students' situations.
- L.M.A.S recognises the need for more services aimed at children and young people aged 9-14 years, especially students who suffer emotional and behavioural disorders.
- L.M.A.S recognises the need for more early intervention support services for children and young people with emotional behavioural disorders. More early intervention services are needed, as services such as L.M.A.S are merely acting as a bandaid for the problem, and not a cure.

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PART 6 – SOURCES

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