



**Youth Affairs Council of Western Australia's
response to**

**State Government proposal to raise the school leaving
age in Western Australia**

***A Consultation Paper by The State Government
Department of Education and Training***

September 2004

Youth Affairs Council of WA
4/1329 Hay Street WEST PERTH WA 6005
Ph: 08 9485 2750 | Rural: 1800 670 231 | Fax: 08 9485 2757
Email: yacwa@yacwa.org.au | www.yacwa.org.au

INTRODUCTION

The Youth Affairs Council of WA (YACWA) appreciates the opportunity to respond to the consultation paper released by The State Government Department of Education and Training for the proposal to raise the school leaving age in Western Australia.

YACWA is the Peak Body for the non-government youth affairs sector in Western Australian and is a membership based organisation with statewide representation of a wide variety of people who work with and for young people. YACWA's mission is to strengthen the trust, cooperation, collaboration, professionalism and voice of the non-government youth service sector so it can serve the young people of Western Australia.

The Council's vision is that of a united, independent and active advocate for the non-government youth sector that is both supported and respected by the sector and the wider community. The Council believes in and actively promotes equity, equality, access and participation for all young people in the Western Australian community.

These aims are achieved through developing and co-coordinating policies, facilitating program responses, preparing resources for the sector and distributing information about young people's needs.

Consultative Process

YACWA held discussions with members of its Policy Advisory Groups (the Young People's Policy Advisory Group and the Youth Sector Policy Advisory Group) regarding the proposed increase of the school leaving age and distributed a summary of the discussion paper to its members. These parties were invited to provide input into the proposal to raise the school leaving age in Western Australia. YACWA has formulated its response based on the feedback obtained during these processes.

RESPONSE OUTLINE

On the basis of feedback provided by our membership and members of our Policy Advisory Groups, it was unanimously agreed that YACWA does not support the proposed raising of the school leaving age as it is outlined by The Department of Education and Training in its Consultation Paper. The implications of raising the school leaving age in WA are complex and numerous. Our major areas of concern with the proposal are summarised as key points below:

- Increasing links between industry, schools and training bodies is a great initiative to encourage young people to stay at school and gain important and necessary skills and abilities, but it should not be compulsory.
- How are extremely disadvantaged young people going to be supported given they are currently not even attending school to the current legal age of 15?
- Impact on rural and remote young people who may have to leave their communities in order to access schools that cater for young people over the age of 15.
- Implications for parents in regards to the Parental Responsibility Act.
- Resourcing issues.

1. Increasing links between industries, schools and training bodies is a great initiative to encourage young people to stay at school and gain important and necessary skills and abilities, but it should not be compulsory.

YACWA welcomes the initiative to increase links between industry, schools and training bodies, however, it strongly opposes the proposed amendments to the current legislation to raise the leaving age in 2006 to the end of the year in which young people turn 16, and in 2008 to the end of the year in which they turn 17, and make it compulsory. Making school compulsory for a longer period of time does not effectively address the reason why many young people choose to leave school, including the rising number of young people as young as 13 and 14 leaving school.

While the goal of raising the retention rate of students completing year 12 is worth supporting, the Government must focus on providing better options for students rather than forcing them to stay in school longer. In fact, raising the school age may further disengage young people who do not fit into the school system as it currently exists and may be counter productive.

2. How are extremely disadvantaged young people going to be supported given they are currently not even attending school to the current legal age of 15?

The implications for extremely disadvantaged young people who are already disengaged with the current education system are complex and numerous. Young people are disadvantaged for various reasons. These include:

- Young people who are not academically inclined.
- Homeless young people who are unable to continue schooling until their accommodation needs are met.
- Lower income families who require their young person to work to assist with household income or stay at home and look after younger siblings whilst parents work.

- Young women experiencing pregnancy or have child care responsibilities.
- Culturally and Linguistic Diverse Young People.
- Young people from rural and remote areas.
- Young people with mental health issues.

YACWA 's concern for making year 11 and 12 compulsory for students in Western Australia is that it will not change the disadvantages marginalised groups, including those from low socio-economic backgrounds, are faced with. The lack of success in schools merely reflects structural inequalities in the broader social, political and economic sphere. Therefore, raising the school leaving age without addressing other issues impacting on the educational outcomes may be counter productive.

3. Impact on rural and remote young people who may have to leave their communities in order to access schools that cater for young people over 15.

Serious consideration and attention needs to be given to young people in remote and rural areas. Currently only one in ten Aboriginal young people in remote regions completes year 12. Many schools in remote and rural areas do not offer schooling beyond year 10. This is often the result of the lack of infrastructure in remote and rural areas. In other words this means that young people would have to leave their families and communities in order to access schools for the compulsory year 11 and 12 education. This would undeniably place even more pressure on families and communities, often resulting in a loss of support.

4. Implications for parents in regards to the Parental Responsibility Act.

YACWA is also concerned about the implications of the Parental Responsibility Act that has been put forward by the Office of Crime Prevention. Parental Responsibility Orders fail to consider the variety of environments which provide a backdrop to young people's behaviours. Furthermore, a parent may be highly responsible in all facets of a child's upbringing but may be unable to influence them to attend school because the child is disengaged, bullied or any number of factors. Forcing students to remain at school longer could result to increased truancy, absenteeism and frustrations with the school system and potentially conflict with the justice system. YACWA acknowledges the additional immense pressure families and communities would be faced with if the proposal to raise the school leaving age would be legalised without addressing other issues impacting on the educational outcomes.

5. Resourcing issues.

YACWA believes that the initiative to raise the school leaving age would also have a huge impact on our already under resourced school system. There would need to be an increase in teaching staff, an increase in administration staff, an increase in classes and many more teaching resources will be required to support the increase of student numbers. Not to mention the improvements in guidance and counselling services to assist students in making important choices as well as funds to provide professionals such as Youth Workers who could offer necessary holistic support in each high school.

Non-government schools are increasingly dependent on public subsidies; the taxpayer meets about a third of the costs in public schools. Again, an increase of the school leaving age could have potential implications, which yet have to be fully realised. In fact, over time it could redefine what we mean by 'public education'.

CONCLUSION

In summary, YACWA opposes the proposal of raising the school leaving age as it is outlined by The Department of Education and Training in its Consultation Paper. Compulsion to keep young people longer in schools without addressing other issues impacting on the educational outcomes, as outlined in the above discussion would have complex and numerous implications.

YACWA welcomes the initiative by the government to increase links between industries, schools and training bodies to encourage young people to stay at school and gain important and necessary skills and abilities. However, YACWA strongly opposes the concept of making this education compulsory and forcing young people, exceeding the current legal age of 15, to stay at school longer.