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28 October 2025

RE: Submission to the Department for Education's Schools and Preschools Division's systemic review into public education beyond mainstream education

ABOUT US

Connecting Foster & Kinship Carers - SA Inc. (CF&KC-SA) is the peak representative body for all approved foster and kinship carers in South Australia under the *Children and Young People (Safety) Act 2017* (*SA)* (herein referred to as family-based carers, or carers).

ABOUT THIS SUBMISSION

This submission is written on behalf of a) family-based carers who have provided foster and kinship care to children who have engaged in non-mainstream education settings as announced by the Honorable Blair Boyer, Minister for Education, Training and Skills, and b) family-based carers who sought to express their views on the delivery of mainstream and non-mainstream education to their foster and kinship children.

To formulate our findings, we conducted a review of Commissioner Nyland's *The Life They Deserve Child Protection Systems Royal Commission Report* (2016), Dr Fiona Arney's *Report of the Independent Inquiry into Foster and Kinship Care* (2022), CF&KC-SA's annual foster and kinship carer survey results, the Department for Education's school enrolment policies, data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics, grey papers, and peer reviewed journals. Moreover, we consulted our direct carer advocacy team who deliver individualised advocacy to family-based carers and surveyed family-based carers for their perspectives.

This submission is divided into two parts. In *Part One: Care Leavers, Carers, and Our Education System, we* outline important findings about care leaver education attainment and family-based carers navigating our education system. In *Part Two: Public Education Beyond Mainstream Schooling*, we address the scope of this review using the results from our survey of family-based carers.

Topics explored in Part One (pp.2-6):

1. Government school zoning and catchment areas.
2. Student enrolment policies for children in care.
3. The private education of children in care.

Topics explored in Part Two (pp.7-10):

1. Barriers to transfers/transitions to non-mainstream settings.
2. Benefits of non-mainstream settings to foster and kinship children.
3. Supports and services to better support foster and kinship children in mainstream settings.

PART ONE: CARE LEAVERS, CARERS, AND OUR EDUCATION SYSTEM

Australia's government education system, like many around the world, has long prioritised academic results. Unfortunately, the reality for many children under guardianship of the Chief Executive (also known as "state care") is that before they can focus on their education, they must gain strategies to cope with their adversities. Evidence tells us that care-leavers in Australia tend to report lower educational achievement than their non-care-leaver peers and that lower educational achievement is linked to worse employment prospects which can lead to poverty, homelessness, and mental health challenges.[1] Like most parents, family-based carers want to see their children become independent and contributing members of society. In contemporary society, ensuring one's child attains an education is critical to this vision. However, over the years, family-based carers have raised their concerns about the education outcomes of their foster and kinship children.

In the most recent results reported in our *Annual Foster & Kinship Carer Survey Summary 2024-25* (95% CI ±0.075; RSE = 7.72):

- 74.2% of family-based carers were concerned about their foster/kinship child or young person's education outcomes.
- 46.3% of carers reported their foster/kinship child had experienced a school suspension.
- 14.7% of carers reported their foster/kinship child had experienced a school expulsion.[2]

Nearly a decade ago in 2016, Commissioner Nyland's report on the Child Protection Systems Royal Commission underscored similar and other areas of concern regarding the public education of children in care. These included:

- Children in care experiencing higher rates of suspension and exclusion from school than their peers.
- Public school teachers misunderstanding the needs of children in care and lacking awareness of how to respond to behavioural challenges, particularly related to trauma.
- Administrative disagreements between the then Department for Education and Childhood Development and its Families SA arm about who funds in-school additional education support for children in care, delaying the actual delivery of support.[3]

In light of these concerns, the report summarised the important role education plays in the life of someone raised in care, including how their adverse backgrounds can affect their schooling:

> Education plays a critical role in helping children in care to reach their full potential. Early traumatic experiences, however, can impact on a child's ability to learn and to interact appropriately in the school environment. Children with a history of trauma and abuse may have an impaired ability to regulate their emotions and this can result in conflict with teaching staff and other students. There is also a greater risk that a child entering care will

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[1] Grace Killmer et al., "'Going around the long route to get where I want to be": Exploring the university experiences of care leaver students', *Children and Youth Services Review*, 2025.

[2] Connecting Foster & Kinship Carers – SA, *Annual Foster & Kinship Carer Survey 2024-25,* p.21.

[3] Margaret Nyland, *The Life They Deserve Child Protection Systems Royal Commission Report: Services for Children in Out-of-Home Care* (Report), 2016, pp.256-59.

> experience language delays, weakening their ability to socialise and learn. A good educational environment can contribute to overcoming children's early disadvantage.[4]

While we know that a good education can change the trajectory of a child in care for the better, the 2022 South Australian Independent Inquiry into Foster and Kinship Care received several submissions from family-based carers and organisations that described the same issues Commissioner Nyland raised 6 years prior. In particular, a gap in the now Department for Child Protection (DCP) and our government schools' responsibility to support children in care to attain their school education. These submissions detailed:

- Stigma toward children in care.
- Experiences of carers hearing negative opinions from school officials about accepting children in care.
- A perceived lack of school officials having both trauma awareness and an understanding of complex needs.
- Challenges obtaining adequate educational support for foster and kinship children.

Lastly, submissions included examples of carers resorting to the private education sector in order to access the educational support their foster/kinship child needed—even paying the fees from their own pocket.[5]

Today, CF&KC-SA's carer advocates continue to hear from carers struggling to gain access to additional in-school educational support for their foster/kinship children in government schools. In fact, payment disagreements between the now Department for Education (DfE) and the Department for Child Protection remain. Our carer advocates have observed inconsistencies around which department ends up paying and situations where foster and kinship children do not receive any in school support until the disagreement is settled, which can take some time. This is disappointing. In Commissioner Nyland's report, her position on which government agency should pay is fair and clear:

> Where a child who is not in care has additional needs, school services officers may provide extra support. This support is not paid for by the child's parents and is funded by the Department [for Education and Childhood Development] … There is no reason to treat children in care any differently from other children when considering funding responsibilities for their in-school support.[6]

The Department for Education currently holds responsibility for funding additional in school support for students who need it. When a student in care needs additional in school support and the DfE diverts funding responsibilities to the DCP, it is understandable when family-based carers perceive the situation as prejudice and as discrimination against a child based on care status (in the non-legal sense). In fact, the 2024 status report on the recommendations made in the *Child Protections Systems Royal Commission* show that the DfE accepted Commissioner Nyland's recommendation that education fund any in-school support needed by children in care.[7] This means there is no reasonable explanation for treating students in care differently, nor the delays in fulfilling requests as a result.

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[4] Ibid, p.256.
[5] Fiona Arney, *Report of the Inquiry into Foster and Kinship Care* (Report), 2022, p.129.
[6] Margaret Nyland, *The Life They Deserve Child Protection Systems Royal Commission Report: Services for Children in Out-of-Home Care* (Report), 2016, p.259.
[7] Child Protection Systems Royal Commission – 2024 recommendation status, (report), p.10.

1. Government school zoning and catchment areas

In Australia, it is a harsh reality that our government schools are not homogenous. Each one offers different facilities, resources, socio-demographic catchment profiles, and academic results that are more or less favourable to parents and caregivers. Due to zoning and catchment area limitations to enrolment, the area in which a student resides fulltime will usually determine the government school they can attend. While students can be eligible to attend a government school outside their zone, the circumstances permitting their enrolment do not apply to most, and all government schools are required to prioritise students who live inside its zone and catchment area.

In Australia, the impact of zoning and catchment area limitations on students is important in the context of the socio demographic status of a geographical area. For example, evidence shows that schools in high socio-economic areas will catch a higher pool of socio-economically advantaged students. These schools tend to report above average academic results. Likewise, low socio-economic areas will catch a higher pool of socio-economically disadvantaged students. These schools tend to report below average academic results, as well as higher rates of behavioural issues, lower rates of student attendance, and lower rates of enrolments into university than average.[8] Reasons for this are beyond the scope of this submission, but important when considering the socio-economic status of the areas where most foster and kinship families in South Australia live today.

We are aware that the DCP holds data on the local government areas in which South Australia's foster and kinship households reside. We also know that the average annual household income of family-based carers is 42% less than the average annual Australian household's.[9] The Index of Relative Socio-economic Disadvantage and Advantage use Australia's census data to measure and compare socio-economic disadvantage and advantage relative to local government areas across Australia and within the jurisdictions. Incomes levels, among other factors, are used as indicators of socio-economic disadvantage and advantage.[10] In order to build a picture of the socio-economic status of most family-based carer households in South Australia and how it may or may not affect the education attainment of a child in care, we encourage the DfE to reach out to the DCP for this information.

2. Student enrolment policies for children in care

It is true that the DfE's enrolment policies allow children in care to apply to any non-local government school. This policy perhaps recognises that our government schools do not provide the same levels of opportunity and that the education of a child in care may be best in the hands of a non-local school that has the resources to help. Still, "automatic entry" has its limitations. Successful enrolment in a preschool or primary school is determined through a joint evaluation done by the government school of preference and the DfE's Student Support Services—and enrolment is not guaranteed. When preferencing government secondary schools though, children in care *will* receive automatic entry into any non-local secondary school of their choice *when* the following circumstances are met:

a) The child in care is in grade 6 at a government primary school and their case worker completes and submits the child's secondary school registration form by the due date applicable to every other grade 6 student in the State.

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[8] Emma Rowe & Christopher Lubienski, 'Shopping for schools or shopping for peers: public schools and catchment area segregation', *Journal of education Policy*, 2017, p.352.
[9] Connecting Foster & Kinship Carers – SA, *Annual Foster & Kinship Carer Survey Summary 2024-25,* (report), *p.10*.
[10] Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Socio-Economic Indexes for Australia, Index of Relative Socio-economic Disadvantage and Advantage,* (website).

b) The DfE's Chief Executive directs that the child attends a particular non-local school in line with section 62 of the *Education and Children's Services Act 2019*.[11]

There is no doubt that these policies are an excellent lever our foster and kinship families can pull when needed, but it has come to our attention that in order for some children in care to access the in-school supports they need, carers have sent their children to private schools. If government schools are meant to accommodate children in care who need additional in-school support, then why have a significant proportion of our family-based carers opted to private schooling?

3. The private education of children in care

> When my foster child was ready to go to high school I visited six high schools. Three public and three private schools. Two of the public schools made it very clear that they would prefer to not have her at their school as soon as I mentioned that she needed a modified education. One principal said that they didn't offer a modified educational plan for students. Unfortunately (or possibly fortunately), I didn't know that it really wasn't a choice for a school. I ended up enrolling her at a private school which has been unbelievably supportive of her and her abilities – Family-based carer, 2025.

As the peak body for family-based carers, we are not aware of the number of foster and kinship children who attend a non-local government school. However, we do know that many family-based carers report dissatisfaction with the in-school support government schools provide to their foster/kinship children. In fact, we know that in 2022, 28% of family-based carers said their foster or kinship child received a private education.[12] This figure is noteworthy for three key reasons:

1. Students attending private schools are more likely from a modal annual household income of $74,750 to $194,999.[13] Children in foster/kinship families are more likely from a modal annual household income of $18,201 to $30,000, or an average household income of $69,859.[14] By comparison, the pursuit of private education is less affordable to most family-based carers, so those who pay the fees will face greater financial implications.
2. As mentioned, the Arney report on the Inquiry into Foster and Kinship Care revealed that many carers who enrolled their foster/kinship children in private schools did so to secure additional in-school supports that could/would not be met by a government school.[15]
3. Non-mainstream settings in government schools are understood as existing to accommodate the needs of students that cannot be accommodated for in the mainstream setting. Yet, family-based carers have resorted to private schools to access accommodations.

It is essential that government schools can meet the in-school support needs of all students. Private education should be a choice based on a family's fundamental values, beliefs, and philosophies about education. No carer should feel compelled to resort to private education in the absence of a government school's ability or preparedness to support their foster/kinship child's attainment of a school-education.

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[11] Department for Education, *Placement in School*, (webpage), 2025.
[12] Connecting Foster & Kinship Carers – SA, Annual Foster & Kinship Carers Survey Summary 2022, (report), p.8.
[13] Independent Schools Australia, The Independent School Student: an analysis of the 2021 Australian Bureau of Statistics Census of Population & Housing (report) 2021, p.6.
[14] Connecting Foster & Kinship Carers – SA, Annual Foster & Kinship Carers Survey Summary 2024-25, (report), p.10.
[15] Fiona Arney, Report of the Independent Inquiry into Foster and Kinship Care, November 2022, (report), p.129.

Nor should any carer endure the financial burden of paying the fees to make it happen. Importantly, in South Australia, a foster or kinship child who attends a private primary school forfeits their automatic entry into any government secondary school in the State.[16] This policy is particularly unfair to students whose carers enrolled them in a private primary school to access adequate in-school support because a government school could not. If the child's local government secondary school is also unable to meet their support needs, the carer and/or the DCP could face significant financial pressure to fund a private secondary school that can.

When mainstream school cannot support a child in care to succeed in attaining a school-education, non-mainstream school should aid as an alternative that will. However, when family-based carers see private schooling as the alternative instead, it calls into question:

a) Whether non-mainstream school settings can meet the educational support needs of children in care.
b) Whether family-based carers are aware of non-mainstream school settings.
c) Whether family-based carers face barriers that prevent their foster/kinship child from accessing non-mainstream settings.

These questions bring us to the second part of this submission (see page 7)

[16] Department for Education, *Placement in School*, (webpage), 2025.

PART TWO: PUBLIC EDUCATION BEYOND MAINSTREAM SCHOOLING

CF&KC-SA surveyed a small sample of South Australia's approved family-based carers (n=43). The survey was based on the questions posed by the review, advertised to our membership, and invited family-based carers who have *and* have not provided care for a child engaged in a non-mainstream setting to participate. Due to the survey design, choice answers were not compulsory so sample sizes can differ per question and are disclosed accordingly.

According to the survey, 9 out of 43 carers indicated they had provided care for a child who engaged in a non-mainstream setting in a government school. As the sample size of these carers is very small, the results outlined below are in numbers, not percentages:

- 4 carers indicated they had cared for foster/kinship children who had engaged in Better Behaviour Centres.
- 3 carers indicated they had cared for foster/kinship children who had engaged in Home Education.
- 2 carers indicated they had cared for foster/kinship children who had engaged in Bowden Brompton Community School.
- 2 carers indicated they had cared for foster/kinship children who had engaged in Learning Centres.
- 2 carers indicated they had cared for foster/kinship children who had engaged in Open Access College.[17]

When asked how the carers became aware of the non-mainstream school settings, most of the 29 respondents said they found out through the DfE's website. Some carers were made aware by the school and child protection sector workers. Others learnt about the program through online research. 7 carers, however, used the comment box to explicitly cite the survey itself as having informed them.[18] This is a concerning finding considering it is well established that a) children in care often have greater difficulty focusing on their education due to adverse childhood experiences, and b) care leavers tend to report lower educational attainment than their peers.

1. Barriers to transfers/transitions to non-mainstream settings

While only 9 were caregivers of foster/kinship children who engaged in non-mainstream school settings, 11 reported they faced transfer/transition barriers that stopped their foster/kinship child from accessing a non-mainstream school setting. Reasons for these barriers related to 3 main areas:

1) Perceived inadequate support offered by the non-mainstream school setting:[19]

> Lack of appropriate options for teenagers who are struggling with mainstream school. FLO options are too 'hands off' and encourage disengagement. Mainstream do not meet needs for children struggling socially. Young people who leave school during school hours (for a variety of reasons) are then excluded (which is a win for them given they wanted/needed to leave in the first place). Better awareness and pathways into

[17] Connecting Foster & Kinship Carers – SA, Public Education Beyond Mainstream Schooling Family-based Carer Survey (Survey), 2025.
[18] Ibid.
[19] Ibid.

> independent schools such as [Specialised Assistance School for Youth] (SASY), [Sport College SA] (SEDA) and FAME [Flexible School] would have greatly helped.
>
> After interview at available schools in our rural setting we chose a non-government (Christian) school for the child in our care. This has paid off in huge dividends - he's thriving, but we met opposition to Christian education!
>
> I was told by my local public school that my child would not be guaranteed a place in their special ed class but would be assessed after starting if he was in the most needy category. They explained that they only had limited places and most kids with special needs didn't get allocated to this class. We decided then to go to private education who guaranteed him a place.
>
> My now 10 y/o was not development ready for school, was mainstreamed and excluded for inappropriate emotions in reception, transferred her to a [Catholic Education South Australia] (CESA) school as there were zero alternatives in mainstream to engage her.

2) Issues with the process for transitioning/transferring the child into a non-mainstream school setting:[20]

> Child was considered not suitable but now failing mainstream schooling.
>
> It was not a simple process. The Department of Ed would send you to the school offering alternate education and they would send you back to the Department of Ed. We found it ridiculous and frustrating. It wasn't straight forward.
>
> School [has] not recognised [the] child's ongoing behaviour issues.
>
> Ignorance from school staff.

3) The DCP not supporting the transition/transfer of the child to a non-mainstream school setting:[21]

> DCP not being supportive.
>
> DCP consistently tell me they will not support the opportunity to learn from home or go permanent part time or utilise any other model on a medium or long term basis that will support my child's needs.

One carer claimed that they had not known about non-mainstream school until their child's school sent the child to a non-mainstream school setting.[22] Moreover, what is of particular concern are the carers

[20] Ibid.
[21] Ibid.
[22] Ibid.

who resorted to a private school education after perceiving the non-mainstream school setting as unable to adequately support their foster/kinship child.

While not provided in the survey, a carer also shared the following experience with one of our advocates:

> A teacher told my grandson that not one school in the State would take him when discussing behaviours. He is only allowed to attend for a few hours a day and has missed out on so much of his education. We have started to try and find a school that will support him, so that he can achieve good outcomes.

2. Benefits of non-mainstream settings to foster and kinship children

The survey asked carers if they think their foster/kinship child's engagement in school and education goals would benefit from being part of a non-mainstream setting. According to the results (n=30), the majority (53.3%) thought non-mainstream school settings would benefit their foster/kinship child in these ways. 30% were unsure and 16.7% did not think so. Carers who thought their children would benefit from a non-mainstream school setting largely attributed this to the structure and environment of mainstream school being unsuitable. More specifically, carers imagined the non-mainstream school setting their child would engage in to have smaller class sizes, individualised learning support, trauma informed teachers and learning environments, and support systems that accommodate students with behavioural and learning difficulties.[23]

3. Supports and services to better support foster and kinship children in mainstream settings

The survey gave carers a range of multiple choices to identify supports and services they thought would better support their foster/kinship child's engagement and learning capacity in the mainstream school setting. More than 45% of all respondents (n=29) selected the answer choices below:

1) Teacher-awareness of ways adverse childhood experiences affect capacity to behave and learn **(86.2%)**.
2) School programs that focus on building healthy peer relationships, personal resilience and confidence **(79.3%)**.
3) Regular access to education support officers skilled in engaging children with adverse childhood experiences **(72.4%)**.
4) Regular learning support through academic tutoring **(69%)**.
5) Options to meet regularly with school leadership and teaching staff, the DCP case worker, myself and child **(65.5%)**.
6) More targeted planning toward student pathways to tertiary education (university and non-university) **(65.5%)**.
7) Regular access to school counsellors or wellbeing staff **(62.1%)**.
8) Access to a familiar quiet area my child can use when needed **(58.6%)**.
9) Adjustable start and finish times that suit my child's capacity to engage productively in their learning **(48.3%)**.[24]

[23] Ibid.
[24] Ibid.

For a long time, family-based carers, as well as researchers and commissioners in the child protection sector, have recommended increasing teacher-awareness of the ways adverse childhood experiences, in particular trauma, affect a student's capacity to behave and learn. While trauma-informed theory is widely accepted as necessary in our helping professions, such as teaching, the reported lack of awareness among teachers indicates that they are not taught to be trauma aware or that trauma-informed theory itself is difficult to teach and/or practice successfully. Nonetheless, it is up to government to decide who is responsible for ensuring our teachers are prepared. Teachers can be some of the most influential figures in a child or young person's life. It is important we prepare them to support a student who struggles to focus on their education as a result of adverse experiences.

FINAL REMARKS

By the time children are placed into care, they are already severely disadvantaged compared to their peers. Adults with a care experience also tend to report lower levels of education and are more likely to experience poverty. For anyone born into disadvantage, education often holds the key to a better quality of life. Non-mainstream school settings offer an alternative for students who cannot thrive and reach their full academic potential in mainstream school environments. For children in care having trouble focusing on school, a non-mainstream setting should help. However, many family-based carers faced difficulties accessing adequate in-school supports for their foster and kinship children, turning some to private schools to fill the gap.

The State Government bears responsibility not only to protect children in care from harm within the home, but also from harm within institutions. A public education system that cannot support all children in care to attain a school education will ultimately harm their futures and harm their capacity to become independent contributing members of our society. According to the DfE's *Strategy for Public Education,* "public education is for every child and young person." The Department's review clearly has important work to do to ensure government meets this commitment and rings true for children in care. We hope this submission provides an informative perspective on foster and kinship families and we thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,





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