Report to the NSW Department of Education and Training

Evaluation of the Plan-It Youth Program

Final Report

September 2007
Evaluation of the Plan-It Youth Program

Erebus International

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We are grateful for the way they were able to accommodate our inquiries, often at very short notice. We are very conscious of the demands made on schools and mentors, and acknowledge the imposition we often make on their time. We are appreciative of the time afforded us, and the insights they were willing to share.

We would also like to acknowledge the contribution to this report by Dr Les McCarthy and Mr Ian Sinclair.

While the information presented in this report draws on the contributions of a range of stakeholders, responsibility for the accuracy of the findings and the conclusions drawn are, however, the responsibility of Erebus International.

Dr Robert Carbines
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Erebus International
Executive Summary

Introduction

The Plan-it Youth Community Mentoring Program is a school-based mentoring program for students who are potential early school leavers. It is a program linking community members with young people who may need extra support to continue at school or to prepare for the transition from school to work, further education or training.

The students and mentors in the Plan-it Youth program work together to deal with the challenges of school, relationships with peers and teachers, family life, work and training issues. The Plan-it Youth program provides a structure for a one-to-one mentoring relationship between students and mentors.

The Plan-it Youth program was intended to:

- target young people in Years 9 and 10 who are potential early school leavers
- enhance the strengths, skills, abilities and interests of young people
- involve volunteer community members trained in mentoring through TAFE NSW
- use a co-ordinated approach to providing mentoring support for young people in targeted areas
- draw on financial and other support from government, business and community (2001 Plan-it Youth Mentor Guidelines, p3).

Plan-It Youth commenced as a pilot program initiated by the Dusseldorp Skills Forum in secondary high schools in the Central Coast in 1999. In 2002, the NSW Department of Education and Training (DET) assumed responsibility for funding of the program, which was then implemented in six school districts across the state. The program was further expanded in 2006 and now operates in schools in 8 of the 10 DET regions.

In 2006 a total of 77 schools participated in the program across NSW. A total of 796 trained mentors were actively involved with 1087 students. Program data suggests that since the inception of the program, around 3,700 students in total have participated in the program.

Annual expenditure on the Plan-It Youth program in 2007 is in the vicinity of $1 million per annum, including amounts contributed by the Department of Education and Training, TAFE NSW, and sponsorship by external organisations. This figure does not include the substantial contributions of Regions made in terms of supervision, travel and other on-cost expenses, or the contributions made by schools from their own budgets for the time commitment of the in-school coordinators and associated management costs.

Evaluation Objectives

The evaluation required the collection, analysis and reporting of information about the effectiveness, efficiency and appropriateness of the Plan-It Youth. Specifically, the project required collection of data that:

1. evaluates the effectiveness and efficiency of Plan-It Youth in relation to:
• student engagement in learning, retention and attendance in education or training
• transition planning by students to continuing/further education, training and employment
• the profile of participating students including the nature of disadvantage
• community and school partnerships in support of retention in education and training
• the profile, training, support and retention of mentors
• involvement of sponsors and management and administrative arrangements

2. Evaluates the degree of strategic alignment between Plan-It Youth and other related initiatives and programs

3. Identifies the success and hindering factors and opportunities for greater effectiveness and efficiency in relation to 1 and 2 above.

Methodology for the evaluation

To address these Terms of Reference, a comprehensive data gathering process was undertaken that involved both qualitative and quantitative methodologies to provide representative data from all key stakeholder groups. The data gathering methodologies included:

• Review of current and previous program documentation, including official correspondence, papers related to the Plan-It Youth reference group, program guidelines and centralised data collections.
• Individual student interviews
• Individual student questionnaires completed by 367 students (see Appendix 2 for details)
• Mentor questionnaire, completed by 316 mentors (see Appendix 2 for details)
• Mentor focus groups with current and former mentors held in two locations
• School case studies in five locations were conducted, and involved discussions with the Plan-It Youth coordinator, Regional equity coordinators, school principal, in-school coordinator, mentors, and in some cases local management committees and students.
• Strategic interviews with key stakeholders. A list of stakeholders consulted is shown in Appendix 3.

Key Findings

The findings discussed below are organised according to the key themes identified in the project’s terms of reference.

Student engagement in learning, retention and attendance in education or training

Qualitative findings from this evaluation, in line with those from previous evaluations of Plan-It Youth program, generally indicate that there are many success stories that can be
cited by stakeholders that describe the experience of mentoring as being beneficial for both parties in the mentoring relationship.

Despite the limited quantitative information about the impact of Plan-It Youth on student retention, attrition, and behaviour at an aggregated level, evidence provided by Plan-It Youth coordinators and many teachers and mentors strongly suggest that the program can be a most effective way of re-engaging students, providing direction through enhanced careers information and vocational awareness.

Data on the post-program destinations of students appears to be mostly positive, although this data cannot be used to infer that Plan-It Youth alone was the cause of this outcome. There are many other influences on student choices in relation to education, training and employment, some of which are school-related and some which are not. Taken together with the anecdotal evidence from participants, there are, however, reasonable grounds for concluding that mentoring can be a useful strategy for supporting some students at risk of leaving school early to consider their options for the future in a more informed way.

The success of the mentoring relationship appears to be the result of the relatively structured experience which creates a sense of purpose about schooling and its relevance that may have been absent in the students prior to their engagement in the Plan-It Youth program. The ability of the mentors to make the students feel “special” and to provide students with the opportunity to engage in one-to-one conversations in a non-threatening environment also appears to have been critical in addressing the self-confidence and self-esteem issues which were often characteristic of the students targeted for participation in Plan-It Youth mentoring. The overwhelming majority of students who completed the evaluation survey said they would recommend Plan-It Youth to their friends, which can be taken as high praise from the cohort involved.

**Transition planning by students**

Participants clearly believe that the program assists the students in planning their future career options. Comments from in-school coordinators suggest that the mere fact that the majority of students had remained in the program indicates that students perceive that there are some benefits from their participation. Such students are said to have little tolerance for what they perceive as irrelevant. Further, it is believed by many school principals and other school key stakeholders that the majority of the targeted students would have left school without the intervention.

The evaluation survey data indicated that the most significant changes for students occurred in relation to understanding their options for the future and their plans for the future. Nearly 60 per cent of participating students said that these plans were a lot more clear following mentoring. Mentoring was also credited with helping students to better understand their strengths and to have better ways of dealing with problems. More than 80 per cent of students said these were a lot or a bit better following mentoring. Fewer students believed that the mentoring had a positive impact on their school work, their enjoyment of school, or relationships with teachers or other students. Only a very small number of students said that any of these things were worse as a consequence of mentoring. The majority of students also said that mentoring had positively influenced their views about their future.
This data provides a strong indication that the mentoring program was largely successful in its primary goal of helping students to better understand their options for the future and make decisions about their future education or work pathway. However, when asked what they intended to do in the next few years, nearly 25 per cent of all students surveyed said they did not know what they intended to do. The majority of students say that mentoring is never or not often, discussed with teachers in the school.

From the mentors’ perspective, a key outcome of the program has been to facilitate participants’ engagement towards the identification of a goal relating to their future career or transition into education and/or work. Unfortunately because the program is not sufficiently located within the strategic priorities of many schools, the opportunity for school follow-up is most commonly ad hoc. The importance of follow-up by key staff within the school cannot be overstated, because it is essential for these young people to have the opportunity to access the pathways that will assist them to achieve their identified career goals. Without this opportunity, the students may possibly become disillusioned and further disengaged.

The profile of participating students including the nature of disadvantage

The evaluation found that there was considerable diversity in the group of students who were targeted for participation in Plan-It Youth. While the majority of students were in Years 9 or 10, students from Years 6-12 were sometimes involved. The length of time students stay in the program also varies considerably, with the majority completing the program in one school term, but others are still receiving mentoring more than four years after commencement.

There is no standard way in which students are directed into the program: some are carefully selected after consideration by a school welfare committee, others are selected after screening with a diagnostic tool that considers a range of school and behavioural indicators, while other students may join the program through self-referral.

There appears to be confusion as to the most relevant definition of what it means to be “at risk of leaving school”. In some cases this has been interpreted as students simply expressing the view that they might be considering leaving school. In other cases, it is interpreted as meaning students whose general behaviour, attendance record and demeanour suggests that they have in effect already disengaged from schooling and are likely to drop out. Overlaying this appears to be the strong perception that students are considered to be at risk because of their personal or family circumstances, level of maturity (or lack thereof).

It was clear also that students who are most at risk are seldom selected for Plan-It Youth. Students who present with significant behaviour management issues are not referred to mentoring as a preventative or interventionist strategy. Likewise, students with very poor attendance records are generally not referred to the program, although some individual cases are cited where the students would turn up for mentoring but little else. It is also noted that while Indigenous students are over-represented in the group of students who leave school before Year 12, they are under-represented in the Plan-It Youth cohort. This may in part, be due to the fact that very few Indigenous mentors have been able to be recruited or retained in the program.

The fact that the Plan-It Youth program appears to target students who are most likely to gain from such an intervention may also explain why the program is viewed so favourably by
participants. It would appear to be a sensible strategy to match “horses for courses”, and not risk failure by presenting mentors with challenges which they are not equipped to deal with.

Mentoring of the type provided by Plan-It Youth should not be confused with psychological counselling. Few of the Plan-It Youth mentors are qualified or suited for the task of working with extremely troubled adolescents. It is important also that the limitations of mentoring should be recognised, and unrealistic expectations for Plan-It Youth not developed. Schools exhibiting better practice in this area explicitly used Plan-It Youth (consistency) mentoring as one among a number of strategies for addressing the needs of their students, especially those at risk.

While the targeting of Plan-It Youth towards “easy” students may make operational sense, particularly in the pilot phase of the program, from an equity perspective it leaves several questions unanswered. Because of the historical development of the program and the way that schools have been recruited into the program on a voluntary basis, the majority of schools participating at present are not those with the highest proportion of students at risk (defined either as those with the lowest Year 12 retention rates or with the highest proportion of students from low socio-economic backgrounds). Further, the program does not operate at all in Western Sydney – a region which has a very high proportion of schools classified as disadvantaged. It is acknowledged that not all disadvantaged students are in designated schools facing challenging circumstances. However, there has been a general principle applied in the DET planning that equity funding should target those most in need. How Plan-It Youth mentoring might best be implemented in future in light of this principle is a matter that needs further consideration.

Community and school partnerships in support of retention in education and training

Plan-It Youth provides an opportunity for schools to engage in meaningful and productive ways with the local community. The greater knowledge of public schools and young people developed by mentors allows positive messages to be communicated throughout the community. It is noted that a considerable effort has been made by Plan-It Youth coordinators to promote the program and its successes in local communities, taking advantage of local radio, newspapers, service club meetings, and so on to build a strong support base for the program. As a consequence, the program is often highly regarded by community members. The end-of-program “celebrations” also create a strong feeling of goodwill towards the program, and the testimony of the students about their experience and the value and esteem to which they hold their mentors is often very moving.

In a similar way, the involvement of local business organisations and enterprises are also fundamental to the success of the program. In many cases mentors accompany students on specific work experiences related to their identified goals. If such organisations were unavailable for visits by participating students, the outcomes of the program would certainly be inhibited. Mentoring through Plan-It Youth is not the only way school students can find out about the realities of the world of work. There are, in fact a wide range of career development programs already in place in government schools (whether these are effective or not is another matter). However, the personal connections between Plan-It Youth mentors and business organisations cited to the evaluation often provided a more specific, targeted experience, which appeared to be particularly powerful and was much appreciated by the students concerned. Not all mentors had the demonstrated capacity to
deliver these experiences, and the extent to which the business community is engaged in the program varies considerably from location to location.

The effectiveness and efficiency of Plan-It Youth training, support and retention of mentors

Plan-It Youth mentors are drawn from across the spectrum of young and old, employed and unemployed, professional and non-professional people, but the majority are active retirees. Their stated motivations for becoming a mentor most frequently arose from a desire to “give something back to the community”, or to help young people avoid the mistakes they had made. Some, however, saw the mentor training as an opportunity to enhance their own career prospects — which appears to have been one of the goals of the pilot program. Indeed, one of the major reasons why mentors discontinue from the program is that they take up full-time employment. In most Regions, male representation of mentors is slightly less than 50 per cent.

A number of characteristics have been identified as key qualities of a successful mentor. These include:

- having a positive attitude towards the program,
- the ability to listen, the ability to be non-judgemental
- a valuing of education
- being able to act in a facilitation role
- having good communication skills
- the ability to set goals
- positive motivation.

The roles and responsibilities of mentors are concerned with, first, understanding the boundaries that exist for mentors within the program. These boundaries include not acting as a parent, counsellor, therapist, or authority figure. Having established the boundaries, the role involves, specifically, working hand in hand on a tour of discovery with students, acting as facilitators to empower students through the acquisition of information which enables them to make decisions about their futures.

Clearly, mentors are the life blood of the Plan-It Youth program, and without them there would be no program. The data available suggests that as at the beginning of 2007, around 1800 mentors have been trained since the inception of the program. Determining precise numbers of active and trained mentors is difficult because new mentors start and some drop out or temporarily discontinue each month. According to information provided to the TAFE Board meeting in 2006 there were 796 active mentors, that is, those mentoring at least one student). The overall rate of attrition appears to be relatively high, although most mentors complete their obligations within a particular cycle of the program. The majority of mentors have less than two years of experience in the program. The need to continually recruit new mentors poses an ongoing challenge and cost for the program.

Training of mentors is acknowledged as being crucial for the delivery of a quality program. However, the length of training and the content of the training varied considerably from region to region. The majority of mentors are satisfied overall with the training they receive, but a significant proportion of those surveyed were not fully satisfied, and many of the mentors interviewed commented negatively on aspects of their training.
Recruiting and training mentors occupies a significant proportion of the Plan-It Youth Coordinators’ time. Many use the training as an opportunity to screen potential mentors. The general practice appears to involve training mentors first, and selection following completion of training. This allows the Coordinators to “get to know” the mentors more fully than a simple interview process might allow, however, it is not an efficient use of the program funds to train people who then are unable to make a commitment to the program. This is the case also with the involvement and training of university and TAFE students in some regions. These students participate in Plan-It Youth as part of their qualification. They generally do not continue as mentors once their course has been completed. The engagement of the university and TAFE Institutes in the program may have other benefits, but the value of their contribution to the ongoing program needs to be carefully assessed.

**Strategic alignment between Plan-It Youth and other related initiatives and programs**

Since the initiation of the Plan-It Youth program, the DET has developed a range of initiatives aimed at addressing the needs of secondary aged students. The current implementation of Plan-It Youth does not appear to be strongly aligned at either a strategic or operational level with these related activities at state, Regional or school level in most instances. This is partly a consequence of the diversity of views held by stakeholders as to the purpose of the program — that is, whether its focus should be on student welfare or school to work transition (recognising that the line between the two can sometimes be blurry).

It is noted that there are several other mentoring programs operating within government schools, and several other Australian Government and state government-funded programs that seek to achieve similar outcomes as Plan-It Youth, including the LEAPS program, Youth Pathways, the School to Work program and Transition Pathways programs, as well as mainstream Work Experience and Vocational Education and Training in Schools initiatives.

There is a need for Plan-It Youth to be more strongly aligned with existing initiatives including the broader DET 15 to 19-year-old Strategy and School to Work program. This will involve careful planning within each region to ensure that resources dedicated to Plan-It Youth mentoring, along with those provided from other programs, are utilised most effectively to support students at risk. Such an approach would ensure that the valuable mentoring component of the program continues to be sustained, where appropriate, as one of the available strategies for working with young people at risk of leaving school.

**Facilitating and hindering factors**

The following factors were seen to considerably facilitate the implementation of the program:

- generous funding of the program consistency of spelling on a per capita basis
- strong Regional and school-based support for the program
- strong and active endorsement of the program by the State Reference Group
- sound relationships established between the mentors and the young people participating in the program
- ongoing promotion of the program by all key stakeholders


- the use of mentoring as a very effective strategy for assisting young people to make informed decisions about their future

The following factors were seen to possibly inhibit the implementation of the program:

- the weekly absence of participating students from the same period in a particular key learning area throughout the duration of the program
- the poor alignment of the program with existing Regional and State wide imperatives in its current form of implementation
- the absence of a set of measures to objectively measure the effectiveness and efficiency of the program at school, Regional and State wide levels
- the lack of coordination at the school level between the program and related initiatives to ensure that value is added for students participating in the program
- the lack of systems and structures in some schools to ensure that students are assisted to map the strategies that are needed to achieve their goals in relation to future career options
- the variability in the training of mentors for participation in the program throughout the state.

The evidence available to this evaluation suggests that the mentoring approach provided through Plan-It Youth can be a valuable and effective means of helping some young people at risk to make more informed decisions about their education/work pathways. Many examples can be cited where mentoring has made an appreciable difference to individual student’s confidence, communication skills, understanding of their own strengths and weaknesses, goals for the future and options available to them. For other students, it has helped to give them a sense of direction and feeling of connectedness that they may not otherwise have experienced. In yet other cases, mentors have gone well what might ordinarily be expected from a program of this kind to support students through extremely difficult personal circumstances. The value of such experiences cannot be underestimated.

At the same time, the program has allowed some members of the community who have participated as mentors to have a better understanding of contemporary schooling and young people, and to feel that they are making a worthwhile contribution to the lives of others. Many mentors describe the experience as refreshing and invigorating. Mentoring provides the schools involved with a resource for addressing the needs of some students, and an alternative strategy, that that they may not have been able to provide through their own resources.

The literature review highlights the fact that the way that mentoring programs are structured and conducted makes a significant difference on their impact. Studies such as those by Herera (2004), Grossman and Rhodes (2002), Rhodes and Dubois (2006) and others point to the fact that in the translation of the concept (i.e., adults providing guidance and support to young people) to a program that delivers the concept on a large scale, there are many things that can and do go wrong. Large scale meta-evaluations of the mentoring research suggest that programs are more effective if they:

1. select mentors who have previous relevant experience in helping. Not everyone is a good mentor
2. require a long (at least 12 months) commitment from mentors
3. carefully train and support mentors, and help structure their activities with their mentees

4. monitor program implementation

5. involve parents as much as possible

6. remember that if not done carefully, mentoring can harm participating youth (Durlack, 2006).

However, despite the positive conclusions about the benefits that mentoring provides, it is impossible to avoid noting several significant shortcomings of Plan-It Youth as a systemic program. First, the wide variability in how the program is delivered in different regions is a strong indicator of the fact that the program has little coherence — to the point that it is hard to describe it as a single program. The lack of shared understanding by all involved of the primary goal of the program is symptomatic of this. The program appears to work best when it is explicitly focused on helping young people identify their goals for the future, and identifying pathways by which they might reach these goals. It is less effective in its present form at changing young people’s attitudes towards school, relationships with teachers, or educational outcomes. However, unless the program can impact on these things, the capacity of the young person to meaningfully engage in senior schooling must be questioned.

Secondly, the present implementation of the program is unsustainable, without continued funding. The program relies heavily on the continued input of the Coordinators to recruit, train, and support mentors, as well as recruit schools to the program. In contrast, the role of the in-school coordinator and the professional expertise of staff in many instances have not been optimally engaged. More particularly, it is difficult to conclude that mentoring has been deeply embedded into the cultural practices or organisational structures of many of the schools currently participating in the program. It is viewed as something “nice to have” but not critical in most schools’ student support strategy. At the present stage of development, it is likely that the program would not continue far into the future without the continued efforts of the Plan-It Youth Coordinators. At the same time, within the current operational paradigm, the capacity of the program to cater for more schools or to provide mentoring to a greater number of students is significantly constrained. The working day of all Plan-It Youth Coordinators is at present, quite full, but much of this time is spent in unproductive driving from place to place, and in performance of low level tasks, that while appreciated by mentors, are not consistent with the level of strategic direction expected from other consultants at a similar level of seniority. As a consequence of the relatively small number of students engaged in the program and the cost of maintaining the Regional infrastructure required, the program is not efficient in terms of the cost per student compared to other initiatives with similar goals.

Third, as noted above, the program is not well aligned with other programs either at school or Regional level. Survey results suggest that students rarely discuss mentoring with teachers of their school, or their parents. In only a small number of regions was the program observed to be closely aligned with broader regional planning processes. More often, it is seen in practice to stand alone and sit outside Regional supervision structures. In regions demonstrating best practice, there was a strong Regional committee comprising school principals, community members, and senior Regional staff who provided strategic direction for the Plan-It Youth coordinator. However, in general there was little evidence at present of strong alignment of the program with other department-wide strategies and initiatives aimed at supporting students at risk. At the same time, the coordination and
management of the program at a central level has not been as strong as would be expected given its cost. It is noted, for example, that the program does not have an effective accountability framework, and that the data collected as evidence of program effectiveness is not adequate for the purpose.

The state-wide data is effectively reporting on the aggregation of outcomes that derive from very different delivery models, rather than from a single, coherent program. There were many comments expressed also about the adequacy of the current program guidelines written in 2005. Likewise, although an attempt was made in 2006 to develop a “best practice” document as a resource for Plan-It Youth Coordinators, this was not universally well-regarded. The examples of best practice identified were criticised as being unvalidated against the impact on outcomes for students.

Finally, there remain tensions regarding the status of the Plan-It Youth brand name. While there appears to be an agreement between the Dusseldorp Skills Forum, which originated the name and concept, and the NSW Department of Education and Training about exclusive use of the brand, this does not appear to be the case nationally. Even within NSW, it would appear that initiatives are undertaken under the banner of Plan-It Youth without Departmental approval or endorsement. This contributes to the perception of Plan-It Youth being independent from other departmental initiatives, which in turn sets it outside mainstream student support strategies. This situation would need to be unambiguously resolved in any future implementation of the program within the auspices of the DET.

Recommendations

In light of the findings of the evaluation discussed above, it is recommended that the following actions be undertaken to capitalise on the investment made thus far in the Plan-It Youth program:

1. That consideration of the future of Plan-It Youth is undertaken within the broader policy framework of the Department of Education and Training's 15-19 Year Old Strategy.

2. That overall responsibility and authority for the operation of Plan-It Youth in schools be devolved to the Regional level, in line with Department of Education and Training's current tri-level structure.

3. That the current total budget for the implementation of the Plan-It Youth initiative, including the notional current allocation for TAFE training for mentors and funding for current coordinator positions, be equitably distributed to each region to address the needs of students who are most at risk of leaving school early, as part of the 15-19 Years Strategy.

4. That each Region undertake a review of current and projected provision for 15 to 19 year old students. As a result of this review, Regions will determine what strategies and personnel are required to address the identified needs of 15-19 year olds most at risk of leaving school early, in the region.

5. That each Region utilise the information from the review to develop a Regional Action Plan, highlighting key initiatives to be undertaken, appropriate indicators to measure success and projected expenditure of Regional allocation. It is intended that this Action Plan will detail the key strategies and initiatives, including
professional learning and training where applicable, to be undertaken by the Region in addressing the needs of 15 to 19 Year olds most at risk of leaving school early.

6. That in place of the existing State Reference Group for Plan-It Youth, regions utilise existing committees or establish local management committees chaired by a senior Regional officer, to oversee the implementation of the Regional Action Plan for 15-19 yr olds who are most at risk of leaving school early.

7. That the Department consider the development of a mentor framework to provide further guidance and support to schools in the engagement and use of mentors, in conjunction with other support programs.
Chapter 1: Background to the Evaluation

1.1 Introduction

This report presents the findings and conclusions of an evaluation of the Plan-It Youth Community Mentoring Program in NSW, commissioned by the NSW Department of Education and Training (DET). This evaluation was conducted between June and September, 2007.

The Plan-it Youth Community Mentoring Program is a school-based mentoring program for students who are potential early school leavers. It is a program linking community members with young people who may need extra support to continue at school or to prepare for the transition from school to work or further education and training.

The students and mentors in the Plan-it Youth program work together to deal with the challenges of school, relationships with peers and teachers, family life, work and training issues. The Plan-it Youth program provides a structure for a one-to-one mentoring relationship between students and mentors.

The Plan-it Youth program was intended to:

- target young people in Years 9 and 10 who are potential early school leavers
- enhance the strengths, skills, abilities and interests of young people
- involve volunteer community members trained in mentoring through TAFE NSW
- use a co-ordinated approach to providing mentoring support for young people in targeted areas
- draw on financial and other support from government, business and community (2001 Plan-it Youth Mentor Guidelines, p3).

Plan-It Youth commenced as a pilot program initiated by the Dusseldorp Skills Forum in secondary high schools in the Central Coast in 1999. In 2002, the NSW Department of Education and Training (DET) assumed responsibility for funding of the program, which was then implemented in six school districts across the state. The program was further expanded in 2006 and now operates in schools in 8 of the 10 DET regions.

In 2006 a total of 77 schools participated in the program across NSW. A total of 796 trained mentors were actively involved with 1087 students. Program data suggests that since the inception of the program, around 3,700 students in total have participated in the program.

Annual expenditure on the Plan-It Youth program in 2007 is in the vicinity of $1 million per annum, including amounts contributed by the Department of Education and Training, TAFE NSW, and sponsorship by external organisations. This figure does not include the substantial contributions of Regions made in terms of supervision, travel and other on-costs expenses, or the contributions made by schools from their own budgets for the time commitment of the in-school coordinators and associated management costs.
1.1.2 A brief history of Plan-It Youth

The Plan-It Youth program began as an initiative of the Dusseldorp Skills Forum (DSF) in 1998. The DSF’s charter is to stimulate innovative practice in the education and employment sectors. For more than a decade the DSF’s research has focussed on the education, training and employment circumstances of 15 to 19 year olds, with a particular emphasis on those young people who are most at risk of leading marginalised lives. Research conducted by the DSF (Australia’s Youth: Reality and Risk, 1988; How Young People are Faring 2007) has consistently demonstrated that those who leave school early (ie before Year 12) are twice as likely to be unemployed at age 24 as those who have a Year 12 qualification (Sweet, 2006). The research also suggests that the decision to leave school early is made with little or no planning or any real idea of the future.

The pilot Plan-It Youth program, commenced in 1997, responded to this research by providing a strategy by which students could develop a more realistic picture of the options that are available on leaving school at the end of Year 10 and to plan their exit from school with a positive destination in mind, with a better understanding of how they can reach their goals. The program thus offered some students who said they were considering leaving school an opportunity to participate in a program where community based mentors helped them to investigate their post-school options. The aim of the pilot program was not so much to retain these students at school but to ensure they move into a positive destination, that is, further training, apprenticeship, traineeship or TAFE (Bean, 2002).

The early history of the Plan-It Youth program is documented in the 2001 Mentor Guidelines, including the involvement of the Active Retirees Movement (ARM) and the use of TAFE outreach mature age students as mentors. It is not necessary here to repeat this story, except to note that the program was felt to meet the needs of several groups in the community.

The evaluation of the pilot program concluded that “the results have been remarkable” (Bean, p.4) — a statement that has been often repeated. This conclusion was reached on the basis that “in the first two years the results are showing more than 80 per cent of these young people choosing to continue their education, or move into structured training or employment options (such as TAFE, traineeships or apprenticeships)”. The evaluation also included a number of case studies and testimonials from principals of schools involved in the pilot program.

In 2002, the then Director-General agreed that the Department of Education and Training would assume funding for the program. The program was subsequently expanded, and by 2004 the program in schools in Central Coast, Campbelltown, Lake Macquarie, Shellharbour, Taree, Wagga Wagga and Maitland locations. In 2006 and 2007, the New England, Sydney and Western NSW regions joined the program.

The growth in the program is reflected in the number of schools participating in the program, as shown in Table 1 below.


### Table 1: Number of schools participating in Plan-It Youth

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>2002</th>
<th>2003</th>
<th>2004</th>
<th>2005</th>
<th>2006</th>
<th>2007</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hunter/Central Coast</td>
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<td>22</td>
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<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Riverina</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>11</td>
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<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South West Sydney</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sydney</td>
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<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
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<td><strong>39</strong></td>
<td><strong>49</strong></td>
<td><strong>65</strong></td>
<td><strong>77</strong></td>
<td><strong>70</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Data obtained from Coordinator’s Annual Reports. Schools have been allocated to regions as defined in 2007. Each site within multi-campus schools has been counted separately.

#### 1.1.3 Mentoring as a strategy for supporting at-risk youth

The academic literature on mentoring is now substantial and an exhaustive review is beyond the scope of this evaluation. However, it is necessary to briefly identify from this literature why it is believed that mentoring might be beneficial to assist young people to make better decisions about their education/career pathway planning, as this provides the conceptual basis for the Plan-It Youth program.

Mentoring of young people has a long and esteemed history, most frequently in informal relationships, but more recently in formally structured programs, both in and out of school settings (Dennis, 1993). The popularity of mentoring has increased greatly over the past decade in many countries. Three million young people are in formal one-to-one mentoring relationships in the US, a sixfold increase from just a decade ago, and funding and growth imperatives continue to fuel program expansion (Mentor, 2006). Anecdotal reports of mentors’ protective qualities are corroborated by a growing body of research, which has underscored the positive influence of mentors in the lives of youth (Rhodes and Dubois, 2006).

Mentoring has a strong presence in the corporate sector and there is a strong body of research relating to this context. Mentoring has been and is being used successfully in the corporate sector to encourage inclusive and autonomous workforce culture, assisting in raising individual performance improving the performance profiles of under-represented societal groups. Bond (1999) noted that a successful mentoring arrangement has the opportunity to encourage creativity, risk taking and teambuilding to unleash each individual’s, as well as the group’s potential. Bond found that successful mentors display a number of positive characteristics including trust, rapport, time, good listening and good questioning skills and a person goodwill towards youth at risk.

Rafferty (1997) argues that mentoring has the ability to be adapted to the varied circumstances could arise between young person, the mentor, the school and the local community. Lacey (1999) suggests the current interest in mentoring in both education and work-based training programs almost certainly stems from belief that participants, learn best through observing, doing, commenting and questioning, rather than simply by
listening. Rolf-Flett (2002) outlines the positive features of a well presented and structured mentoring program in the workplace. Her findings regarding strategies, barriers, planning and pitfalls nonetheless have relevance to school based programs.

The benefits of mentoring appear at first glance to be obvious, not only for young people, but for the schools they attend, the mentors involved, and in the longer term, for society as a whole. Mentoring has benefits for both mentors and participants. Rajkumar (2006) discusses a project that focused on positive outcomes mentoring can have on mentors themselves. This research extends that in other studies, such as the International Year of Older Persons Mentoring Research Project, which confirmed the personal satisfaction and feeling of accomplishment gained by mentors during the mentoring process, which provides a sense of usefulness to the mentors and in turn boosts their self-esteem.

Proponents of mentoring claim it is highly successful in helping young people at risk to achieve a wide range of personal, social and academic outcomes. At an individual level, there are undoubtedly many success stories, which are often widely cited in the form of anecdotes and case studies used to justify funding for mentoring programs. However, the research literature paints an entirely different picture, one in which the level of success from mentoring programs is far more mixed, and which points to some significant limitations of mentoring, even in well-established programs.

This literature is reviewed briefly below. It must be stressed that the majority of this literature is drawn from the United States, and the difference between the educational and social context there and in Australia are such that any attempt to translate these findings into the Australian context must be done with caution. However, there are now several meta-evaluations synthesising the findings of many different mentoring programs in the literature that provide a reliable evidence base from which good practices can be identified. The breadth of these meta-evaluations provides confidence that the results have wider applicability. These findings also serve as a valid point of comparison for reflecting on both the structure of Plan-It Youth as a program and the way that it has been implemented in individual locations.

Perhaps the most important finding from the research literature is that while it might appear obvious, all mentoring programs are not the same. They vary considerably in who they target, who serves as mentors, what the program aims to achieve, how long relationships are maintained, the circumstances in which mentoring is delivered, among other things. Not all mentoring programs are as successful as others. Far from validating the claim that “mentoring works”, methodologically appropriate studies suggest that mentoring leads to successful outcomes only when certain conditions are met. A second significant finding from the international literature is that to date, programs have achieved only limited success in their efforts to establish and sustain such relationships. This is evident in a modest and inconsistent pattern of effects on youth outcomes, well-documented implementation problems, and a lack of compelling evidence of cost-effectiveness.

Given this diversity, it is perhaps not surprising that mentoring can be conceived in a variety of different ways. Dennis (1993) differentiates between three different types of mentoring:

- **educational or academic mentoring** helps mentored youth improve their overall academic achievement

- **career mentoring** helps mentored youth develop the necessary skills to enter or continue on a career path
personal development mentoring supports mentored youth during times of personal or social stress and provides guidance for decision making.

Mentoring can be defined as a developmental, caring, sharing and helping relationship with one person and invests time, know-how and effort into enhancing another person’s growth, knowledge, and skills in response to critical needs in the life of that person in ways that prepare the individual for greater achievement in the future (QUT Career Mentoring Scheme, 2005).

Through continued involvement, the adult offers support, guidance and assistance as the younger person goes through a difficult period, faces new challenges works to correct earlier problems. In particular, where parents are either unavailable or unable to provide responsible guidance for their children, mentors can play a critical role in supporting the young person (QUT Career Mentoring Scheme, 2005).

Two types of mentoring are natural mentoring and planned mentoring. Natural mentoring occurs spontaneously through friendship, collegiality, teaching, coaching, and counselling. In contrast, planned mentoring occurs through structured programs in which mentors and participants are selected and matched through informal processes (Riley, Robinson and Conaty, 1993). Plan-It Youth is an example of planned mentoring.

The rationale for mentoring of school students at risk derives from the research on the importance of the development of a sense of connectedness and resilience in maintaining adolescent well-being, which in turn appears to be a strong indicator of personal and academic success. There is a significant body of research that demonstrates the importance of connectedness between young people and at least one at person. Hamilton and Darling (1989) found that 82 per cent of the adolescence in their study identified at least one unrelated adult as an important person in their lives. This attachment is important because adolescence is a time when young people begin to differentiate themselves from their parents, and so are more open to the influence of others. Mentors ideally bring their experience and insights of the wider world into the relationship which allows the adolescent the opportunity to observe and practise other ways of relating to adults than their family or school has previously provided. Positive relationships are powerful in assisting potentially disadvantaged situations in the development of strong qualities such as having healthy, non-violent relationships, a positive outlook, high self-esteem, strong problem-solving skills and a sense of humour (Bein, 1999).

Werner and Smith (1982) in one of the seminal longitudinal studies into youth resilience found that youth who showed an ability to locate an adult, in addition to their parents, who could help them cope with the world, were much better equipped to successfully overcome adversity. Without exception, all the children who thrived had at least one person that provided them with consistent emotional support — a grandmother, an older sister, a teacher or neighbour. Mentoring programs often attempt to establish such a connection with a trusted older person, providing the kinds of relationships that successful students seem to have an innate ability to develop.

Without this sense of connectedness, the likelihood of dropping out of school, involvement in drug and alcohol abuse, and other dysfunctional behaviour is significantly increased (Haggerty et al, 1994). Smink (1990) reported that dropouts often cited the absence of anyone who cares about them is one of the primary reasons for leaving school. Many mentoring programs internationally have attempted to address this perception that “no-one cares” by connecting youth at risk with an older person.
One of the largest and longest standing mentoring initiatives in the United States is the Big Brother/Big Sisters (BBBS) program, which now operates in several other countries including Australia. A significant amount of research has been undertaken to identify the impact of this program, including a large scale evaluation by Tierney, Baldwin and Resch (1995; 2000). This research report remains one of the cornerstones of youth mentoring research. In fact, many of the “best practices” used in mentoring programs today are the result of the eight years Public/Private Ventures (P/PV) spent researching BBBS. For this study P/PV studied 959 youth, ages 10-16, who applied for a mentor at eight BBBS agencies around the country. Roughly half were matched with a volunteer, with the others forming a control group to compare results against. The researchers did a pre-post analysis consisting of interviews and other self-reported data examining the impact of the mentoring services in six areas:

- anti-social activities
- academic performance, attitudes and behaviours
- relationships with family
- relationships with friends
- self-concept
- social and cultural enrichment

The findings from this study are perhaps the most widely quoted in the field. The study found that participants:

- were 46 percent less likely to initiate drug use
- were 26 percent less likely to initiate alcohol use (that number reaches 50 percent for the girls in the programs)
- were 33 percent less likely to hit someone
- skipped half as many days of school
- showed modest gains in Grade Point Average (3 percent gain over control group)
- reported improved parent and peer relationships (this was especially true among boys).

However, participants showed no substantial changes in perceptions of self-worth and self-confidence, participation in social and cultural activities, or participation in other educational activities, such as homework completion and college planning. Since their original publication, these statistics have been used as some of the strongest evidence that mentoring is effective. But perhaps more important than these outcomes is the study’s investigation into the programmatic context that produced them. Specifically, the Impact Study recommends that programs implement a one-to-one model where matches are made in a structured way based on common interests and other factors. It also recommends that programs provide rigorous screening, training, and matching support for mentors and frequent contact with youth and parents as the match progresses.

Morrow and Styles, (1995), in another examination of Big Brothers/Big Sisters found that the approaches mentors took in working with their mentee could be easily divided into two categories: developmental (with the mentor providing broad emotional support and building the relationship around youth goals) and prescriptive (in which the mentor attempted to
address specific behaviours through targeted activities or even brought their own goals to the match). The results for these two groups were remarkably different.

The young people involved in this study reported being much more satisfied with the developmental relationships. They felt closer to their mentors and were more likely to seek out their support and advice. Since other research has demonstrated that mentoring outcomes are closely tied to relationship quality, this study provides valuable insight into the styles of mentoring that produce close, supportive relationships.

Developmental mentors spent more time building trust with the youth, gave the youth a prominent role in setting goals and deciding activities, regularly engaged in activities that were simply “fun,” and listened more while judging less. Prescriptive mentors were less likely to do these things and their youth reported far less match satisfaction. A surprising 22 of the 28 prescriptive matches had significant problems or closed outright over the course of the study, while 50 of the 54 developmental matches continued to develop.

These findings do not mean that mentoring relationships should not spend time addressing specific behaviours, nor does it mean that the young person should direct the activities undertaken or other aspects of their participation in mentoring. However, it suggests that mentoring programs must create matches that put the relationship between adult mentor and the young person first and purposeful activities second.

More recent studies have confirmed the importance of the relationship established between mentor and mentee as critical to successful outcomes. Herera, (2004) examined the correlation between program structure, relationships and youth outcomes. She found that several positive impacts, especially for matches that had lasted nine months or longer: improvements in peer relations, social skills, classroom behaviour, and school attitude, combined with a reduction in fighting and other disciplinary incidents. Youth in mentoring partnerships that met for six months or less typically had worse outcomes in all these areas.

The study did not show any improvement in attendance, grades, parent-youth relationships, or relationships with other adults. Youth who felt their mentors took their preferences into account (in other words, a developmental approach) were more likely to show improvement in their behaviours and attitudes. These findings show that school-based mentoring has the potential to impact many areas of school connectedness and relationship development. They also illustrate the importance of a developmental framework that can lead to match closeness, as well as the need for schools to better define how services are delivered on site and how the volunteer will interact with teachers, case managers, parents, and other adults in the students’ lives.

Grossman and Rhodes (2002) studied 1,138 youth in eight BBBS agencies. The study, which also featured a control group of youth, focused on the youth’s parent relations, school attitudes and feelings of scholastic competence, grades and attendance, and feelings of self-worth. The researchers also examined the relationship between the quality and duration of the mentoring matches. The study showed a strong relationship between relationship length and quality of outcomes. Youth who had been matched for 12 months or longer showed significant improvements in self-worth, feelings of social acceptance, feelings of scholastic competence, improved parent relations, with decreases in drug and alcohol use. Conversely, youth whose matches had terminated before three months (for a wide variety of reasons) showed significant regressions in self-worth and feelings of scholastic competence. They actually wound up worse in these areas than youth in the control group. This finding highlights the critical nature of the early months in mentoring
relationships and places heightened importance on the match support services programs provide.

Overall, youth whose matches did not last six months showed no positive impacts. In fact, failed matches had negative results in some areas. When looking at the factors that predicted match duration, relationship quality was by far the biggest influence.

Studies such as those by Herrera, Grossman and Rhodes and others are important in highlighting the fact that in the translation of the concept (ie, adults providing guidance and support to young people) to a program to deliver the concept on a large scale, there are many things than can and do go wrong, and indeed can be counterproductive.

Recent meta-analyses explore these mixed results from mentoring further. DuBois et al's (2002) synthesis of 55 previous research studies concluded that formal mentoring programs could reproduce the positive benefits that natural mentoring relationships had been known to provide. However, the meta-analysis also showed that while these programs were, overall, having a positive impact, the impact itself was rather small. The effect size for mentoring was far short of the effect sizes reported or other psychological, educational, behavioural, and mental health treatments for youth. In fact, the authors indicated that it may be exceedingly difficult to say that mentoring “works” across the board because of the many specific program and participant factors that moderate impact and outcomes. The broad conclusion that mentoring, as currently provided, was not fostering huge changes for the nation’s youth compared to other interventions.

Closer examination of the DuBois et al data indicates that it is the factors that moderate impact—the personal traits, program structures, and relationship characteristics that improved outcomes. The programs in the study that provided ongoing training for mentors, offered matches structured activities, set firm requirements around frequency of mentor-mentee contact, offered mentor support services, or found ways to increase parent involvement showed a greater impact. All these factors were strong predictors of higher outcomes for youth. The programs where youth felt most positive about their relationships also had higher effect sizes. Also, the impact of mentoring seemed to be greatest for youth who were most at risk.

What the Dubois et al study clearly demonstrates is that the below-average impact was produced not by inherent problems with mentoring as a strategy, but by the number of programs not following what are now considered “best practices” for delivering services. The analysis offers a realistic portrait of how mentoring was being delivered, while also illuminating a set of program features that could lead to improved outcomes.

Durlack (2006) concludes that mentoring programs are more likely to be effective if they:

1. select mentors who have previous relevant experience in helping. Not everyone is a good mentor
2. require a long (at least 12 months) commitment from mentors
3. carefully train and support mentors, and help structure their activities with their mentees
4. monitor program implementation
5. involve parents as much as possible
6. remember that if not done carefully, mentoring can harm participating youth!
Another important meta-analytic study by Moore, Jekielek and Hair (2002), examined youth outcomes related to educational achievement, health and safety, social-emotional development and feelings of self-sufficiency. It also examined the program practices associated with these outcomes, as well as the characteristics that shaped long-lasting and high-quality mentoring relationships. They found that there is evidence that improved interaction and coordination of mentoring activities with parents, teachers, counsellors, case workers, and other adults in the mentee’s life can enhance mentoring outcomes.

One of the most recent and comprehensive reviews of youth mentoring is reported by Rhodes and Dubois (2006). This review builds on and confirms much of the research cited above. This review confirms that the impact of mentoring hinges on the quality of relationships developed between all of those involved in the mentoring partnership (not only the mentor and young person but parents, teachers and other support workers). They also found that mentors must provide a role model of relevant skills and not negative ones. There is strong evidence that a youth-centred, developmental approach seems to work best. However, matches do need structured activities and meaningful goals. Successful mentoring relationships cannot be entirely unstructured and friendship-based. Regular, stable meetings for one year are most likely to produce results. There is also strong evidence that programs should do everything they can to keep matches from terminating prior to six months.

The interplay between the various factors affecting the outcome of mentoring are described in the model below.

Rhodes argues that the entire model hinges on the development of mutuality, trust, and empathy that the mentoring relationship creates. That development is moderated by a whole host of other factors, such as personal history, length of the match, and the youth’s family and community environment. But the reality is that programs need to develop close,
EVALUATION OF THE PLAN-IT YOUTH PROGRAM

Rhodes and DuBois (2006) further point out that when youth mentoring relationships reflect the best practice characteristics identified above, the relationships have the potential to realize the type of transformative influence on long-term health and adjustment that have been central to arguments for expanding mentoring initiatives. Yet, when these features are lacking, it is equally apparent that mentoring relationships may fall well short of their potential benefits, and even do harm. These circumstances may include, for example:

1. a lack of compatibility in the personality or interests of the youth and mentor
2. insufficient skills or abilities on the part of the mentor; an irregular or infrequent pattern of contact
3. brief or less than expected duration
4. the absence of a close, emotional bond
5. mentor behaviours that do not reflect sensitivity to the full range of the youth’s developmental needs and
6. weak or missing linkages to the youth’s social network.

These possibilities may help to account for the generally modest magnitude of the associations found between mentoring relationships and youth outcomes and a lack of consistency in findings across all areas of functioning.

Durlack (2006), in a critique of Rhodes and DuBois’ analysis of research and practice, identifies the importance of raising cautionary flags about how political and financial pressures, coupled with strong personal advocacy can undermine the potential value of mentoring programs. In the rush to implement mentoring programs on a much wider scale, exactly the wrong decisions might be made about helping youth in need.

Rhodes and DuBois indicate the dilemma facing mentoring researchers. Current findings “are complex and replete with qualifications and nuances that do not lend themselves easily to political crusades.” Yet qualifications and nuances are the last thing that personal advocates of various strategies and those in the policy arena want to hear. Durlack concludes that we do not know precisely why mentoring works, or what circumstances lead to the best results for different participants and that careful evaluation should be fundamental requirements for all new mentoring programs.

This literature review identifies the positive outcomes that can be achieved from mentoring. However, it also points to the fact that the structures and processes implemented to deliver this mentoring have a significant impact on the quality of outcomes achieved. Irrespective, it provides a context for consideration of the structure and implementation of the Plan-It Youth program.
1.2 Methodology for the Evaluation

1.2.1 Evaluation Objectives

The Terms of Reference for the evaluation were as follows.

The evaluation requires the collection, analysis and reporting of information about the effectiveness, efficiency and appropriateness of the Plan-It Youth program. Specifically, the project requires collection of data that:

2. evaluates the effectiveness and efficiency of Plan-It Youth in relation to:
   - student engagement in learning, retention and attendance in education or training
   - transition planning by students to continuing/further education, training and employment
   - the profile of participating students including the nature of disadvantage
   - community and school partnerships in support of retention in education and training
   - the profile, training, support and retention of mentors
   - involvement of sponsors and management and administrative arrangements

2. Evaluates the degree of strategic alignment between Plan-It Youth and other related initiatives and programs

3. Identifies the success and hindering factors and opportunities for greater effectiveness and efficiency in relation to 1 and 2 above.

1.2.2 Data gathering methods

While the timeframe for the evaluation was short, a comprehensive data gathering process was undertaken that involved both qualitative and quantitative methodologies to provide representative data from all key stakeholder groups. The data gathering methodologies are described in more detail below.

1. Review of current and previous program documentation

The document analysis stage involved careful examination of official correspondence, papers related to the Plan-It Youth reference group, program guidelines and centralised data collections. Each of these collections provided important insights into the intention and reality of the project and were used in addition to the other data gathering strategies to draw key insights for the evaluation.

2. Individual Student interviews

In total, 15 individual student interviews were undertaken with former and current students who had participated in Plan-It Youth mentoring. Interviews generally lasted for approximately 30 minutes (in the presence of another adult) and sought student's views on the effectiveness and efficiency of the Plan-It Youth. More specifically the student interviews focused on such questions/themes as:
• what benefits have the students found from the Plan-It Youth initiative
• are there other related initiatives in which students have been involved and how do these work together to assist students
• how has the Plan-It Youth initiative helped students to make the transition from school
• are there other ways that this could have been done more efficiently
• what roles have mentors played and how have the mentors influenced the decisions made by students about their future
• what was the most positive feature of being involved in the Plan-It Youth program
• what is one thing that could make the experience even better?

3. Individual student questionnaires

The questions included in this questionnaire derived directly from the research questions developed for the project. While these related essentially to the effectiveness and efficiency of the Plan-It Youth, issues around the impact of the Plan-It Youth initiative and the factors influencing the impact were also explored within the questionnaire, a copy of which can be found in Appendix 3. The questionnaire included both open and closed questions.

Questionnaires were distributed via Plan-It Youth coordinators to in-school coordinators who were asked to provide the surveys to a random sample of about 5 current or former students within the school if possible. The school coordinators were asked to collect and return the surveys to the evaluators for analysis. Further information about the characteristics of those who responded to the questionnaire is provided below, however it should be noted that confidentiality was maintained at all times.

4. Mentor questionnaire

A similar approach to the individual student questionnaires was employed for mentors. The questionnaire for mentors, which is included in Appendix 3, explored themes including the following:
• the perceived roles and responsibilities held by mentors
• the mentors’ perception of the outcomes and benefits of the Plan-It Youth initiative
• the adequacy of training and support for mentors
• the perceived impact of the mentor
• suggestions for the future.

Further details of the characteristics of those who responded to the Mentor questionnaire are shown below.

5. Mentor focus groups

Two focus group sessions were undertaken of former and current mentors. The purpose of these sessions was to further explore issues identified in the mentor questionnaire and as a
result of data from students and the document analysis stage. The focus groups were designed to be approximately 30-45 minutes and the activities are planned to be engaging for participants yet productive for the evaluators. Questions used as discussion starters for the focus groups are shown in Appendix 3.

6. School case studies

The case studies undertaken for this evaluation were used as an important means of providing information about how the program operates at Regional and school levels. Five case studies were conducted in various locations throughout the State, and involved discussions with the Plan-It Youth coordinator, Regional Equity Coordinators, school principals, in-school coordinator, mentors, and in some cases local management committees and students. Each of these discussions was guided by semi-structured interview schedules, copies of which are shown in Appendix 3. Case studies were used not only to provide holistic overviews of the program operation in particular sites, but also to feed into an understanding of issues.

7. Strategic interviews with key stakeholders

As part of the overall plan for the project, interviews with key stakeholders were considered to be a critical phase of the data gathering process. The key stakeholders interviewed included representatives from:

- Regional offices
- Equity Programs and Distance Education Directorate
- Student Welfare Directorate
- Vocational Education in Schools Directorate
- Business Relations Unit in the Corporate Marketing Directorate
- ARM Incorporated
- TAFE Outreach
- Plan-It Youth Reference Group members

A list of stakeholders consulted is shown in Appendix 2.

Characteristics of students responding to the survey

Table 2 below shows that some 367 usable survey responses from students were analysed for this evaluation. This represents more than half of the total number of students currently participating in the program. A greater proportion of boys (55%) than girls (45%) responded to the survey. The Table also shows that the survey sample was generally reflective of the distribution of students across regions where the program operates.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
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<th>Female</th>
<th>Not stated</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<tr>
<td>South West Sydney</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3 shows the number of student responses to the evaluation survey by grade level. The response rates reflect the pattern of participation in the program in 2006 shown in Table 8, that is, the majority of respondents were in Years 9 and 10. This suggests that those who responded to the survey were representative of all those who participated in the program.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Not Stated</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hunter/Central Coast</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Coast</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Illawarra</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sydney</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>199</td>
<td>165</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>367</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Characteristics of Mentors responding to the survey

Table 4 below shows that some 316 survey responses were received from mentors. A significantly greater proportion of these mentors were female (60%) than male (37%), reflecting the general distribution of mentors by gender across the program. Responses were also generally reflective of the number of mentors in each Region.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Not Stated</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>New England</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hunter/Central Coast</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Coast</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South West Sydney</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Western</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Riverina</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Illawarra</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sydney</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>117</td>
<td>188</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>316</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5 shows the length of experience as a mentor for those who responded to the survey. Respondents were most frequently in their first year of mentoring, or had had between one and two years of experience. However, around 40 per cent of the respondents had been part of the program for more than two years.
Table 5: Length of experience as a Plan-It Youth mentor of survey respondents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>No. of Mentors</th>
<th>Percent of Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Under 1 year</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>35.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 to 2 years</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>24.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 to 3 years</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>13.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 to 4 years</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>12.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Over 4 years</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>14.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>313</strong></td>
<td><strong>100%</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 6 below shows the aggregate number of students mentored by mentors by year level. This table shows that the majority of mentors have mentored only one student (who was most likely to be in Year 10). Relatively few mentors who responded to the survey had mentored two or more students, reflecting the finding in Table 5 above that for most respondents; this was their first year in the program.

Table 6: Number of students mentored by each mentor

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year level</th>
<th>1 student</th>
<th>2 students</th>
<th>3 students</th>
<th>4 students</th>
<th>4 or more students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Year 6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 7</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 8</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 9</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 10</td>
<td>183</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 11</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 12</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 7 below shows the great disparity in the way the program operates. As would be expected from Table 5 above, a significant number of mentors had conducted less than 5 sessions with their students, as they were relatively new to the program. The majority of mentors conduct between 5-10 sessions with their students, which is consistent with the model adopted in some Regions. However, a considerable number of mentors conduct more than 11 meetings, with nearly 12 per cent conducting more than 20 meetings. The issue of how long the interaction between mentor and student should continue is discussed later in the body of the report.

Table 7: Frequency of meetings between mentors and students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Number of responses</th>
<th>Percent of total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than 5</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5-10 meetings</td>
<td>125</td>
<td>40.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11-20 meetings</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>25.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than 20</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>11.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>310</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
1.3 Structure of this report

The remainder of this report presents the findings and conclusions of the evaluation and is structured according to the Terms of Reference provided.

Chapter 2 provides findings in relation to the effectiveness and efficiency of the program. It presents data in relation to student and school participation in the program, the perceived impact of the program, organisation and content of the program and issues relating to the training and recruitment of mentors. The Chapter also considers the wider picture for youth transition planning within the DET under initiatives such as the School to Work program and the degree to which Plan-It Youth is aligned with such initiatives. The Chapter concludes with a discussion of the factors that have helped or hindered Plan-It Youth.

Chapter 3 identifies the key conclusions that can be drawn from the findings in chapter 2. The conclusions are organised in terms of the four key dimensions of appropriateness, effectiveness, efficiency and sustainability. The Chapter concludes with a discussion of options for the future.

Chapter 4 presents the recommendations for the future based on the options provided in the previous chapter.

Chapter 5 outlines the major references employed in the development of the report.
Chapter 2. Evaluation Findings

This section discusses the findings of the evaluation, drawing on data from a diverse range of sources. The findings detailed below represent an analysis and synthesis of data derived from key policy and related documentation, the evaluation surveys, case studies, interviews and focus groups.

2.1 Student participation in Plan-it Youth

Table 8 below shows the number of students participating in Plan-It Youth from 2002-2006. Since the introduction of the program, nearly 3,700 students have completed mentoring. Program records indicate that around 5-10 per cent of mentoring “matches” between students and mentors are discontinued each year. The reasons for this are varied and most frequently include incompatibility between the student and mentor, the mentor or student leaving the locality, and mentors taking a full-time job or becoming ill. The number of students participating in the program has increased steadily as the program has grown from the pilot phase. This also reflects the activity of the increased number of coordinators made possible by the allocation of DET funding to support regional funding to new two regions. A greater number of boys than girls usually participate in the program across the state, although the pattern of participation by gender varies considerably from school to school and from year to year within any particular location. A relatively small proportion of the students participating in the program are from Indigenous backgrounds — an issue that is discussed later in this report.

Table 8: Number of students participating in Plan-IT Youth Mentoring, 2002-2006

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Students -completed in 2006</th>
<th>Total 2006</th>
<th>Students 2002-2005</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Boys</td>
<td>Girls</td>
<td>Aboriginal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central Coast</td>
<td>119</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hunter</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Illawarra</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New England</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Coast</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Riverina</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South West</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sydney</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Western</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>552</td>
<td>535</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As Table 8 also demonstrates, the program at present operates in a relatively small number of schools, and engages a relatively small number of students each year, who themselves represent a small number of those students who are most at risk. The program does not currently operate in all Regions. Of particular significance is its absence in Western Sydney, which has high numbers of students at risk. There would appear to be little scope for further expansion of the program within the current operational model.

The scope of the program is currently affected by a lack of clarity about its focus and the consequent targeting of students to participate in the program is therefore not as strategic as it might be. There is not a common definition of what it means to be at risk of leaving school early across the state. This is reflected in the fact that students in Years 7 to 12 have been included in the program. Table 9 below further provides evidence of the lack of targeting of appropriate students, with only a very small percentage of Plan-It Youth students coming from PAS schools.

Table 9: Percentage of Plan-It Youth students in Priority schools

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Number of students in Plan-It Youth mentoring</th>
<th>Percent of Plan-It Youth students in Priority Schools</th>
<th>Percent of Plan-It Youth students in Priority Action Schools</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Illawarra</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New England</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Western</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Riverina</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hunter/Central Coast</td>
<td>329</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Coast</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South West Sydney</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sydney</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>679</td>
<td>21.6</td>
<td>4.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Compiled from an internal DET survey of Regional coordinators in June 2007

2.2 The effectiveness and efficiency of Plan-it Youth

This section of the chapter outlines the relationship between the program and student engagement in learning. It also examines the impact of the program on students’ ability to make informed decisions about their future. In particular the impact is examined in terms of the “destinations” of students after completing the program; students’ perceptions about how the program has affected them; and school, teacher and mentor observations of changes in the students.

2.2.1 Student engagement in learning, retention and attendance in education or training

The Plan-It Youth program was designed to assist students who are disengaged from school and more particularly from learning. Solutions to these issues may have been related to strategies to ensure ongoing retention at school while in other cases it was considered to be more appropriate to assist students to find appropriate career pathways which may or may not mean staying at school until the end of Year 12.
There is no doubt that the program has attempted in a range of ways to address these issues and there are many success stories emanating from both mentors and participants that described the experience as being life changing for both parties. While most of the mentors spoke of the improved self-esteem of the students with whom they work, the longer term benefits of the experience with mentors is yet to be determined.

In a similar way anecdotal data would suggest the success of the program, however there is limited quantitative data from which informed judgements can be made about the overall success of the program. A key determinant of the overall success of the program was the involvement and commitment of the mentor. It cannot be debated that the success of this program is built on key relationships. These relationships not only concern program participants. They concerned parents, school stakeholders, and the mentors themselves.

The pivotal role of the mentor in determining the effectiveness of the program cannot be understated. While the majority of mentors described the experience as personally and socially fulfilling, some mentors have some reservations about their experience. They cited some uncertainty about their ongoing engagement with the program. The uncertainty was a result of the shortness of available time; the length of the program; the time it takes to get to know the student and to an extent, the commitment of the student(s). All agreed however, that the program had a number of clear benefits.

Despite the general absence of more compelling quantitative data, the mentors mentioned that they knew when they had made a difference when the student opened up and became friendly; when they thanked the mentor for coming and most particularly when, at the “celebration” the student spoke enthusiastically about the program and the people involved. Further, they commented that some parents had approached them and thanked them for caring about their son/daughter.

The best mentors, they believed, found the way to motivate and empower the student, build a relationship and trust level while showing the students the way to construct and use short term and long term goals. Similarly, discussions with teachers in schools as well as mentors indicate that the majority of program graduates seem to be more engaged in learning because they have identified a pathway to their future and now see the relevance of learning in the school particularly as a tool for achieving their goals. Such comments however represent anecdotal data only and could not be substantiated with quantitative data. However, comments by students suggest many have seen great value from the program.

A quote from the Riverina Region Equity Term 2, 2007 Newsletter reads “more students [are] approaching their school’s facilitator asking to be placed in the program ... Nathan said Mum said it would be good for me”.

The Term 3 2007 Newsletter from the Riverina region includes the following examples:

    Tom from ... is topping his class at TAFE whilst completing his first year of his apprenticeship as a painter. Sally from ... has gone onto Year 11 at ... HS and is a member of the SRC as well as being a part-time announcer on ...’s community radio. Tim from ... is working full time at ... Meats in ... and Emily from ... announced to this year’s intake the fact that she hasn’t had a day off school this year and that this was a big improvement.

Accordingly, the belief is that the program has the capacity to facilitate a new level of engagement through improved self-confidence and self-esteem.
The view of a Regional Equity Coordinator is instructive in terms of the data available to make informed judgements about the effectiveness of the program generally and the impact on student engagement more specifically:

*The program is perceived to be very successful although data collection on the degree of success leaves a lot to be desired in terms of regularity and consistency of approach. One coordinator suggested that the data to be collected on students need to be specified early in the program. Specification needs to include how data are to be collected, the use to be made of it and what feedback is to be provided from an analysis of it. Anecdotal data should be included. Mentors track student progress while the programs are in operation. Students also use a booklet to record information and to plan future actions. Most students in the program go on to Year 11.*

In contrast the following comment from an in-school coordinator suggests that day to day systems and interactions may circumvent the need for any formal snapshot of the program to be undertaken:

*The program works; it is cost effective and complements other equity programs. The coordinator evaluates the program at the end of each period by finding and ringing the participants. Further, participants’ and mentors’ comments are gathered and analysed at the completion of the program and case studies are reported to the relevant principals. Most students are still in a school program and that indicates some level of success because the students are chosen as being at risk of leaving school. Participants report that their engagement in learning is enhanced and that appears to be reflected in attendance patterns.*

*The local program has changed so that time limits are removed in order to cater for students’ particular needs. The program coordinator and the management committee are well aware of the implicit pitfalls of that and work to avoid them. Strategic targets are negotiated with students at the key transition points.*

The majority of teachers and mentors interviewed for this evaluation strongly suggest that the program is a most effective way of re-engaging students through careers information and vocational pathways.

From a practical perspective the program is seen to be effective because it provides vulnerable students with a one-on-one opportunity to relate to an adult. The students are exposed to resources by the mentors and they assist them to consider their life and life-choices. The mentors have provided students with insights into the reality of the world of work, and in many instances have impressed on the young person the importance of taking responsibility for taking charge of their own destiny. In some schools, it was evident that the in-school coordinator for Plan-It Youth had made linkages between the students and the school’s careers adviser. In one school, the careers adviser and the mentors use the school’s computers to guide the students to information about careers and the options associated with various careers.

However as indicated elsewhere in this report, there is no formal relationship between the careers adviser and the program in many schools, to ensure adequate follow through for students at the school level, once they have established their goals. The opportunity to assist students in the school context to map out strategies to achieve their goal is missed in
many schools. This would add a dimension of reality to a distant dream that may never be realised for some students.

Despite these limitations, some principals and teachers interviewed for the evaluation have reported that some students seem to be more on task as a result of the Plan-It Youth experience and that student behaviour, attendance and attitudes had shown improvement. However, as discussed elsewhere in this report, students who present with significant behavioural or attendance issues are seldom referred to the program. This arrangement has been adopted to maximise the use of mentor’s time. As one in-school coordinator said, they “do not want to let the mentors down”. The consequence of this situation is that sometimes those students in greatest need of the program may not always be targeted for participation in the program.

These selection processes have perhaps contributed to the finding that the drop out rates by both students and mentors (during the program) has been relatively minor. Most of the mentors speak of returning, implying that they are getting positive feelings about the program and what they are achieving for the young people under their care.

It is acknowledged that the data is essentially anecdotal. Without quantitative data systematically developed and analysed, it is therefore difficult to make informed judgements about the longer term sustainability of the program. As highlighted above, many mentors describe relationships that are mutually fulfilling between student and mentor that have extended well beyond the structured and formal mentoring period.

Destinations Data

The following section discusses the data available that indicates the impact that the Plan-It Youth program has had on students. Such data is critical in understanding the effectiveness of the program, that is, the extent to which it has reached its intended goals. Data that is indicative of program impact comes from several sources: the “destinations” of students after completing the program; students’ perceptions about how the program has affected them; and school, teacher and mentor observations of changes in the students.

Plan-It Youth Coordinators have collected data about the “destinations” of students post Plan-It Youth mentoring at regular intervals throughout the life of the program. This data has been the primary source of claims for the effectiveness of the program. This data typically shows that more than 80 per cent of the students in Plan-It Youth are still in school at the end of the year in which mentoring took place. Data for 2006 is shown in Table 10 below. This table shows a positive picture of student retention with the vast majority of participating students still enrolled in school or other training and employment.

However, while Table 10 does show that the majority of students are still in school or other worthwhile occupation (TAFE or work), there is no way of knowing whether they would have stayed in school anyway – given that more than half of those tracked are still in Year 10 or earlier grades and maybe not old enough to leave school. The relevant data concerns students in Year 11, who are post-compulsory leaving age. However because there is no baseline data available about how the Plan-It Youth students compare with other Year 11 students in the school or across the state, it is unknown whether this is a better outcome than might otherwise have been expected. It also needs to be noted that the data refers to those who have completed Plan-It Youth and not dropped out of the program or taken up the opportunity in the first place. It must also be remembered that these students are “hand picked”, i.e. they are not those most at risk because students with behavioural problems are generally excluded from mentoring.
In addition, from the sample of interviews with students and teachers conducted for this evaluation, it was evident that many students participating in the program were not at serious risk of leaving but simply confused about what they wanted to do in future. Likewise, the data are recorded within 12 months of the program, so the longer term outcome of mentoring, say, Year 9 students, is also unknown.

Therefore there are significant limitations to the destinations data as a source of “effectiveness information” and must be viewed with caution as evidence of the effectiveness of the program as an intervention. It is unsafe to infer from this data alone that Plan-It Youth is effective as a program, because the wide variability in the way that the initiative is structured and delivered across the various Regions and schools means that it is far from a standardised intervention. The state-wide data is effectively reporting on the aggregation of outcomes that derive from very different delivery models, rather than from a single, coherent program.

It is not possible to infer from this data that Plan-It Youth mentoring was the cause of the destinations outcomes reported on. There are many factors that impact on students’ decisions to pursue a particular education/employment pathway at any point in time, and the data sheds no light on whether the student would have reached a particular decision or taken a particular course of action if they had not received mentoring. Plan-It Youth does not operate in a vacuum. Students’ decisions are influenced by parent/carer’s opinions or directions, school-related factors such as enjoyment of school and relationships with teachers, previous school success, peer attitudes, media depictions of the job market for youth, advertising in relation to employment options including apprenticeships and the general economic circumstances of the community. As is discussed in the body of the report, there are many other programs in place in NSW schools that address similar short-term objectives to Plan-It Youth, including the School to Work initiative and Youth Pathways, to name two. Most secondary schools already make provision for students to learn interview skills and resume writing, for example, as part of the career development program.

It is therefore not possible from the destinations data alone to separate what the influence of Plan-It Youth mentoring might have been relative to these other factors. It is not even possible to know whether the students in Plan-It Youth were actually free to take the decision to leave school. While students might say they are thinking about leaving school or unsure of their future and subsequently referred to Plan-It Youth, they may not have been in a position where they could actually leave school, for example, against their parents’/carers’ wishes. Similarly while students may say they intend to leave school and get a job, the reality of the employment and welfare/benefits available to them may dictate that they remain at school.

Perhaps the most important limitation of the destinations data in terms of its suitability for inferring program success is that because there is no control group, it is not possible to know whether the destinations for students who received mentoring were more favourable than those who received no support (other than they would have ordinarily received from the school in the normal course of events). It is also not possible to know whether Plan-It Youth mentoring is more effective than other forms of mentoring or any other form of intervention directed towards providing transition advice. There is simply no point of comparison that would allow judgments about the relative effectiveness to be made. Only a properly designed experimental study would allow such conclusions to be drawn. Since such a methodological design has not been built into the program from its inception, and is not possible within the scope of this evaluation, we must rely on the weight of collective
evidence from multiple sources to reach conclusions about indicative trends. This triangulation of data lends greater confidence to the conclusions reached than reliance on a single source of data alone.

That aside, taken together with the in-school evaluations that generally show students believe mentoring has helped them in some way (and the mentors’ similar testimony) — results that were also reflected in the survey undertaken as part of this evaluation — it is difficult to draw a conclusion that the effects of the program are negative.

While some might argue that retention in school is not the only goal of Plan-It Youth, given the arguments that failure to complete Year 12 or equivalent is a strong indicator of life success, school retention rates are therefore a relevant point of comparison. As can be seen in Table 11, apparent retention rates in NSW government schools have been greater than 99 per cent for more than a decade. For the students in Years 7-10, retention rates have been greater than 95 per cent since 1999. For the age group that is most relevant to Plan-It Youth (Years 10-11) the retention rate in 2006 was 82 per cent. This compares to a Year 10-11 retention rate of less than 50 per cent in the 1980s (see In Brief, 2007). This apparent retention rate does not include students who enrol in TAFE or other education providers, transfer to non-government schools, or migrate interstate or overseas. The real retention rate is therefore significantly greater than the apparent retention rate. Overall retention rates for Years 7-12 are close to 70 per cent. While direct comparisons between the Plan-It Youth cohort and the state figures are not possible (nor are pre- and post-mentoring comparisons possible), the education/training and employment circumstances of the Plan-It Youth cohort do not appear to be greatly different to those of other students of similar age across the state.
# Evaluation of the Plan-It Youth Program

## Table 10: Aggregated Destinations Data for 2006 Students Participating in Plan-It Youth

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Destination</th>
<th>Illawarra</th>
<th>Sydney</th>
<th>South Western Sydney</th>
<th>New England</th>
<th>Riverina</th>
<th>Western</th>
<th>North Coast</th>
<th>Hunter/Central Coast</th>
<th>Total (No.)</th>
<th>Total (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Still in school Year 9</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>5.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Still in school Year 10</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>148</td>
<td>252</td>
<td>42.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Still in school Year 11</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>169</td>
<td>28.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Still in school Year 12</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P/T TAFE</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F/T TAFE</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>3.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Further study-private provider</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employment-Traineeship</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employment-Apprenticeship</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>4.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employment-F/T no study</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>3.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Combination P/T employment and TAFE</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employment - F/T casual</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employment - P/T or casual</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployed/job seeking</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Left area/Interstate</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lost contact or still trying to contact</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>6.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>77</strong></td>
<td><strong>23</strong></td>
<td><strong>78</strong></td>
<td><strong>70</strong></td>
<td><strong>53</strong></td>
<td><strong>25</strong></td>
<td><strong>83</strong></td>
<td><strong>197</strong></td>
<td><strong>599</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Regional Coordinator Annual Reports. Data gathered in March 2007
The data on retention of students following Plan-It Youth mentoring shown in Table 10 must be viewed in the context of the overall picture for youth education and employment in NSW.

Examination of national education and employment data for 15-19 year olds (see Figure 1 below) suggests the profile of Plan-It Youth graduates is similar to those of 15-19 year olds nationally.

Table 11: Apparent Retention Rates, NSW Government Schools 1986-2006

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2006</th>
<th>1996</th>
<th>1986</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Year 7-9</td>
<td>99.9</td>
<td>98.6</td>
<td>97.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 7-10</td>
<td>95.5</td>
<td>94.2</td>
<td>90.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 7-11</td>
<td>78.0</td>
<td>74.9</td>
<td>50.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 7-12</td>
<td>66.4</td>
<td>63.3</td>
<td>39.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 10-11</td>
<td>82.0</td>
<td>79.7</td>
<td>56.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 10-12</td>
<td>69.6</td>
<td>66.2</td>
<td>43.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: In Brief, NSW Department of Education and Training, May, 2007

Whether this is a consequence of their participation in Plan-It Youth or not is unknown from the destinations data collected. This does not suggest that either the content of the Plan-It Youth program or the relationships developed through mentoring are not worthwhile. Nor does it deny that there are substantial numbers of students who are disengaged from schooling (even though they may still be enrolled) or disenfranchised in other ways. However, for the future, the management of the program would be enhanced by data collections that include appropriate baseline measures and points of comparison to avoid the possibility of drawing inappropriate conclusions from limited data.

Figure 1: Participation in Education, Training and Employment, 15-19 Year Olds, Australia

Table 12 below shows that students perceive that mentoring sessions most frequently discuss students’ plans for the future and specific advice about options for the future. More than half of the students surveyed said that personal issues both at school and outside of school were discussed frequently in mentoring sessions. However, more than 40 per cent of students said they never or infrequently discussed issues they had out of school.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Very often (%)</th>
<th>Fairly often (%)</th>
<th>Not often (%)</th>
<th>Never (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Issues you have at school</td>
<td>21.2</td>
<td>47.3</td>
<td>21.4</td>
<td>10.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Issues you have out of school</td>
<td>21.7</td>
<td>39.3</td>
<td>27.7</td>
<td>11.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Your plans for the future</td>
<td>64.8</td>
<td>27.7</td>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>2.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specific advice about options for the future</td>
<td>54.2</td>
<td>34.5</td>
<td>7.7</td>
<td>3.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Overall, the responses of students about the content and focus of mentoring reflects the findings from the case studies and interviews that there are considerable differences in the way that the program is implemented in different Regions, schools and by individual mentors.

**Figure 2: How frequently do students discuss mentoring with their parents**

Figure 2 shows that the majority of students do not often discuss what happens during mentoring with their parents. This is in alignment with the perceptions recorded by mentors that students seldom discuss mentoring with parents (see Figure 2). Interviews with coordinators confirm that while parent/carers permission is sought for student participation, in most cases there is little formal communication about the mentoring until the concluding “celebration” event. This lack of communication with parents is potentially challenging, since the primary purpose of the mentoring is to influence significant life decisions by students. It might ordinarily be expected that parents/carers should be part of this decision-making process, especially if the longer term sustainability of the impact of the program is an important consideration.
The situation is complicated by the fact that students appear to be directed towards Plan-It Youth not simply because they have expressed the view that they intend to leave school early but because they are perceived to be experiencing “difficult” personal circumstances, including family breakdowns, drug and alcohol problems, or behavioural issues including low self esteem or self confidence. It was observed that the mentoring was in some cases, implicitly providing a form of surrogate parenting. Whether it is appropriate for a voluntary mentoring program to be attempting to address these issues or not is discussed later in this report.

There is no denying that there are many students in the schools in this program and elsewhere in the state that could benefit from the opportunity to develop trusting and supportive relationships with someone outside their immediate family. Likewise, it is evident from the testimony of principals and coordinators interviewed for this evaluation that some mentors have developed such relationships with students, going far beyond what might be expected of any school-based program to support students in particularly distressing circumstances. On the basis of this testimony, it is also apparent that these students have derived great personal benefit from these efforts. As one student responding to the survey said:

“My mentor has provided me with the parenting I never had”.

At the same time, there are considerable risks involved in mentors developing relationships outside the program guidelines, both from the point of view of probity, child protection and competency to deal with deep-seated issues involved. It was also clear from the discussions with some stakeholders that the relationships sought by some mentors (if a small minority) may challenge standard expectations of adult/student relationships.

It is an unfortunate reality that the kinds of quite innocent relationships that might once have been commonplace between adults and adolescents especially in small communities may present an unacceptable level of risk when auspiced under the apparent authority of the school (even when the Principal may have no direct knowledge of what is happening), especially when there is no explicit parent/carer involvement.

There is a constant tension in any student mentoring program between the need for a degree of confidentiality to be observed in order for sufficient trust to be developed for students to be able to talk openly about their strengths and weaknesses, hopes, fears and aspirations. It was remarked in several case studies that the guiding principle adopted was that “what happens in mentoring stays in mentoring”. There are particular challenges in maintaining confidentiality when there is group debriefing of mentors following mentoring sessions. While coordinators are sensitive to this issue, it remains a significant management challenge.

This issue exposes another key dilemma in defining the purpose and scope of the Plan-It Youth program and the understanding of what it means for a student to be “at risk”. It is often seen as difficult to distinguish between the issues that affect any particular student’s engagement and retention in schooling and issues affecting their general outlook on life. As one coordinator put it:

“How can you begin to address transition planning issues when the students have so many other basic needs to be met?”
Figure 3 below reports on students’ perceptions of how frequently they have discussions about mentoring with teachers. The majority of students say that mentoring is never or not often discussed with teachers in the school. This accords with mentors’ views, which similarly suggest that for the most part, mainstream teachers are not well informed about the program. These findings reinforce some significant observation about the way the program appears to operate in many of the schools involved. Firstly, Plan-It Youth mentoring appears to sit outside the mainstream operation of the school. In some cases, there appears to be little connection with mainstream welfare programs or structures in the school. At the same time, explicit linkages with the career development and transition planning program within the school, such as the employability skills logbook, are difficult to discern.

The linkage between the career choice exploration and subsequent follow-up in terms of subject selection and skills development also appears to be limited. This lack of connection to mainstream school processes is reflected in the diverse processes used to identify potential student participants in the program and the relatively informal monitoring and evaluation of the outcomes for students found in the majority of schools. While Plan-It Youth mentoring is not specifically directed at improving students’ behaviour, engagement and attendance at school, these factors are considered in some cases in the nomination of students to take part in the program, and are recognised as significant correlates of school failure.

As seen in Table 13 below, students do not believe the program has changed greatly either their enjoyment of school, relationships with teachers or other students, or general attitudes to school. It cannot be assumed that the Plan-It Youth participants had negative attitudes towards school or teachers to begin with. Nonetheless there is a considerable body of research that says that these factors are key determinants of student’s decision making about staying at school (see for example the ACER studies on school retention).

**Figure 3: How frequently do students discuss mentoring with other teachers at their school?**

Better practice was observed in schools where in-school coordination of Plan-It Youth was strong (and well resourced) and was overseen by the whole school welfare committee or learning support team, where the program was considered as part of the school’s suite of strategies for addressing the needs of students at risk, and where there was a well-
articulated overall career development program in place. In these schools, the perception was that Plan-It Youth was used to systematically address student needs rather than a personal or externally driven agenda.

Table 13 below provides further details of students’ perceptions of changes following Plan-It Youth mentoring. This Table shows that the most significant changes for students occurred in relation to understanding their options for the future and their plans for the future. Nearly 60 per cent of participating students said that these were a lot better following mentoring.

Mentoring was also credited with helping students to better understand their strengths and to have better ways of dealing with problems. More than 80 per cent of students said these were a lot or a bit better following mentoring. Fewer students believed that the mentoring had a positive impact on their school work, their enjoyment of school, or relationships with teachers or other students. Only a very small number of students said that any of these things were worse as a consequence of mentoring.

The perceptions of students recorded in Table 13 in relation to future planning provides a strong indication that the mentoring program was largely successful in its primary goal of helping students to better understand their options for the future and to make decisions about their future education/work pathway.

### Table 13: Students’ perceptions of changes following mentoring

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Has mentoring changed any of the following for you?</th>
<th>A lot better (%)</th>
<th>A bit better (%)</th>
<th>No change (%)</th>
<th>A bit worse (%)</th>
<th>A lot worse (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Your school work</td>
<td>17.3</td>
<td>55.2</td>
<td>26.9</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Your enjoyment of school</td>
<td>16.5</td>
<td>39.1</td>
<td>42.7</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Your understanding of options for the future</td>
<td>57.1</td>
<td>37.1</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Your plans for the future</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>36.3</td>
<td>7.4</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Better understanding of your strengths</td>
<td>35.4</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>14.6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Better understanding of ways of dealing with problems</td>
<td>30.9</td>
<td>47.1</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Your relationship with teachers</td>
<td>9.9</td>
<td>33.5</td>
<td>54.7</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Your relationships with other students</td>
<td>17.3</td>
<td>37.9</td>
<td>44.5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Your attitudes towards school</td>
<td>23.1</td>
<td>45.2</td>
<td>30.8</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>0.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 14 below presents further information about students’ perceptions about their immediate future. Not surprisingly, the most frequent response was to “stay at school”. This response was most frequent for students in Years 9 and 10 (see Table 15) and female students (see Table 14). A significant proportion of students said that they intended to stay at school and then do further study. However, a significant proportion of students said that they intended to leave school and look for a job. Students in Years 6, 7, 8 were more likely to say they intended to leave school and find work. Male students were more likely to give this response than female students.
It is not possible to tell whether this outcome (if realised) would be a positive or negative outcome for the students involved. If the students can only find work in lowly paid and unskilled jobs, then they have perhaps not made the best decision. On the other hand, if they can confidently embark on a secure, career pathway than this is a better option than remaining at school but being bored and disengaged. While the biases inherent in the sample of students who were selected for and responded to the survey are unknown, the fact that all student responses indicate a perception of a constructive future can be taken to be a positive outcome of the program.

Table 14: Students’ perception of what they will do in the next few years by Gender*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Males</th>
<th>Females</th>
<th>All students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Not stated</td>
<td>0.5%</td>
<td>0.6%</td>
<td>0.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stay on at school</td>
<td>34.2%</td>
<td>40.6%</td>
<td>37.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stay on at school and then do further study</td>
<td>12.6%</td>
<td>13.9%</td>
<td>13.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leave school this year and go to TAFE</td>
<td>2.0%</td>
<td>4.8%</td>
<td>3.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leave school and get an apprenticeship</td>
<td>14.1%</td>
<td>1.8%</td>
<td>8.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leave school and find a job</td>
<td>14.6%</td>
<td>10.3%</td>
<td>12.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leave school and apply for welfare benefits</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t know</td>
<td>22.1%</td>
<td>27.9%</td>
<td>24.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL (No. of responses)</td>
<td>198</td>
<td>198</td>
<td>396</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: Some students provided multiple responses to this question

Table 15: Students’ perception of what they will do in the next few years by Year Level

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Year 6,7,8 (%)</th>
<th>Year 9 (%)</th>
<th>Year 10 (%)</th>
<th>Yr 11, 12 (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Stay on at school</td>
<td>23.5</td>
<td>41.6</td>
<td>38.7</td>
<td>25.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stay on at school and then do further study</td>
<td>11.8</td>
<td>14.3</td>
<td>12.6</td>
<td>20.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leave school this year and go to TAFE</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>11.1</td>
<td>10.4</td>
<td>22.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leave school and get an apprenticeship</td>
<td>8.8</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>10.4</td>
<td>5.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leave school and find a job</td>
<td>17.6</td>
<td>7.8</td>
<td>13.9</td>
<td>10.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leave school and apply for welfare benefits</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t know</td>
<td>38.2</td>
<td>32.5</td>
<td>20.4</td>
<td>30.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL (No responses)</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>230</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The extent to which students perceived their mentor had helped them to decide what they will do in the next few years is shown in Table 16 below. Overall, the majority of students believed that their mentor had helped them make their decision to a great or some extent. Mentoring was rated as having a more positive impact on decision making by students in
Year 9 for males and Years 11/12 for female students. However, for some 15 per cent of participants, mentoring was reported to have little or no influence on students’ decisions.

**Table 16: Students’ perceptions of the extent to which their mentor helped them to make decisions about the future**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Males</th>
<th>Females</th>
<th>All</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Year 6,7,8 (%)</td>
<td>Year 9 (%)</td>
<td>Year 10 (%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Great extent</td>
<td>50.0</td>
<td>52.5</td>
<td>43.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some extent</td>
<td>50.0</td>
<td>27.5</td>
<td>39.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Little extent</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>8.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not at all</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>15.0</td>
<td>8.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>6</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>123</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 4 below shows the relationship between the kinds of pathways that students said they were likely to follow and the influence of mentoring.

**Figure 4: Would students recommend mentoring programs like Plan-It Youth to others?**

Figure 4 indicates that the overwhelming majority of students that responded to the survey considered that mentoring offered sufficient advantages that they would recommend it to their friends or other students. There were no significant differences between male or female student responses. For teenagers, recommendation of a program to their peers can be taken as positive endorsement. This finding is reflected in the comments made during the case studies. Essentially comments indicated that a number of the students participating in Plan-It Youth mentoring had been referred by their friends or were self referrals.
Students who completed the survey conducted for this evaluation were asked what they most enjoyed about Plan-It Youth. By far the most frequent response was that they enjoyed talking to someone different — making a new friend, with wisdom and knowledge. More than one-third of students made a comment of this kind. A significant number of students also said that mentors had provided them with “Encouragement to do things — make good decisions and choices, and how to reach goals”.

The next most frequent response was “working out what job I should do for the future/what I should do in the future”. This aligns with the ratings given by students with the extent to which certain outcomes from their participation, in which the highest ratings were given to activities that were clearly related to career planning. Closely related to this were responses that indicated that the students involved enjoyed the opportunity to undertake work experience, and visit business and other organisations outside the school, such as Centrelink, learning how to do a resume, and having interviews — “so I know what it’s like to do that job”. “Getting out of school” was also a popular response.

When asked what they didn’t like about Plan-It Youth, the most frequent response was “nothing”. About 24 per cent of students gave this type of response. The two areas that student responses indicated were negative features were that they considered once per week was not enough, and that the program should go for longer. At the same time, the weakness for several students was that it made them miss out on a “good” period/or they had to catch up on missed work. Negative aspects mentioned by one or two students, indicating that they were problems unique to their particular situation, included the following:

- Being told what faults I have
- The hard to understand books
- Remembering to go, very forgetful - embarrassed when forget to go
- Endless droning that I didn’t understand, boring
- Reading all the time.

### 2.2.2 Transition planning by students to continuing/further education, training and employment

At the most general level, the program is designed to assist participating students to make an informed transition into further study, which may include Year 12 and the HSC, the achievement of TAFE qualifications or alternatively to seek employment. As indicated earlier in this report, the fundamental brief for the mentors is to assist targeted young people to identify which of the optional pathways for study and/or employment they wish to choose. Many mentors believe that they have succeeded in that task if students have identified their career path in terms of a future goal. In terms of transition planning by students therefore, the relationship between mentors and the school and more particularly the careers adviser is pivotal to the students’ achievement of their goals. The rationale for this statement is because it is the responsibility of the school to assist the student to identify those strategies to assist them to achieve their identified goals.

In some cases mentors have been very successful in helping students to map the strategies to achieve their goals as well. However discussion with mentors clearly demonstrates that the identification of strategies for achieving the goal is not necessarily seen to be integral to the mentor’s role in relation to the students. Unfortunately therefore the development
of strategies to realise the goals is somewhat left to chance because it is based on the relationship between the Plan-It Youth program, the mentors and the key school stakeholders to ensure that follow through occurs.

The evidence provided to this evaluation clearly suggested that the program can assist students in planning their future career options. The mere fact that the students remain in the program as they do, indicates that there are some benefits from their participation because such students have little tolerance for what they perceive as irrelevant. Further, the view expressed by school principals and other key stakeholders interviewed for the evaluation was that many of the targeted students would have left without the intervention.

The in-school coordinator generally has the responsibility for managing the school to work link for the students involved in the program. The effectiveness of the link depends on the quality of the relationships between the Plan-It Youth coordinator and in-school personnel. In the most effective schools the team tries to build the bigger picture together, employing strategies such as the use of speakers for mentors in training. Where this relationship is thriving, the program is also thriving. However, this was not the case in every school. In those school settings where there is a positive relationship, students report that their experiences are broadened and they are in a better position to make decisions about their futures. During celebration days held at the conclusion of each program cycle students make and talk to posters about what they have learned, indicating possible future directions. They indicate an improved capacity for self-evaluation and self-analysis as well as increased self-confidence. Such anecdotal evidence relating to transition continues to be cited in a variety of school settings.

2.2.3 The profile of participating students including the nature of disadvantage

While the 2005 Plan-It Youth Guidelines clearly articulate that this program should be targeted at students who are at risk of disengaging from education before completing senior schooling and without having established a clear training or career pathway, the reality in terms of those students selected for the program appears to be somewhat different. Selection is a school-based decision and it would appear that the schools broadly target potential early school leavers. In all cases it is intended that the students and their parents should agree that the opportunity is worthy of commitment. In the case of parents, unfortunately some show very little interest in their student’s participation in this initiative. Students can self refer in some schools, and referrals can also come from the school’s Learning Support or Student Welfare Teams.

The students offered the opportunity are generally those for whom commitment is expected and with whom some gains can be made. Accordingly, the students are not necessarily those most at risk. The program has been subject to some criticism for this approach. Some observers would suggest that this program should be directly targeted at the students in greatest need of the opportunity to build a future direction in their lives. Unfortunately these students are often afflicted with deep emotional problems and other related personal problems that mean a 10 week program of the type offered in Plan-It Youth is anticipated to have minimal impact on their long-term future. For this reason, in most schools, the students in greatest need are not necessarily those students targeted for inclusion in the program. For example, it is evident that Aboriginal students who on a
state-wide basis have lower school retention rates than other students are under-represented in the Plan-It Youth program.

It would appear that it is the students who are perceived to have the potential to derive some immediate benefit from their participation that are most commonly selected. In some cases the Plan-It Youth coordinator initially perceived that the students involved in the program had behavioural problems, but quickly realised that there was a broader range of students involved. These students, however, lacked the knowledge and skills, and, in some cases, the parental guidance, to make appropriate decisions about their future. The experience of the program consistently demonstrates that such students are seen to benefit most effectively from the program. In many cases the students were identified as being able to make progress through the program as distinct from being those who might be regarded as the worst behaved. The selected students were generally not well resourced at home; not performing to their potential at school; were potential leavers; would take advice and commit to the program; and were able to interact with a stranger. It is noted that this selection methodology appears to be at odds with the findings of overseas research on mentoring that those students who begin mentoring most at risk appear to obtain greater benefit than less disadvantaged students.

In most schools the Year Advisers established the criteria for choosing students to participate in the program. Generally this task was undertaken in light of the 2005 Guidelines, or at least in terms of some level of awareness about the Guidelines and the intentions of the program.

This involved generally selecting students who were considered to be:

- uncertain of their future in relation to continuation at school or transition to the workforce
- at risk to some degree but not at extreme risk
- capable of being guided to make appropriate decisions.

Indeed one in-school coordinator described the situation in the following way:

*In general, qualifying students haven't had a lot of attention. They are basically good young people who are at risk of not making the right decisions.*

Despite these common starting points, one Plan-It Youth coordinator reported that schools did in fact use different strategies for the identification of students to be involved in the program. Schools generally surveyed students regarding their future intentions and invited appropriate students to participate in the program. Mentors were matched to students through liaison with the in-school coordinator. Problems relating to student selection are more significant when the program is viewed as a student welfare program, rather than a program that facilitated students’ transition from school to work or future study. Mentoring which attempts to address student’s personal issues rather than specific career pathway knowledge requires a higher degree of skill and commitment on the part of the mentor. The overseas literature suggests that mentoring relationships that break down more frequently lead to even worse outcomes for the young person than they entered with.

Nevertheless, school stakeholders and Plan-It Youth coordinators believed that students who derived most from Plan-It Youth were motivated to succeed and had the potential to develop self-confidence, self-esteem and self-concept but lack the initiative to do so. It was reported that most students in the program have little idea of how to make decisions
about their future, including the reality of leaving school or continuing in their education — but were at least willing to explore possibilities open to them.

Comments from student participants demonstrated that the experience of the program gave them the motivation to stay at school rather than leave, and then to use the Year 12 qualification as a springboard to achieve their career goals.

2.2.4 Community and school partnerships in support of retention in education and training

Discussions with key stakeholders during the data gathering process demonstrated that there is considerable variability in the nature and level of community and school partnerships in relation to the program. A key stakeholder however is TAFE because of the program's reliance on this organisation to provide training for mentors. The partnership with TAFE is critical to the program because both the research literature and the consultations conducted for this evaluation suggest that adequate and appropriate training of mentors is a fundamental pre-requisite for program success.

Over the life of the program, there have been consistent efforts made by Plan-It Youth coordinators to promote the program in local communities. Plan-It Youth depends entirely on volunteers from the community for its ongoing implementation. There are many demands on volunteers from a range of community organisations of which Plan-It Youth is but one. Clearly, the volunteers have to regard the program as worthwhile to be committed to it. The success of programs such as Plan-It Youth depend on building on community relationships, so that the mentors become the best advocates of the program. Service clubs and other groups have sometimes assisted in providing mentors and contacts to facilitate work experience for program participants.

It is noted that strong community involvement is integral to other Department of Education and Training programs, such as School to Work and work experience. Neither of these initiatives would be possible without the direct involvement of local businesses and other employers. The Plan-It Youth program has been one way in which the community has been brought into the school. While some strong examples of the involvement of community organisations were observed in the schools visited for the evaluation, it was also evident that this was not consistent practice in all schools. The fact that some volunteer community members spend a small amount of time in school each week should not be over-represented as meaning “strong community support for the school”. However limited specific community and school partnerships have been developed specifically for the Plan-It Youth program. Community-school partnerships do exist for the School to Work program and some principals perceive this to be a related program because of the close link between the transition to work component of Plan-It Youth and the School to Work program.

There was little evidence that Plan-It Youth enhanced engagement of parents/carers with the local school. Apart from obtaining permission for their children to participate in the program, there is relatively little contact with parents. Acknowledging that the engagement of parents in the program remains a contentious issue, one coordinator expressed the view that it is appropriate and important to encourage independent trust between mentors and students. Some schools telephone all parents concerning the program and some send information to parents, phone them and have information sessions. A significant number of parents do not attend the information sessions. Some parents do attend celebrations at the conclusion of the program. Mentors generally ask students if they would like them to speak to their parents and accept students’ advice on the matter. Mentors point out that a significant number of students participating in the program have
difficult home lives and therefore it is important for mentors to develop trust with the students and ensure that confidentiality is maintained.

Despite these limitations, the idea of mentoring in schools is the epitome of community partnership and the training course is a way of ensuring that proposed mentors are suitable and are appropriately engaged with the requisite concepts. The program is very community centred and community reliant, thereby potentially reflecting an excellent school-community partnership. Several Plan-It Youth co-ordinators attend the training courses and use their attendance time to both participate and to get to know the people in training. It could be questioned however whether this is most appropriate use of the time of the Regional coordinator to remain at the training for the full period. In terms of Regional coordinator accountability, this is one area that needs closer examination to ensure that the coordinator is using available time in the most strategically effective way. Despite this issue, the program takes community and school partnerships to a new level in some schools.

### 2.2.5 The effectiveness and efficiency of Plan-it Youth in relation the profile, training, support and retention of mentors

Management of mentor training and recruitment is a significant part of the role of the Plan-It Youth Coordinators. Mentor training in 2006 accounted for around 15 per cent of the annual budget for the program, funded by a $150,000 allocation per annum from the TAFE budget. The vast majority of the mentors are training via a program conducted by TAFE NSW, through a course leading to the possible award of a Certificate II course in Mentoring in the Community or Statement of Attainment, depending on the length of training (see Table 17 below).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Training</th>
<th>Percent of total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TAFE Course</td>
<td>98.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trained by another mentor</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other training</td>
<td>0.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No training</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The number of training sessions conducted in 2006 in each Region is shown in Table 18 below. Plan-It Youth coordinators frequently attend all of the training sessions conducted within their Regions.

#### Table 17: Type of training received by mentors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TAFE Institute</th>
<th>Number of Plan-It Youth courses in Semester 2, 2006</th>
<th>Locations (where known)</th>
<th>Number of Plan-It Youth courses in Semester 1, 2007</th>
<th>Locations (where known)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Riverina</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Griffith, Coolamon, Albury, Wagga Wagga</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Tumut, Albury, Wagga Wagga</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Illawarra</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Shellharbour, Shoalhaven</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Shellharbour, Shoalhaven</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Clearly, mentors are the life blood of the Plan-It Youth program, and without them there would obviously be no program. The data available suggests that as at the beginning of 2007, around 1800 mentors have been trained since the inception of the program. Determining precise numbers of active and trained mentors is difficult because new mentors start and some drop out or temporarily discontinue each month. Departmental documents indicate that in 2006 there were 796 active mentors (i.e. those mentoring at least one student representing 44% of the total number trained). Up to that time, over the life of the program, TAFE NSW had trained 1786 mentors. The Regional distribution of this training is shown in Table 19 below.

Table 19: Number of Plan-It Youth Mentors trained

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TAFE Institute</th>
<th>No. of mentors trained</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hunter Institute</td>
<td>751</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Illawarra Institute</td>
<td>180</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Coast Institute</td>
<td>117</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New England Institute</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Riverina Institute</td>
<td>321</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Western Sydney Institute</td>
<td>360</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Western Institute</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>1786</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Information tabled at TAFE Board meeting, 2006

In order to provide an overall perspective of the level of activity of mentors and their training, the example of one Region in the rural west of NSW is instructive. Since 2002, through the local TAFE, 429 mentors have enrolled and 347 completed the courses. The mentors are drawn from a broad spectrum of society and there are no credentials required to do the course as there is no entry requirement. This is because of a belief that many people who have no credentials may be perfect as mentors and an 80 year old man, recently trained, was cited as being just that. The involvement of the co-ordinator becomes important then as part of the ‘sifting and sorting’ process.
Figure 5 below reports data collected in the survey conducted for this evaluation about mentors’ perceptions of the effectiveness of the training. The Table shows that the majority of the mentors trained through the TAFE programs thought that the training was mostly effective, with few believing that it was very ineffective. As reflected in the discussion below, while many mentors were generally satisfied with the training and for many of the mentors this was their first post-school formal training so they have nothing to compare it with, a significant proportion thought that the program could be considerably improved.

![Figure 5: Mentor rating of effectiveness of training received](image)

Mentors are generally drawn from both young and elderly professional and non-professional people, whose motivation is to give something back to the community; working people from the professions, trades and various religious groups and younger people who are involved in community programs or community courses and are seeking opportunities to enhance their own career goals. Mentors range in age from their early 20s to late 80s. In most Regions, male representation is slightly less than 50%. Mentors are most commonly selected by the Plan-It Youth coordinator and attend an introductory information session, after which some prospective mentors drop out because of unsuitable timing or the specific day on which they are required to work. Some of these people commence the program at a later date.

Most of the mentors interviewed found the program to be challenging and rewarding. Mentors indicated that they made friends with the students and teachers. One mentor indicated that a past student still rings her for her birthday after the passing of a number of years.

Despite these generally positive experiences for both mentors and students, the ability to recruit mentors varies from time to time. According to Plan-It Youth co-ordinators, there are usually numerous enquiries, but a commitment to training and the time commitment in the school causes quite a few potential mentors to drop out of the program. The timing of training sessions presents challenges for some Plan-It Youth coordinators in that the availability of potential mentors does not always match the demand from schools. It is efficient to recruit and train mentors in widespread locations “in case” they are needed at some time in the future. Neither is it efficient to conduct training for a small number of mentors when there is high demand in a particular school. Twelve is considered to be an ideal number of mentors for facilitating the program and conducting debriefing sessions in
most Regions. Such targets however are not regularly achieved in all Regions where the
program is undertaken.

In terms of recruitment and in light of discussions with in-school coordinators and mentors,
a number of ideal qualities were outlined for a successful mentor. These include:

- having a positive attitude towards the program
- the ability to listen, the ability to be non-judgemental
- a valuing of education
- being able to act in a facilitation role
- having good communication skills
- the ability to set goals
- positive motivation.

While there appeared to be significant variability in the training of mentors, both in terms
of depth and breadth, content and the length of the training program, mentors indicated
that their training program was essential and gave them a foundation for their involvement
with students. They were particularly appreciative of segments on listening skills which
encouraged the development of the patience necessary for dealing with students. They felt
that the timing for the training program was appropriate although it should be noted that
this varied greatly among Regions. They also indicated the need for regular refresher
courses and that additional support could be provided for team leaders on a regular basis.
Training in debriefing is perceived by the mentors to be particularly relevant to mentors' involvement with students in schools. Some mentors noted that the early part of the
training program which involved a good deal of time spent filling in forms was basically a
waste of time.

The use of existing experienced mentors to act as teachers of the training programs is not
common but was strongly suggested for the future by a number of the mentors being
interviewed. The reason for this suggestion is that some mentors consider the program in its
current form to be too generic and not sufficiently tailored to the particular needs of
mentors working with difficult students in some difficult school settings. Mentors perceive a
particular advantage in having their skilled colleagues to be the teachers for them. In this
way the neophyte mentors have the opportunity to learn from those who are more
experienced colleagues.

It also became evident in discussions with mentors that they would value the opportunity
for regular refresher or update courses perhaps on the basis of one day per year. It was
considered that such experiences provided the mentors with the opportunity to update
their skills, to ensure that they are contemporary in their approach to young people and
also to examine the manner in which they are currently undertaking the mentoring role in
light of other mentors’ practices. While refresher courses are held in some Regions, this is
not consistent across the state. Not all mentors, of course, require such refresher training.
Some refresher courses have been made available under other names (e.g. Mentor
Development Days). During these occasions the mentors listen to speakers and share their
work. As one form of ongoing communication with mentors in a small number of Regions, a
monthly newsletter is published. The purpose of this newsletter is to communicate with
mentors about emerging issues, new regulations that may have some relevance to their
work with students and any other matters of genuine concern to the mentors that may
enhance their role.
While the training program provides mentors with initial support, mentors report that they are also supported by the in-school coordinator, other personnel within schools and by the Plan-It Youth coordinator, whose support and advice they particularly value. The mutual support of other mentors is also important. Mentors indicated that they occasionally take a break from the program in order to pursue specific aspects of their personal lives. The idea of the in-school coordinator, for consistency, being involved in the mentors’ training appealed to some in-school coordinators as a new strategy, as does the development of a local management committee. While a number of mentors suggested the notion of a management committee, when asked what the role of this committee would be, there were very few suggestions.

In terms of the logistics of training for mentors, it is instructive to note the description of the experience outlined by one Plan-It Youth coordinator.

The training is done through TAFE where the mentors are accredited after successfully completing 24 hours (8 x 3 hours) of training. As part of the commitment, the co-ordinator attends the training courses and has even taught one course to ensure that mentors were available. Approximately 150 people have been trained and only two of those were deemed unsuitable. The mentors remain ‘on the books’ and are contacted when it is appropriate. The TAFE Community Welfare students are sometimes used as they seek work placement and they have the highest attrition rate for obvious reasons. Others drop out when they find employment and it is evident that their training and work as mentors facilitates that search and success. Roughly the trained mentors are 33% on, 33% off but available, and 25-33% unavailable.

The comments below from another Regional coordinator highlight a somewhat different perspective of the TAFE training:

The training program, which culminates in a Statement of Attainment, is conducted over 30 hours, organised on one day per week for six hours over a five week period. The program includes in-class activities, guest speakers, meeting young people of appropriate age in schools, and other in-school activities. The program encompasses roles and responsibilities, desirable attributes of mentors, the phases in developing relationships, developing empathetic relationships with adolescents, and also provides opportunities for mentors to increase their skills through leadership courses and activities. Mentors are involved in activities such as excursions, developing computing skills and sharing experiences of their own youth in order to identify themes that remain the same for modern youth.

Finally in relation to training, mentors consistently expressed their appreciation for receiving a certificate when they graduate from their training experience. In some Regions mentors have a name badge that they proudly wear when in the school environment. This would appear to be a very useful idea during a lesson and the need for all visitors in the school to be clearly identified.

Figure 6 below shows data in relation to the mentors’ perceptions of satisfaction with the level of support received gathered from the survey conducted for this evaluation. More than 70 percent of mentors say they are very satisfied, but this data indicates that there is scope for further attention in this area.
In terms of undertaking the role of mentor, there are no prerequisites apart from the requisite legal checks. As with any other program and activity, people drop in and drop out but the real challenge is having enough mentors to service the identified groups in the schools. While the mentors come from all walks of life, most are retired and are keen to assist. It has been reported by one Plan-It Youth coordinator that the process is somewhat self-selecting. Those who are not comfortable and those who struggle to connect with young people tend to drop out of the program as do the students.

A significant challenge in managing the Plan-It Youth mentoring program is to ensure mentors have a clear understanding of the boundaries of this role. These boundaries include not acting as a parent, counsellor, therapist, or authority figure. Having established the boundaries, the role involves, specifically, working with students, acting as facilitators to empower students through the acquisition of information which enables them to make decisions about their futures. A number of mentors report that this was a key aspect of the training.

Despite multiple methods being used to match mentors and students, in-school coordinators and mentors suggest that it is relatively easy to match students to mentors as the mentor demographic is very wide in terms of both age and gender. The number of “failed” or discontinued matches is reported to be relatively low in Plan-It Youth, perhaps as a consequence of the short duration of mentoring in most cases. A mentor to student ratio of one to one is always maintained and the number of available mentors at any time varies according to supply and demand within each Region. Rarely is there a surplus of mentors in relation to the number of students that are interested in participating in the program. Augmenting the number of mentors available sometimes becomes an issue because potential mentors are usually busy people. The Plan-It Youth and school coordinators carefully monitor the quality of relationships between mentors and students, particularly during debriefing sessions.

Discussions with students generally indicated that they were very appreciative of the assistance they had received from their mentors, whose gender was of little relevance to them. A few male students, however, preferred female mentors as they were “easier to get
on with”. In particular, the students were appreciative of the help they had received, in order to provide assistance with a broad range of tasks. These included:

- writing resumes and letters to prospective employers
- developing communication skills
- developing interview skills
- experiencing a variety of possible career paths through excursions
- identifying the steps they need to take to obtain employment positions.

Some mentors provided students with experience of the workplace. Some students subsequently made the important decision that what they had thought might be a future career for them was not really suitable for a variety of reasons. Students were able to describe their experiences, current goals and in a small number of cases, the methods of achieving them. Students also valued the availability of mentors when they needed assistance. One student indicated “I have made a new friend”. Another indicated that he appreciated the mentor’s “wisdom”.

In their response to the survey, mentors said they believed the most effective strategies were simply holding frank and open discussions that allow the students to look at their strengths and to set goals that are achievable. To do this, many mentors mentioned that they were required to be a strong listener. Building on this, a significant number of mentors said that arranging visits to workplaces allowed students to get a better understanding of what skills/training was required in their field of interest.

The things mentors said they enjoyed most were watching the students gain confidence and self esteem to help them realize their dreams, the positive group feeling amongst mentors, and participating in the practicalities of addressing young peoples concerns. Another consistent theme in responses was the feeling expressed that participation in Plan-it Youth was a most rewarding way to be of use in retirement and that it allows retired people to keep in touch with today’s students and gives them the opportunity to be heard without being judged.

### 2.2.6 Involvement of sponsors and management and administrative arrangements

Plan-It Youth was initially implemented with the assistance of a substantial grant from the Kellogg’s Foundation. Since then, various Plan-it Youth Coordinators have sought and obtained funding from various sources to supplement the DET core funding. In one Region, a donation from a registered club currently supports the employment of two part-time mentor coordinators. In another Region, a grant (as yet un-expended) was provided by a welfare organisation to subsidise additional mentor training. The Illawarra Mutual Building Society supported the program in the Illawarra Region for two years. These sponsorship arrangements are said to have largely resulted from personal relationships between key stakeholders. Since 2004, no further large scale sponsorship has been forthcoming.

While program records indicate corporate and community sponsorship was clearly intended to be an ongoing feature of the program, this has not materialised to the extent that it could support the ongoing operation of the program. There has been little interest at a corporate level. In the view of one key stakeholder interviewed, the Plan-It Youth model and the target group it serves does not match that sought by many large
organisations, which prefer to invest in programs that cater for students from a broader ability range.

The weekly time commitment over an extended period required by Plan-It Youth is also said to not be preferred by many businesses that might otherwise encourage their employees to volunteer their expertise to work with schools. It was also suggested that shorter and more targeted contributions such as summer schools and weekend camps is now viewed as more suitable to the needs of business. It was also noted that the landscape for business sponsorship is also changing — many firms are now no longer interested in simply “handing out money” from a sense of altruism, or in the form of advertising, but respond to more considered notions of social responsibility. As such they seek to be involved in “bigger picture” programs than Plan-It Youth.

It must also be recognised that Plan-It Youth mentoring is in effect, subsidised by the voluntary contributions of mentors and others involved in the program. While most do not make a direct contribution in cash, many local and Regional business and community organisations such as The Smith Family, DSF, Chambers of Commerce and Regional Development agencies make in-kind contributions to the Plan-It Youth program in the form of time for employees to participate in face to face mentoring and in some cases, program management activities including attending reference group and local management committees. Similarly, many local business owners donate their time to the program as mentors, which often incurs personal costs.

Future consideration of sponsorship of the Plan-It Youth program, even at the local school level, needs to take account of the fact that this is not the only school-based program to make demands on the time of business and industry, and there are limits to how much time busy individuals and organisations can be expected to give. For example, work experience programs have long been a part of the business/education partnership in NSW. The emergence of school based apprenticeships and other VET in Schools initiatives place demands on employers. All of these efforts, including Plan-It Youth, have enhancement of student learning outcomes as their primary goal.

However, there are strong benefits for business, and society as a whole, in students being as well prepared for the future as possible in terms of their knowledge, skills and attitudes and in relation to the world of work. The importance of students developing awareness of the options for participation in post-school life is recognized in a wide range of State and Commonwealth policies and programs, including the employability skills, enterprise education, and careers initiatives such as “The Real Game”.

While the goal of achieving a self supporting program through sponsorship has not been achieved, the unanimous view of Regional Equity Coordinators was that this aspect of the program model should not be pursued in future. They considered that the time of Plan-It Youth coordinators would be better spent developing the educational linkages of the program than in pursuing further sponsorship. To do otherwise was thought to be simply a distraction from the Coordinator’s core business. It was also thought that reliance on corporate sponsorship to support the program might open the possibility for conflicts of interest to develop between the goals and priorities of sponsors and those of schools and the DET.
2.3 Strategic alignment between Plan-It Youth and other related initiatives and programs

At the heart of any consideration about the strategic alignment between the Plan-It Youth program and other related initiatives is an agreement about the overall purpose of the initiative for young people. It became apparent during interviews conducted for this evaluation that the perception of the overall purpose of the program varied considerably depending on the stakeholder interviewed and also the Region where the Plan-It Youth program was operating. In some contexts the program was considered under the general umbrella of a program where student well-being and student welfare were primary considerations. In contrast, in a small number of Regions the program was clearly seen to fit within the broader framework of School to Work. In this situation the focus of the initiative was deliberately targeted at those young people who were considered to be at risk of leaving school, with the purpose of the program seen to be clearly focussed on assisting those young people to make informed decisions about their future, whether in the school context or in relation to future work possibilities.

This dichotomy of views as to whether the program should have a welfare focus or a school transition to work focus continued to dominate discussions with key stakeholders throughout the data gathering for this evaluation. In various school based contexts and in some Regions, it became evident that the actual focus of the program had not been determined. In these situations it was apparent that the program contained elements of both student well-being and School to Work. The consequence of this situation has meant that in a number of Regions the Plan-It Youth program has not been able an accepted and integral part of regional equity planning and was not seen to have a role within the broader strategic imperatives of the Department of Education and Training. The uncertainty of the positioning of the program has meant that in the majority of cases, there is limited strategic alignment with other key initiatives operating at the school, Region or system levels.

Further evidence for this dichotomy can be found in the methods of selection of students to be engaged in the program. Some in-school coordinators clearly articulated that those students experiencing personal difficulties at home, or whose self-esteem was perceived by other staff to be low, were immediately encouraged to participate in the program. In other contexts the major criterion for student inclusion in the program was any allusion to the fact that the student may be contemplating leaving school and not completing Year 12. In these circumstances the selection processes for students to be involved in the program not only reinforces its particular strategic location within the school in terms of identified priorities, but also determines the nature of the experiences that students receive within the actual Plan-It Youth program.

The outcome of the situation described above, in terms of unclear intentions and lack of alignment with other strategic imperatives, has resulted in significant variability in the manner in which the program has been implemented in various Regions throughout the state. While the program should always remain sufficiently flexible to respond to contextual characteristics, the variability of its outcomes has also exacerbated the issue in terms of its alignment with other strategic imperatives.

In order to enhance the impact of the program and to facilitate its continuity, it is imperative that the program is more strategically located within a defined policy context in the future, where it can more easily align with the existing strategic initiatives. In its
current form, one of the greatest strengths of the Plan-It Youth program is the effective application of mentoring as a tool for assisting students to make informed decisions.

In terms of the original intentions of the Plan-It Youth program, and the manner in which some Plan-It Youth Coordinators currently implement the program, it would appear that one solution to the identification of the initiative in relation to broader strategic themes of the Department of Education and Training, is to locate the program within the broader framework of the Department’s Education and Training Strategy for 15 to 19 Year Olds in NSW. Published as a policy document for the period 2006-2009, its Introduction makes the following key comment.

We aspire to a future where all 15-19 year olds are well equipped to make meaningful life choices and to become active participants in their communities, in our democracy and increasingly as global citizens. For this to occur, and to secure their economic future, young adults will need to be fully engaged in education, training or skilled employment. (“An Education and Training Strategy for 15 to 19 Year Olds in NSW 2006 - 2009”)

The goals of the Plan-It Youth program appear to be highly consistent with the ethos expressed in the 15-19 Year Old Strategy documentation. Plan-It Youth should therefore align very closely as one of the key tools for enabling schools and Regions to effectively address the underlying priorities of this policy document. As the strategy document says:

A recent study indicated that over thirty percent of NSW government school Higher School Certificate (HSC) graduates enter university, over twenty-three percent enter Vocational Education and Training (VET), around seven percent become apprentices, five percent trainees and many directly enter the workforce. A minority, however, are still not engaged in work or study. As a society, this is a crucial issue that we must address (An Education and Training Strategy for 15 to 19 Year Olds in NSW 2006–2009, p.3).

The Plan-It Youth program is well-placed to address several of the key goals of the 15-19 year old strategy. The policy document for the strategy identifies three key goals:

1. Aiming higher
2. Supporting strongly
3. Strengthening connections

Of particular relevance to the Plan-It Youth program are the second and the third goals because of the program’s strong support and focus on assisting young people to establish pathways and connections with systems and partnerships in a variety of ways.

The link between the goals of the Plan-It Youth program and the 15-19 Year Old Strategy are evident in the following extract from the 15-19 year old policy document:

Students who are well supported and who know they are valued and respected, are more likely to be engaged in their studies. They are more likely to achieve good results and stay at school or TAFE, and more likely to undertake further education and training.

We know that there are many 15-19 year olds who are unsure about their future and find it challenging to make sense of the choices available to them. There are others who require additional special help. We will assist
young adults in their decision making about options and choices and provide personalised support to individuals and groups of learners.

While the building of character is the primary role of parents and families, we also recognise the role of schools in developing responsible, well-rounded citizens (An Education and Training Strategy for 15 to 19 Year Olds in NSW 2006-2009, p.10).

The policy document also describes the third goal in the following way:

By developing partnerships between schools, parents and care-givers, TAFE, universities, industry, other agencies and the community, students can connect to multiple and diverse support and career options. As well, they can expand the horizons of their learning experiences. We are committed to creating a more highly connected education and training system so that students will have greater choice and more opportunities to undertake learning programs that suit their particular needs. Greater use of partnerships and technologies will help us achieve this (An Education and Training Strategy for 15 to 19 Year Olds in NSW 2006-2009, p.12).

By positioning Plan-It Youth within the broader spectrum of the NSW Department of Education and Training’s Strategy for 15 to 19-Year-Olds, the Plan-It Youth program would not only receive greater prominence, potentially, it also can leverage off many of the resources and structures that have already been established at school and Regional level for the implementation of the 15 to 19-year-old Strategy as a tool for achieving policy outcomes. More particularly, by positioning the Plan-It Youth program within the broader spectrum of the School to Work programs, it can access a variety of resources. Among those is the School to Work Planning, Employment Related Skills Logbook. It is noteworthy that this document is already being used by a number of schools as part of the Plan-It Youth program to document students’ goals and experiences in relation to the identification of future career pathways.

Initially piloted in 1999, the original Skills Logbook was extensively revised during 2001 in consultation with careers advisers, teachers, curriculum consultants and vocational education consultants. The revised edition was distributed to schools in 2002. The Logbook provides a tool for students to record their individual School to Work plans, store evidence of their participation, achievements and qualifications and articulate their learning into résumés, job and tertiary studies applications and interviews.

Since 2002, over 250,000 copies of the Logbooks have been distributed to schools for students in Years 9 to 12. An overwhelming amount of positive feedback has been received by the Vocational Education in Schools Directorate about the style, content and flexibility of the new logbook. The introduction of the revised Logbook was supported by state-wide targeted training for School to Work co-ordinators and school executive.

The rationale for establishing closer links between Plan-It Youth and other Department of Education and Training strategies and programs is strengthened by consideration of both the target age group for the various programs and the nature of the activities undertaken during Plan-It Youth that have demonstrated greatest success. Currently students in Years 9 and 10 are the most common participants in the program, with some students in Year 11 accessing the program for short periods. This age range is highly consistent with the target group for the current School to Work initiatives that are being undertaken. The graph
outlined below as Figure 7, although somewhat dated, similarly targets students in a comparable age range to the School to Work program.

Figure 7 Number of students engaged in School to Work


Similarly, an analysis of the activities undertaken in the School to Work program, designed to create future pathways for young people is highly similar to the activities undertaken by mentors as key strategies within the Plan-It Youth program, as shown in Figure 8 below.

Figure 8: Activities undertaken in School to Work program

![Activities identified by schools that contributed to School to Work Planning in 2002](https://www.det.nsw.edu.au/vetinschools/files/ppt/govdir.ppt#295,4,Slide 4)

The lack of shared understanding about the purpose of Plan-It Youth described earlier in this report has led to an ad hoc approach being adopted by schools as to how Plan-It Youth...
contributes to the broader school. Closer alignment between Plan-It Youth and the School to Work program would have the following benefits for students:

- traditional academic subjects can positively incorporate vocational learning principles
- effective teaching and learning are enhanced by providing environments within and beyond the classroom, which links student learning to personal social and work contexts
- opportunity is provided to more directly link subjects to education, training and employment
- opportunity is provided to directly enhance student support for subject selection in accordance with future educational opportunities or career pathways
- opportunity is provided for students to understand and map both career and study options for the future, thereby feeling more confident about the future
- the intrinsic value of subjects is enhanced because of a direct link to future education and career pathways that the students would then be able to perceive
- such an approach also enhances the opportunity for parents and the community to appreciate the curriculum being taught both in terms of its current and future relevance to students, particularly in terms of its ability to help students plan for the future.

The Plan-It Youth program can play a key role in helping to achieve that vision if it were systematically positioned as a key tool in assisting the “Creating Future Pathways” initiative. The diagram outlined below as Figure 9 describes four possible pathways that can be undertaken by students as part of the School to Work initiative and to achieve the vision encapsulated in that program’s rationale. The Plan-It Youth program can make a contribution in a significant way to each one of these pathways for young people.

More particularly a pathway assists students in the following ways:

1. **Planning Transition Pathways** - this initiative supports students to gain confidence in self managing their career and taking stepping stones to success
2. **Exploring Career Futures** - this pathway helps students to access the latest information about work, education and training options
3. **Strengthening Student Outcomes through Vocational Learning** - this pathway provides students with the opportunity to gain employment related skills and experience authentic learning in all curriculum areas
4. **Building Networks and Connections** - this pathway strengthens career community and workplace learning opportunities for students through strategic connections partnerships and networks.

Figure 9: School to Work pathways
Discussions with mentors clearly indicate that much of their work can be grouped around each of these four pathways. However, in its current form, Plan-It Youth is neither a systematic nor coherent strategy and therefore is rarely followed up by the school or seen to be part of an ongoing strategic program within the school.

The value of integrating Plan-It Youth into the School to Work Program is further reinforced by the latter’s recent evaluation (Hollier and Hart, 2006). This evaluation highlighted a number of significant successful outcomes arising from the effective implementation of the School to Work program among the major achievements identified, there has been evidence of the following issues:

- the integration of vocational learning across key learning areas
- students planning transition pathways
- students exploring career futures
- strengthening student outcomes through vocational learning
- enterprise learning revitalised career education
- individualised learning experiences
- access ensured for all students
- engaging with students before year nine
- measuring and reporting individual student outcomes.

It is evident that the Plan-It Youth program can make a significant contribution to the ongoing achievement of each of these outcomes if it is seen to be effectively positioned within the overall School to Work program.

Of interest however to the Plan-It Youth program, is the fact that the evaluation the School to Work program (Hollier and Hart, 2006) identified the need for the support of the school senior executive if the impact of the program were to be sustained. Similarly, the
evaluation identified the necessity for whole school planning, where teachers from different key learning areas could share ideas and help initiatives become embedded in school practice. It is clear that both are fundamental to the ongoing success of the program and must be explicitly developed if it is to help students in the longer term.

Similarly, the Hollier and Hart evaluation identified that greater levels of success were achieved when School to Work teams which unlocked synergies, built enthusiasm and energy and shared the load of the program. In an attempt to more systematically embed the program within schools, opportunities were identified that ensured the integration of vocational best practice learning throughout the curriculum and extended students’ opportunities and experience through the learning of employability skills.

In light of the well-articulated approach now in existence within the NSW DET relating to the Strategy for 15 to 19-year-olds, it is apparent that Regions can take a greater responsibility for the development of such programs that respond to identified local needs and within the framework of relevant Regional priorities. Indeed a key recommendation from the school to work evaluation (Hollier and Hart, 2006) was the need to extend Regional planning, to acknowledge and share learnings from those schools that have achieved significant success with the program and to more strongly encourage and lead those schools that have not yet done so. Such initiatives not only ensured wider dissemination of the initiatives relating to the School to Work program but also provided the momentum that is necessary to ensure the sustainability of the program within schools and provide the direct link between Regional initiatives and the activities undertaken by schools.

In its recent publication entitled School to Work, the NSW Department of Education and Training makes the following statement:

> While we have achieved much in providing the best School to Work opportunities for our young people, we need to do more. We need to foster and grow career development as K-12 strategy which builds on and strengthens current achievements in the secondary years of schooling and developed a stronger foundation for career awareness in the early years of schooling. This approach is designed to provoke provide a more holistic, planned strategy based on the developmental approach to student career and transition rather than a “Just in Time” model. Such an approach requires careful strategic planning particularly at the Regional level to ensure a systematic approach School to Work Program- Looking Forward 2006 to 2010.

In this context Plan-It Youth as an initiative may be a useful tool for facilitating the achievement of the key outcomes relating to student career development and transitions in the immediate future.

The link between Regional planning and program development is illustrated in the following quote from the Department of Education and Training’s response to the School to Work Evaluation:

Indeed the report continues to emphasise the importance of the Strategy for 15 to 19-year-olds, including the need to focus on comprehensive pathways and career planning designed to equip students to make more successful life decisions and be better prepared to face the challenges and opportunities of the future. The philosophy and strategy underpinning the Plan-It Youth program is well-equipped to make a significant contribution to the achievement of this outcome for this group of young people.
Comparison of Plan-It Youth with other related programs

In determining the most appropriate target population of a program such as Plan-It Youth, consideration must be given to existing programs and frameworks to ensure a complementary approach to addressing the career and transition needs of young people, whilst ensuring there is limited overlap both at the Regional and school level in terms of resources expended.

Already at the national level, an initiative with similar goals to Plan-It Youth entitled the Youth Pathways Program operates in all states of Australia with a specific focus on those students at risk of leaving school. Youth Pathways aims to assist the most at risk young people to make a successful transition through to completion of Year 12 (or its equivalent) and ultimately, to further education, training or employment and active participation in the community. Nationally the program assists over 26,000 young people aged 13 to 19 years old each year by providing intensive individualised assistance and support to help young people to make a successful transition.

Eligible young people participating in Youth Pathways receive services which include:

- personal one-on-one assistance to help identify strengths, goals and barriers
- individual support to achieve their goals
- individual support and guidance to help overcome barriers
- other services aimed at better equipping young people to successfully make the transition through school and from school to further education, training or employment.

There are three identified outcomes for participants of Youth Pathways:

1. retain or re-engage participants in the school environment through to completion of Year 12 or its equivalent
2. engage or re-engage participants in non school-based education, vocational learning and training
3. prepare participants for effective engagement in Job Network activities.

The various pathways that are integral to this Australian Government initiative are designed to address each of the above outcomes in accordance with the particular background and needs of the young people participating in the program.

It is therefore essential that any attempt to more systematically integrate the Plan-It Youth program among Regional initiatives as a tool for achieving Regional and State wide priorities, does not target the same group of students whose needs are already being addressed through Youth Pathways. It is instructive to speak to some young people who are currently participating in a range of school transition to work programs, many of which overlap and are seen by those students as an opportunity to have time out of the school. Such a scenario is wasteful of resources and is best monitored at the Regional level in terms of the identification of particular programs targeted at particular groups of students, to ensure the achievement of appropriate outcomes in relation to 15 to 19-year-olds.

In ensuring the alignment between Plan-It Youth and other strategic programs, it is also important to acknowledge the nationally developed Employability Skills Framework that enterprises argue individuals should have along with the job specific or relevant technical
skills. This framework therefore not only provides the parameters within which career and transition initiatives could operate but also identifies key outcomes to be achieved from such programs. Again Plan-It Youth, if it were strategically positioned, could provide a significant contribution to the achievement of many of the personal and work-related skills embodied within the Framework.

The Employability Skills Framework incorporates the following personal attributes that contribute to overall employability:

- loyalty
- commitment
- honesty and integrity
- enthusiasm
- reliability
- personal presentation
- commonsense
- positive self-esteem
- sense of humour
- balanced attitude to work and home life
- ability to deal with pressure
- motivation
- adaptability.

The key skills identified in conjunction with the personal attributes to make up the Employability Skills Framework are:

- communication skills that contribute to productive and harmonious relations between employees and customers
- team work skills that contribute to productive working relationships and outcomes
- problem-solving skills that contribute to productive outcomes
- initiative and enterprise skills that contribute to innovative outcomes
- planning and organising skills that contribute to long-term and short-term strategic planning
- self-management skills that contribute to employee satisfaction and growth
- learning skills that contribute to ongoing improvement and expansion in employee and company operations and outcomes
- technology skills that contribute to effective execution of tasks.

Such frameworks would provide a clear focus for the efforts of those engaged in the Plan-It Youth program, particularly from the perspective of what initiatives can be undertaken. However, given the deep seated nature of the attributes and skills that contribute to employability, the question must be asked whether the ten one hour sessions provided by Plan-It Youth can make a significant contribution to the development of the fundamental
characteristics. The Plan-It Youth program has clearly demonstrated that quality mentoring programs require hard work and sometimes difficult decisions. In addition they require strong commitments from both mentors and the young people being mentored as well. They require a specific purpose and generally deliver specific outcomes from raising self-esteem, assisting young people to engage in more purposeful behaviour and often result in improved school attendance through to better informed career choices and a more secure place in education or the workforce. Plan-It Youth is an example of where mentoring has been employed to achieve this outcome.

Any consideration therefore of its future should take careful account of the impact of mentoring as an approach for assisting young people to make informed decisions about their future lives. The Plan-It Youth program has clearly demonstrated the advantage of this strategy as an approach for working effectively with young people in the 15 to 19 year old age range.

Within the NSW Department of Education and Training, other mentoring programs also operate successfully. One example is the LEAPS Program (Law Firms Encouraging and Assisting Promising Students). LEAPS is a mentoring program that has been run in partnership between the NSW Department of Education and various legal firms since 2000 in limited numbers of locations across NSW. Under this program, Year 9 school students spend two mornings ‘shadowing’ their mentor in their offices, followed by a team-building excursion with their mentors and then fortnightly trips to visit their mentors in the city for lunch and interactive group mentoring sessions for the remainder of the school year. These interactive sessions take place during lunchtime every fortnight during the school term. The sessions are held away from the school generally at a local community or neighbourhood centre.

The emphasis of the LEAPS mentoring program is to encourage student participation and engagement in learning, motivate students to set career and life goals, and in particular to complete high school and undertake some form of further education, broaden students’ experiences and their understanding of career options, enhance their decision-making skills, and empower them to effectively deal with challenges and opportunities they will encounter in their lives. LEAPS is conducted in Priority School Program schools only. LEAPS is not conducted in schools where the Plan-It Youth Mentoring is provided.

The past coordinator of the LEAPS program considered key success factors of the program to include:

- effective mentor training. For the LEAPS program this was provided by the state-based NSW DET Coordinator
- Year 9 students being involved as this was considered the most critical decision making time of the student’s life in terms of their future
- students being involved in the program for one year
- individual mentoring session of one hour duration
- regular fortnightly sessions (many believed once a week too often for working mentors to be involved)
- the appropriate level of support provided to mentors by the NSW DET
- a strong focus on student outcomes at all points of the mentoring cycle
• appropriate materials to be available for use by mentors during their mentoring sessions that identify the desired student outcome of the session
• the involvement of parents at the beginning of the mentoring cycle
• identifying the right students to be involved. This group were generally selected based on their perceived ability to respond to mentoring so that mentors were capable of achieving an outcome without significant welfare issues presenting
• an equal numbers of girls and boys participating at the school site
• the school being involved and on-board. This would be reflected in school plans being developed that included LEAPS so that every opportunity for the program to succeed is made available and activities such as sports days for example, do not clash with mentoring sessions
• the school valuing and respecting the contributions of the mentors. For example, when a student is away on the day of mentoring sessions the school contacts the mentor to advise of the students’ absence
• mentors valuing and respecting students. For example, mentors contacting the school to advise when they cannot attend a mentoring session
• holding the sessions off-site (e.g. local community centre) which avoids potential issues with school staff not valuing mentors contributions to student development
• basic physical needs of both the mentor and student are considered and catered for
• identifying a “rover’ mentor to cover when mentors are unable to attend
• celebrations at the end of the mentoring cycle.

LEAPS is considered by many to provide an outstanding example of the application of mentoring as a key strategy for assisting young people. If Plan-It Youth were to continue to be used in a systematic manner in schools, then its efficacy could be further enhanced by learning from the experience of such programs as LEAPS, through the application of best practice in mentoring demonstrated in the program.

Other mentoring programs for young people also operate effectively with young people who are at risk of leaving school. One such example occurs in the South Western area of Sydney, with a strong community focus. This program has been acknowledged because of its effective use of mentoring as a key strategy for assisting young people. Through the Youth Partnerships initiative, children and young people of Arabic-speaking and Pacific and Islander background have been provided with a better learning opportunity for long-term personal development. The aim of the program is to build young people's self-esteem and give them an opportunity to understand their real value and worth. Through effective mentoring, the plan provides increased parental support and educates parents to help them prevent risk-taking behaviour among young people. Importantly, the plan aims to increase community harmony by strengthening community interaction through communication and to build on the capacity of the Government and the community to understand and effectively respond to young people of Arabic speaking background.

Such initiatives demonstrate the wide applicability of mentoring as a strategy not only for young people but also for the community at large. However if Plan-It Youth is to find an effective place in the future within the current educational school system, it must be more directly aligned to the larger NSW DET initiatives, such as those outlined above. In its
current form its greatest strength is the strategy, namely mentoring, that is used with young people. Because of its current lack of agreement about purpose, structured follow-up by schools of outcomes achieved with mentors is at times *ad hoc* and left to chance. In order to maximise the outcomes of the program and enhance the career and transition benefits for young people, opportunities do exist for the program to be more closely aligned with state-wide imperatives, but with Regions taking greater carriage for the day to day operation of the programs, in response to their distinctive contextual characteristics.

### 2.3 Factors facilitating and hindering the program

The following sections of the chapter discuss the factors that facilitate or hinder the implementation of the Plan-It Youth program identified during the evaluation. This section has been written as a summary of the major findings detailed earlier in the chapter.

#### 2.3.1 Facilitating Factors

In relation to the Plan-It Youth initiative, a diverse variety of stakeholders engaged in the program have been consulted. The facilitating factors may be divided into three broad themes. They include: resourcing of the program, conduct of the program, and promotion of the program. The following factors that were thought to facilitate Plan-It Youth have been synthesised from data collected through each of the data gathering methodologies used in this evaluation.

Each of these broad themes is discussed below in terms of the contribution that it makes the overall Plan-It Youth initiative.

**Resourcing of the Program**

In the first instance, it is noteworthy that this program receives a high level of financial support from the Department of Education and Training State and Regional Offices. In 2006, the state office allocation to the program is in the order of $1 million per annum. Some departmental documents put the figure at $1.1 million including the TAFE contribution for training. The majority of these funds go towards the cost of Plan-It Youth coordinator salaries, with a small amount provided for other program expenses. Regional offices support the project through provision of office space, travel expenses, and other operational expenses. These Regional contributions are not costed as part of the program budget, but if included would raise the real level of expenditure on the program by up to 25 per cent. The observation has been made that when calculated on a per student basis, the cost per head of participation in Plan-It Youth is very high in comparison to other programs of a similar nature.

In addition to the financial support for the program, there is a large contribution of important, but intangible support from stakeholders at all levels, both within the Department of Education and Training and from the community.

At the local school level, support for the initiative is tangible not only among school leaders but also among teacher coordinators. It is noteworthy that some stakeholders have stressed that the level of funding provided by the NSW Department of Education and Training is in fact quite high relative to the number of students participating in the program.
Wherever possible, principals attempt to build the costs for the program into their annual school budget, due to the benefit that they perceive for those students who have been targeted to participate in the program. Principals ensure that space is provided for student participation in the program and that mentors are welcomed into the school on all occasions.

At a more generic level, an active State Reference Group strongly endorses the program, its philosophy and supports its continuity. It is evident that the reference group is passionate about the program and the results, although generally anecdotal, that have been produced with young people who have participated in the program.

**Conduct of the Program**

In discussing the conduct of the program, it should be stated at the outset that Plan-It Youth builds on a body of research in relation to mentoring that lends a theoretical foundation to mentoring as an effective strategy for addressing the needs of young people at risk. Feedback from participants clearly identifies that the relationships developed through mentoring are valued and provide the trust upon which genuine communication between mentor and mentee can be built.

In addition to this facilitating factor, principals regularly report that the students targeted for participation in the program are generally those that are considered to derive some considerable benefit from engagement with the program. While these benefits may manifest themselves in terms of increased student engagement, many participants would suggest that the greatest benefit of the program lies in the clarification of their own future both during and after school. The role of the mentor is pivotal in producing this result.

School visits and interviews with in-school coordinators clearly indicate that those students involved in the program are deriving significant benefit from participation. However, critics of the program would suggest that those students in greatest need of the services provided by Plan-It Youth are not necessarily the students who are invited to participate in the program. More appropriate targeting of students to participate in the program may further enhance its overall efficacy in the future. Despite these comments the vast majority of principals would suggest, in its current form, Plan-It Youth most appropriately targets the students who will derive greatest benefit from the investment made at the local level.

Indeed, principal support is tangible in a range of ways. For example, period allocations are often made for in-school coordinators in recognition of the importance of this role. A regular space is generally found to conduct mentoring sessions, often within the constraints of limited accommodation within the school. Teachers who are ambivalent about the program sometimes complain about the absence of participating students on a regular basis from recurring lessons within particular key learning areas. For example if mathematics is always taught second period on a Thursday, students will always miss that period during their participation in the program.

Depending on the initiatives undertaken by the mentor, it is possible that students may be absent from other lesson periods. This is particularly the case where the mentor accompanies students on excursions, related to work experience. This task is undertaken to familiarise students with different career paths and the opportunities that may flow from exposure to those various career options. On some occasions students can be absent from school for a full day. Despite this absence many students interviewed suggested that the time is being profitably used because it helps them to clarify participants’ career options. Interviews with mentors indicated that they considered that success had been achieved if
the student had identified either a career goal or a decision to re-engage at school until the end of Year 12, to complete the Higher School Certificate.

In order to achieve this goal, mentors spend large amounts of time in preparation, in organising interviews with employers, in identifying appropriate workplace sites for familiarising students and in organising the transportation logistics to enable students to witness prospective careers first hand. These experiences are seen by many participants to be integral to the overall success of the program.

Discussions with mentors reveal that there is considerable variety in the implementation of the program in different settings. Some mentors scrupulously follow a week by week program almost in a lockstep fashion, while others are totally flexible in determining the content of the program that they discuss with their mentees on a weekly basis. Indeed while some programs with mentors may extend for a period of only six weeks, others have been reported to extend over a four-year period. While these are both extremes, it is apparent that the majority of mentoring programs continue over one school term at present, representing approximately 10 to 12 weeks. Several mentors indicated that it may be preferable for some participants to be engaged in the program longer than one term.

Plan-It Youth Coordinators and mentors believed that the length of time a student may need for mentoring depends on individual needs. There does not appear to be a single answer to the question “how long is long enough for mentoring?” In considering the issue of the most appropriate length of time for mentoring, the issue of the purpose of Plan-It Youth should be kept uppermost in mind. If the program is intended primarily to address transitional planning, then the typical 10-12 week program may be sufficient. If the purpose of mentoring is to address personal issues, then the research literature suggests that more than 12 months mentoring is typically needed. The implication of this structure is that different mentors are starting with different participating students at different times.

Promotion of the program

Key stakeholders engaged in this program at region, school and community level are all strong supporters of its benefit and consequently promote the program actively among respective constituencies. In promoting the advantages of the program, two key aspects are regularly cited. The first relates to the success stories of many students who have participated in the program and continue to sustain a relationship with mentors due to the impact that the program has had on their lives. At another level the program is also seen to be a valuable vehicle for building the capacity of community members who act as mentors for students engaged in the program. While this is seen to be a noble outcome of the program, it should be stressed that it is not seen to be the primary objective and indeed may be interpreted as an unanticipated consequence of the program. Despite this, mentors participating in the program find the experience both personally and socially fulfilling and perceive Plan-It Youth as an opportunity to give back to the community at the local level.

As indicated elsewhere in this report there is not a consistent demographic characteristic of all mentors participating in this program. In both metropolitan and rural locations, some mentors have only recently left school, while others have retired from professional careers, some have private businesses and are so committed to the program that they make time during their day to ensure that they can assist young people under their care. In other cases the mentors are also parents of young people at the school who have decided that they can make a comparable contribution to the young people in this way. These diverse backgrounds are thought to add considerable richness to the experience provided to young
people through the program. There was a widespread view among Plan-It Youth coordinators and In-school coordinators that interaction with mentors by the school provides a strong vehicle for communication about other school initiatives and thereby becomes a tool for promoting community awareness of the school and its achievements.

One occasion when mentors interact closely with the school is during the celebration of success at the conclusion of the participants’ mentoring program. On this occasion, mentors, teachers, students and their parents/carers celebrate together the success of the young people participating in the program. These celebrations are seen to be a symbolic gesture not only of the young people’s ability to remain within a program over an extended period of time, but also they represent in some cases, a turning point in the young person’s life. In the eyes of mentors and participants, these celebratory occasions are seen to be extremely important as a stepping stone towards continuity of the initiatives undertaken during the mentoring period.

**Inhibiting Factors**

Based on the evidence gathered, the following issues have been identified as significant inhibitors which may have a negative influence on the ongoing success of the Plan-It Youth program. These include:

- relationship of the Plan-It Youth program with other state office, regional and school initiatives
- administration of Plan-It Youth
- conduct of the program within schools
- measurement of program effectiveness
- training and engagement of mentors.

**Relationship of the Plan-It Youth Program with other state office, regional and school initiatives**

Despite the fact that this program has strong support from participating stakeholders, the view of many observers is that Plan-It Youth can only be sustained if it is located within a broader strategic priority at the state office, regional and school levels. As noted elsewhere in this report, the lack of connection between Plan-It Youth and other DET programs designed to facilitate the transition of young people into further study or work presents a considerable challenge for the future. It has been suggested that the location of the program within the NSW DET Equity Directorate disconnects the initiative from other mainstream transition programs within the Department of Education and Training. At the same time, the extent to which the program was strongly embedded in the equity planning processes of regions varied considerably.

While this disconnectedness is partly attributable to the history and evolution of the initiative, the overall impact of any program will always be limited when it is not seen to be part of a more strategic priority with the appropriate State office, Region and school support. The absence of a strategic home has resulted in a lack of connectedness to Regional planning and related regional consultancy support in some regions. Such an
outcome does not facilitate the ongoing focus on this program as a key tool for addressing the emerging needs of young people.

At the local school level, the overall impact of the program is inhibited by the fact that in the majority of schools Plan-It Youth is not linked to any other identified school priority. As a result some teachers are aware of the program, but only in terms of mentors’ visiting the school and discussing the future of particular students with them. It is not seen by the majority of staff to be an integral part of the overall thrust of the school priorities concerning school to work transition or student well-being. The unfortunate consequence of this situation is that while mentors establish productive and effective relationships with young people, resulting in the identification of student goals for the future, the school sees no direct responsibility in following through with that student to ensure that their future is mapped out at school, or at TAFE, or into tertiary education to facilitate the achievement of the student’s goal. In some schools this is the responsibility of the careers adviser, in others the Year Adviser may play this role, and in some schools, it does not happen at all.

While this may be a flaw in these schools’ general provision of careers and transition planning rather than the Plan-It Youth per se, the lack of connectedness nonetheless contributes to a perception of mentoring providing an ad hoc rather than systematic solution to the needs of young people at risk.

Until this issue is systematically addressed, the overall impact of the Plan-It Youth program will continue to be inhibited. It is acknowledged that the development of strategies to achieve the student goal cannot be seen to be the domain of mentors. However a formal protocol for communicating between mentors and the school should be established to ensure that the work of the mentors is systematically followed through to maximise the impact.

Many of the issues highlighted above have also occurred because of the ad hoc way that the program has grown over time, thereby limiting the coherence of implementation of the program across the state. It is apparent that this program does not currently operate in every Region, and in those Regions where it is currently operating, it is not necessarily seen to be part of a broader strategic initiative.

Such factors only serve to reduce the potential impact of the program on the young people for whom it is designed. If the Plan-It Youth program is to be successful in the future then it is imperative that it be seen to be part of a broader strategic imperative. In this way Plan-It Youth can be seen to be one tool, employed through a successful mentoring program that is devised to contribute to the overall achievement of a broader strategic imperative.

Moreover there is no established position about the role of parents/carers in relation to the Plan-It Youth program at the moment. As with other NSW Department of Education and Training programs, sustainability of the impact is an important outcome to which all schools should aspire in terms of the funding allocated. In some schools, the mentor sees the parent/carer as a key partner in the process and is contacted at the end of each of the weekly sessions to ensure that the parent/carer is fully informed of the progress of the meeting being undertaken by the mentor.

In other situations a deliberate decision has been made to make no contact with the parent/carer at any stage during the program. In the third instance some parents/carers are invited to the celebration occasion at the conclusion of the mentoring period. It would appear that if the sustainability of the outcomes of the mentoring process is to be maximised, the engagement of parents wherever possible, would appear to be a paramount consideration.
**Administration of Plan-It Youth**

Because of the current uncertainty of the strategic place of Plan-It Youth within the DET overall framework, the initiative has been subjected to a variety of administrative challenges that may not have otherwise occurred. In its current form there is a lack of a full-time coordinator at State office level for project program management purposes.

At the regional level it is evident that Plan-It Youth operates as a program that responds to local needs. At the same time regional operations appear to be driven by interpretation of the programs’ purpose developed by each Plan-It Youth coordinator. Without a unified, state-wide perspective, the program will not be optimally effective in meeting the needs of young people. This would be greatly assisted by the updating of the current Program Guidelines. Such comments in no way denigrate the need and importance for regions to construct programs such as Plan-It Youth in such a way as to ensure that they are responsive to the needs of young people in distinctive contexts.

In contrast, in program planning and program management, the underpinning principles of Plan-It Youth must be maintained to ensure the fidelity of the program towards its espoused objectives. Without such a framework the program lacks internal integrity and coherence and the impact of concomitant outcomes will always be reduced.

In a similar way, because of the lack of a strategic home for Plan-It Youth, issues such as the updating of the Plan-It Youth 2005 Guidelines need to be addressed in the imminent future. Currently the implementation guidelines do not take account of the emerging tri-level structure which now operates within the NSW DET. The alignment of information within the Plan-It Youth Guidelines with the current Departmental structure is a prerequisite to ensure that the overall success of the initiative can be enhanced.

**Conduct of the Program within Schools**

The consultations conducted for this evaluation point to three issues in relation to the conduct of the program within the schools. First, at the most fundamental level there would appear to be a lack of integration between Plan-It Youth and related initiatives at the school level. To a number of observers not directly involved with the initiative, Plan-It Youth is seen to be a community mentoring program that is designed to assist young people. It is acknowledged by these observers that while its intent is admirable, its success will always be limited, because it does not link to other strategic initiatives within the school.

Second, at a more practical level, in some schools where academic achievement is a high priority, there are ongoing complaints from teachers whose periods are regularly missed by students participating in Plan-It Youth. Because the Plan-It Youth initiative is always undertaken on a weekly basis at the same time, this can mean that some students will be absent from a particular period in a particular key learning area every week for at least one term. While teachers are generally willing to provide that students with additional work, it would appear from such comments that students rarely catch up on work missed. The consequence of this situation is that while students may be clarifying potential career paths for the future, they are simultaneously missing the opportunity of enhancing their academic outcomes in particular Key Learning Areas. This situation is a reflection of the lack of legitimacy of Plan-It Youth in the eyes of these teachers. Again this is not a flaw in Plan-It Youth itself (other than perhaps a failure to communicate strongly in regard to the programs purpose and outcomes), but an indicator that out-of-classroom activities may not
be valued as providing genuine educational opportunities. Given the nature of the target group for participation in Plan-It Youth, the fact that it may be unproductive for students to be in class but disengaged, and that mentoring might actually help students more in the long run does not always seem obvious.

Third, the comment was also made by several mentors that the location for mentoring was not necessarily conducive to a successful mentoring context. Several had experienced being placed in out-of-the-way and very old buildings on occasions. They thought that this was not contributing to a healthy program because it did not necessarily demonstrate that the school really valued the program. There is a clear implication that the school must provide an appropriate environment for this program to succeed.

**Measurement of Program Effectiveness**

Measuring the impact of social programs is always a difficult and demanding task, for reasons that have been outlined earlier in this report. However, the fact remains that the data that has been collected at regional and state level in the form of “destinations” data has not provided a comprehensive view of program effectiveness. The absence of a well-constructed performance indicator framework for the program has meant that decision-making about the program has not been made in the best informed manner. Some stakeholders at the regional and local school level would suggest that a lack of measurement of program effectiveness could also be attributed to a lack of leadership or direction from State office personnel about what should be measured and how it should be measured. It is acknowledged that some attempts have been made to strengthen the data collected from the program but these have had limited success.

As a consequence, the data available for program mentoring and evaluation is an ad hoc collection of qualitative and quantitative information that must be taken on face value. The data available through case studies of individual student or mentor experiences are widely used as examples of the programs’ success - but rarely have these case studies been analysed from the perspective of how and why the young people have arrived at the situation that led them being referred to Plan-It Youth, and whether short-term mentoring or more systematic change in the way schools respond to young peoples’ needs is a more appropriate. It may be that the apparent success of Plan-It Youth may have masked deeper issues that may require a preventative, rather than reactive response.

The resulting picture of these situations is an ad hoc attempt to measure outcomes that are sometimes quantitative, sometimes qualitative. However the data (see earlier reported findings) do indicate positive trends in terms of student retention and re-engagement in school, high levels of student satisfaction and mentor satisfaction with the program. While the data gathering would suggest that these outcomes would be expected, there is a clear need to identify a set of quantitative performance indicators linked to program purposes that can be measured on a regular basis, as a form of accountability and reporting in accordance with expenditure of budget allocations from State office.

It should be noted that issues around the measurement of effectiveness and consequent accountability do not relate only to the regional level. Some schools suggested that they were too busy implementing the program to be considering more formal approaches to assessment and evaluation. When questions were asked of in-school coordinators about assessment issues, the most common response was, “We know the program is making a difference. We only have to see the smiles on the students’ faces”. While this is certainly an ongoing indication of the level of satisfaction of the participants in the program, it is
necessary to supplement such anecdotal data with more formally based qualitative and quantitative information. This can then be used to constantly improve the program at the school level, within the broader context of the school’s strategic priorities in this area.

Training and Engagement of Mentors

Discussions with mentors and with those involved in the training of mentors indicate a range of issues needing to be resolved. In the first instance many of these issues spring from a lack of understanding about the overall purpose of the Plan-It Youth program and the overall purpose of training for mentoring within the program. The most common characteristic of the TAFE training provided to prospective mentors at present is its variability. Such variability manifests itself in a range of ways in different regions where it is delivered throughout NSW. Initially the modules, with their accompanying content, seem to vary both in breadth and complexity. Furthermore, programs seem to vary from a weekend school to a program that lasts for several weeks. The program has received considerable criticism from mentors as being too generic and not sufficiently reflective of and tailored to the needs of emerging mentors.

Some Plan-It Youth coordinators used the mentor training program as a selection tool or screening device for future mentors. In the case of participants, it has been reported that some enrolments have no intention of acting as a mentor within the Plan-It Youth program. On the contrary they utilise the program to enhance their employment prospects in other related fields, having achieved the necessary qualification. The attrition rate in some Regional training programs is also significantly higher than in others. While a variety of reasons could be proposed for this variability, the difference in completion rates would indicate the need for a closer analysis of the nature of the program characteristics, of the enrolments and the intentions of training participants after the program.

Indeed in those training programs where mentors are screened for future employment during the training, it would appear that there are more efficient and less expensive ways to initially screen prospective mentors. In this way the cost of training for a mentor who is then screened out of the program would be saved and could be invested in mentors who have a genuine desire to be engaged in the program over the longer term.

The variability in length has also been reported as a factor that has discouraged potential participation of mentors, with some suggesting that longer than a weekend really isn’t a feasible training program in terms of the potential intrusion into their personal lives. This could be a difficult situation to address in light of the fact that the current level of availability of qualified mentors is a significant limitation on the future expansion of the program.

In terms of content to prepare mentors to participate in Plan-It Youth, comments made consistently by mentors indicated that the teaching material could have been more closely tailored to the needs of mentors working in schools. In the various Regions, comments were made that the teaching content was too generic and did not reflect the distinctive context of schools. One explanation for the general content could be that the TAFE training experience was being used by some participants for general employment prospects rather than specifically to prepare them to act as mentors in the Plan-It Youth program. Examples have been regularly cited where University and TAFE students are being trained as mentors but as part of their course, therefore limiting the potential for guaranteed supply and sustainability of relationship with the program.
In addition it became apparent during interviews with mentors that the course content varied from region to region. Because of the variable length of the course, some modules had been omitted, resulting in what some mentors described as only basic preparation. While mentors acknowledged the critical importance of training in order to undertake their role with young people, they equally emphasised the value of a standardised program where all mentors received identical content, because of the essentially identical role that they play with young people in schools. A number of mentors indicated that they would willingly participate as members of a review group to examine the existing training program and identify what they considered to be the most important content that all mentors should receive during future training experiences.

One of the key attributes of success of the Plan-It Youth program is the effective matching of mentors with young people. In-school and Plan-It Youth coordinators consider this to be a critical step in ensuring ongoing success for the young people targeted for the program. While there are very few Indigenous students engaged in the Plan-It Youth program there are even fewer Indigenous mentors available to work with such young people. In those situations where Indigenous mentors are working with Indigenous young people, success is sufficiently strong that such a model should be pursued in the future implementation of the Plan-It Youth program. Therefore the ongoing recruitment of Indigenous mentors may also pose a separate challenge due to the current dearth of such people and the challenges of a full-length the training program provided by TAFE.

Finally it is noteworthy, in terms of potential risk factors, that many students have been referred to the Plan-It Youth program because of a perception of their vulnerability caused by challenging personal and family circumstances. These may require support that is more appropriately provided by qualified professionals. While mentors consider the TAFE training program to be effective, the training provided to mentors is not adequate to address such issues with young people in these circumstances. Such students require high levels of professional expertise in order to address their issues. While it is acknowledged that the mentors in their role of “in loco parentis” always do their best, there is no doubt that the school and indeed the NSW DET is in a vulnerable position in facilitating interaction between mentors and students with such characteristics.
Chapter 3: Conclusions

The purpose of this chapter is to draw on the findings outlined above to make a number of key conclusions in relation to the appropriateness, effectiveness and efficiency of the Plan-It Youth program. In addition to these three dimensions, it is also imperative that approaches towards the sustainability of the program be addressed. This is necessary for the longer term, not only to ensure greater benefit to young people but also to maximise the financial expenditure being undertaken to operate the program. This chapter will conclude by identifying a number of the options for the future of the program.

3.1 The Appropriateness of the Program

Appropriateness, in evaluation terminology, refers to the extent to which a program is structured to meet the needs it was intended to address. At the outset it is worthwhile to restate that the Plan-It Youth program was designed to assist students who were at risk of not completing Year 12 or equivalent. Typically, these students are disengaged from school and more particularly from learning. The data on school retention rates in NSW presented earlier in this report suggests that there are a significant number of students in this category. The Plan-It Youth program is therefore well-positioned to help in providing support to these young people. The findings of this evaluation have clearly demonstrated the potential of mentoring to assist a significant number of the young people involved to consider appropriate directions for their future, and to set goals for achieving this outcome. The evidence available to this evaluation suggests that mentoring can be an effective strategy for assisting young people to make more informed decisions about their future and to re-engage with learning. The Plan-It Youth program has been instrumental in making it possible for some government secondary schools in NSW to offer mentoring as one strategy for addressing the needs of students at risk.

Despite these advantages, the manner in which the program has been managed has been characterised by extensive variability across the various regions of NSW where it has been operating. While it is imperative that the program be adapted to meet the differing contextual characteristics of regions, its internal integrity is a key pre-requisite to ensure that overall outcomes of the program are achieved. The lack of clarity about purpose, highlighted in the previous chapter, has challenged not only the internal integrity of the program but also its ability to meet the objectives specified for the initiative.

This has also resulted in varying approaches to the management of the program and consequently, varying levels of success in achieving its outcomes. In its current form, the program suffers from a lack of coherence as an initiative which is consistently employed throughout schools. Until this recurring issue is addressed, the program may continue to be seen to be appropriate for individual locations but have less relevance systematically because of its lack of relationship with broader initiatives for young people at risk within the NSW government school system.
3.2 The Effectiveness of the Program

Program effectiveness relates directly to the achievement of explicit goals identified for the program. Anecdotal data clearly indicates that in its current form, Plan-It Youth program is seen to be successful, not only from the perspective of mentors but also from the view of participating students and teachers directly involved in the program. The data available however to verify such perceptions is somewhat limited. It is therefore difficult to draw firm conclusions about the extent to which significant and sustainable change for students is being achieved, with any ongoing degree of confidence. This does not mean that this change has not occurred for at least some of the participants, but that on an aggregate basis the evidence available does not allow such conclusions to be drawn.

The findings clearly indicate a need for a systematic and agreed set of measures that not only identify the financial and human inputs into the program but also explicitly articulate the measures for determining the outcomes expected from the program. As indicated previously, there is variability not only in the nature of the data being collected, but also the extent to which it is being collected. In addition, Plan-It Youth coordinators in some cases are making extensive use of the data to enhance the effectiveness of the program. In other Regions however there is evidence from interviews that outcomes data is only being used to a limited extent to continually improve the program and enhance its effectiveness for both participants and mentors.

It has been suggested that this situation is partly due to the overall management of the program from both a state and regional perspective. While the 2005 Guidelines have provided basic assistance to in-school coordinators and also the Plan-It Youth coordinators in managing and administering the program, the extensive variability in its implementation, in its current form makes it difficult to engage in informed judgements about the overall effectiveness of the program from a state-wide perspective. The findings have suggested that the variability in implementation among Regions may be as much a function of the individual differences in skills and personal preferences of those managing the program.

Nevertheless, in order to ensure program fidelity to its objectives, the program must operate according to an explicit set of principles at its core. One clear example is the difference in understanding of the role of the Plan-It Youth Regional Coordinators. Some coordinators have a very operational focus, manifested in activities like attending all debriefing sessions, and every mentor training session. Generally those coordinators perceive that this is a key aspect of their role, but in the broader picture of their potential impact it is very inefficient use of their time and detracts from their ability to achieve the overall objectives of the program.

This close contact has, however, contributed to the formation of, generally very strong relationships between mentors and Plan-It Youth coordinators. Such relationships facilitate the resolution of the issues, facilitate communication channels and help to sustain mentors in their role. Each of these makes a direct contribution to enhancing the overall effectiveness of the program. Acknowledging the value of these relationships, the more effective programs however have been connected with other community groups particularly in rural areas. In best practice locations, Regional coordinators have adopted a more strategic focus and delegated greater responsibility to the in-school coordinator. The value that can be added in this situation is further enhanced when the Plan-It Youth program becomes one of many tools within a broader framework for addressing the needs of at risk young people. As indicated previously, if the Plan-It Youth program were seen to be operating within the framework of the School to Work program and the broader strategic
priority, which addresses the needs of 15 to 19-year-olds, its value would be significantly enhanced.

### 3.3 The Efficiency of the Program

The current variability of the program in terms of the way that it is currently managed and administered throughout the various regions of NSW not only impacts on its potential effectiveness but also its operational efficiency. In its current form, the program is seen to be relatively expensive in terms of its program expenditure and the number of students engaged in the program. The initiative therefore needs to be further examined to identify where efficiencies can be undertaken. It has been suggested by some mentors that the TAFE training program is unduly long and time consuming. However it is difficult to make judgements about this issue because of the variability in length of the training experienced by mentors in the various Regions of NSW. Nevertheless it is apparent that the training issue needs to be addressed more closely at the regional level, where its efficacy can be monitored and more standardised procedures can be undertaken to ensure that quality is achieved.

If the Plan-It Youth initiative were to be repositioned within the broader strategic priorities operating for addressing 15 to 19-year-olds, efficiencies would be created and value would be added at the regional level in terms of maximising the impact of the program in its current form. Under these circumstances Plan-It Youth would have its place within the broader Regional Plan. In this way, at the local level, principals would have a greater understanding of how the Plan-It Youth initiative fits within both regional and school priorities. Regional management groups would understand more effectively how Plan-It Youth fits within the broader framework of addressing the needs of 15 to 19-year-olds and could then provide advice about its most efficient and effective implementation at the local school level.

Because of the range of programs available, such as Plan-It Youth or Youth Pathways or other mentoring programs for young people, the school could then systematically map the students and the respective interventions in which they could participate to ensure that overlap and duplication do not occur and the maximum benefit for students is achieved. In this scenario, schools could be facilitated and empowered to take increasing responsibility for the program at the local level. In its current program management format, a number of schools have developed a strong dependency on the Plan-It Youth coordinator for ongoing support, guidance and leadership.

### 3.4 The Sustainability of the Program

In any government funded program, sustainability is a key consideration to ensure its longevity. Many government initiatives currently operating for young people suffer the syndrome of dependency. That is, over time, with ongoing government funding, a sense of dependence emerges in terms of the financial grant regularly allocated for its continuity. It is therefore imperative that if the program is to be sustained over the longer term strategies need to be embedded within the program to ensure that it can be sustained when the inevitable injection of funds no longer occurs.

In its current form of program management, it is both financially and resource dependent. For example, the ongoing success of the program is directly reliant on the effectiveness of the Plan-It Youth coordinator. This person not only works directly with schools, but also is engaged in the training and maintenance of mentors and also has a direct link to state
office in terms of implementation of policy relating to the program. If the program is to be sustained into the longer term, schools must be empowered to undertake the initiatives within the Plan-It Youth program without relying on regional support. An alternative model of training suggested by some mentors is to make training programs for mentors available online and undertaken through the school at the local level, although it is recognised that this model will not suit everyone.

Such issues however represent short-term operational decisions. Until the program can be positioned within the broader framework of strategic priorities, its sustainability will always be under challenge. Once it is strategically positioned within the broader imperative for 15 to 19-year-olds, the possibility for its ongoing funding is enhanced and it then becomes embedded at the region and school level as one of the key strategies for assisting young people at risk. While it remains an island within the school, the potential for its ongoing sustainability will always be under question. In its current form, the program sits on its own outside the regular work of the school yet is still seen to be relatively useful. However few schools have indicated that they would sustain the program from their own resources within the existing program management model. It is apparent that the program not only requires ongoing training of mentors since the dropout rate is relatively high, and it is already seen to be expensive for the number of students involved.

In order to enhance sustainability, the program must first achieve greater clarity about its overall purpose and focus. While mentoring is acknowledged as being a key successful strategy for program implementation, the initial decision would appear to relate to whether it is perceived to be a student well-being or career planning initiative. It is readily apparent that the initiative cannot be all things to all people, in attempting to resolve problems affecting some young people in the school setting.

Once its purpose has been clarified, the program then has the potential to add value to existing initiatives at the school level relating to the School to Work program. For example the Employability Skills Logbook could be a useful tool for documenting goals and identifying achievements in relation to those goals. In addition to these school related issues, it is also imperative that parents in the first instance become more engaged in the process if it is to be sustained into the longer term. In this way it can be ensured that parents are in a stronger position to follow-up on the initiatives undertaken by the school within the home environment. Similarly the ongoing engagement of local community would appear to be an important pre-requisite for ensuring that students have the opportunity to gain work experience in a manner that enables them to make informed decisions about the future.

Before these initiatives can be undertaken it is important that at both regional and school levels, a review be undertaken to identify initiatives that are currently in place to assist young people to make the transition from school to work. In this way a more targeted approach can be employed with young people and the future role and value of the Plan-It Youth program can be more readily determined. Such a strategy would not only identify potential gaps in provision but also could identify where overlap might be currently occurring in the duplication of resources aimed at achieving the same outcome.

Finally, there remain tensions regarding the status of the Plan-It Youth brand name. While there appears to be an agreement between the Dusseldorp Skills Forum, which originated the name and concept, and the NSW Department of Education and Training about exclusive use of the brand, this does not appear to be the case nationally. Even within NSW, it would appear that initiatives are undertaken under the banner of Plan-It Youth without Departmental approval or endorsement. This contributes to the perception of Plan-It Youth
being independent from other departmental initiatives, which in turn sets it outside mainstream student support strategies. This situation would need to be unambiguously resolved in any future implementation of the program within the auspices of the DET.

3.3 Options for the Future

This chapter has identified the key conclusions from the findings relating to this review. As a result of this these conclusions, a number of options may be identified for the future. Each of those options is outlined below. There are several options for going forward from the present position in relation to the Plan-It Youth program, each of which has advantages and disadvantages. These are discussed briefly below.

**Option 1: Abandon the program**

In this option, funding for the program would cease at the conclusion of the current funding period. The current coordinators would not be replaced as their term of appointment expires. The program would cease to be a responsibility of the Priority Schools and Equity Coordination Unit. The NSW DET would relinquish rights to the Plan-It Youth brand and logo. Schools that have been part of the program to date would be free to continue mentoring as an in-school activity if they chose.

The advantages of this option are that there will be a considerable saving of funds that might be applied in other areas. Ending central funding for the program may encourage schools to take up responsibility for more sustainable forms of mentoring to achieve the same purpose as at present.

The major disadvantage of this option is that in reality, the current momentum will be lost, and without continued external coordination and direction, it is unlikely to be sustained. Unless schools make a greater commitment of their own resources towards the program and take responsibility for recruitment of mentors, the program is likely to wither away in a relatively short space of time. The number of new schools taking up mentoring is likely to be small. The consequence would be that many students at risk, similar to those who have benefited from mentoring would be denied this opportunity in future. The schooling and life circumstances of these students may well be less than they could otherwise have been. The potential offered through mentoring programs for stronger community involvement in schools would be lost.

**Option 2: Maintain the program in its present form**

This option foresees Plan-It Youth continuing much as it is at present, with any improvements made as a result of normal management processes. The current budget would be maintained and supplemented by whatever sponsorship funds that could be raised. Growth in the program would occur as a result of each Plan-It Youth coordinator’s recruitment of additional schools and mentors. This option recognises the weaknesses in current program management and provides strengthened accountability arrangements. A stronger program structure is more appropriate for a maturing program than the model that has operated in the “pilot” phase of the program to date.

The major advantage of this option is that it maintains the infrastructure that has already been established to support the program. It recognises the benefits that are possible from
effective mentoring programs. In those schools where Plan-It Youth already operates, the program will continue to provide a strategy for supporting some students at risk and allow the school to continue to have supportive links with the broader community. It would allow the momentum and good will already established through the program to continue to be capitalised on. At the operational level, there would be minimal disruption to the established routines, with which mentors and schools are apparently comfortable. The corporate knowledge developed within current participants and stakeholders could be used as the basis for further strengthening the program.

The major disadvantage of this option is that without significant changes, the continued operation in its present form will do little to ensure the sustainability of the concept of mentoring without continued funding from the DET. Without the continued efforts of the Plan-It Youth coordinators to recruit and support mentors, it is unlikely that the majority of schools currently involved would commit their own resources to allow the program to continue over time. In these circumstances, it is unlikely that either the Plan-It Youth program or mentoring as a strategy would become more firmly embedded in the support structures of the schools. Further, without significant changes to the way the program operates, there would appear to be little scope for significant expansion of the program so that more students at risk may benefit from the support that can be provided through mentoring.

The current inequitable situation, in which one Region enjoys the services of two coordinators while Western Sydney, with a large proportion of students at risk, has none, would continue. Without additional funding for a dedicated full-time, high-level program manager, the current lack of coherence and unwarranted diversity within the program would also continue. It is also arguable that maintaining the Plan-It Youth program as it is at present provides a “band-aid” solution that prevents proper analysis of the structural reasons why students are becoming disengaged or ill-prepared for future decision-making in the first place. In doing so it may deflect attention and utilise resources that could be more profitably used in developing longer term and more systematic solutions.

**Option 3: Expand program within current operational model**

This option would see the funding for the program to increase to allow the establishment of the equivalent of a full-time coordinator in each Region and the appointment of a full-time program manager within state office. (This funding may allow the appointment of say, two 0.5 positions at various locations to provide more adequate coverage of Regions). The basic operational model of Plan-It Youth would be allowed to continue for the time being, with improvements made as part of the strengthened management of the program.

The advantage of this option is that it would, over time, allow for much greater program coherence to be developed, more adequate accountability processes to be established, and more equitable access to program funds across the state as a whole.

The disadvantage of this option is that while the cost of the program would continue to escalate, the current inefficiencies and limitations would continue. None of the disadvantages identified in Option 1 would be resolved in the short term. Unless there are significant changes in the program model, the key challenges of sustainability, scalability and integration in the broader context discussed above will not be addressed. This will require a far more strategic use of the program resources, which will not occur unless established mind sets and practices to be changed.
Option 4: Integrate the program into Regional structures

In this option, the overall funding currently provided for the program would be maintained but allocated to regions, who would decide how they used these funds to advance the interests of students at risk (defined as those not likely to make a successful transition to post-compulsory education, training or satisfactory employment). Plan-It Youth would no longer continue as a state wide program, but Regions and schools would be free to decide whether they continued mentoring under this banner. Regions would be free to decide whether they maintained one coordinator position or several part-time positions, and where such a position might be located in the Regional consultancy supervision structure. Regions would also have the capacity to determine other potential uses of the resource to support targeted students.

The advantage of this option is that it would provide a program structure that is more aligned with the decision-making structures of the DET at present. It also allows the funds that are currently allocated to the Plan-It Youth program to be applied more strategically in the context of the Department’s 15-19 year old strategy. This option recognises that mentoring can be an effective means of supporting students. When implemented from within the context of a broader supporting policy, regions would be in a position to apply the resources available to most effectively meet the needs of students in the region.

The disadvantage of this option is that it risks losing the focus of the current model, and in doing so increase even further the diversity seen at present. Without a central focus to the program, it may not be possible to identify and build best practice and share knowledge between coordinators as at present. This option would involve a continuation of the current level of funding.

Despite these limitations, on the basis of the evidence available to this evaluation, Option 4 appears to provide the best way forward for the future. The program cannot stay as it is, but neither is it sensible to abandon the concept of mentoring as a form of support for students. In considering the future, the question to be addressed is what is the best means of providing mentoring support in the most effective and equitable way.

With the goal of Plan-It Youth mentoring refocussed specifically on helping students to consider their options for the future, rather than generalised counselling in relation to behavioural or personal issues, it would seem more prudent to locate this mentoring within the mainstream strategy for addressing the needs of the 15-19 year old group. This would potentially allow a broader range of students to access support than is possible within the current model. Devolving the resource to Regions will allow more systematic planning to occur that aligns Plan-It Youth with other programs delivered with similar goals.
Chapter 4: Recommendations

In light of the findings of the evaluation and the resulting conclusions discussed above, it is recommended that the following actions be undertaken to capitalise on the investment made thus far in the Plan-It Youth program:

1. That consideration of the future of the Plan-It Youth program be undertaken within the broader policy framework of the Department of Education and Training's 15-19 Year Old Strategy.

2. That overall responsibility and authority for the operation of Plan-It Youth in schools be devolved to the regional level, in line with Department of Education and Training's current tri-level structure.

3. That the current total budget for the implementation of the Plan-It Youth initiative, including a notional current allocation for TAFE training for mentors and funding for current coordinator positions, be equitably distributed to each region to address the needs of students most at risk of leaving school early, as part of the 15-19 Years Strategy.

4. That each region undertake a review of current and projected provision for 15 to 19 year old students. As a result of this review, regions will determine what strategies and personnel are required to address the identified needs of 15-19 year olds who are most at risk of leaving school early, in the region.

5. That each region utilise the information from the review to develop a regional action plan, highlighting key initiatives to be undertaken, appropriate indicators to measure success and projected expenditure of regional allocation. It is intended that this action plan will detail the key strategies and initiatives, including professional learning and training where applicable, to be undertaken by the region in addressing the needs of 15 to 19 Year Olds most at risk of leaving school early.

6. That in place of the existing State Reference Group for Plan-It Youth, regions utilise existing committee structures or establish a local management committee, chaired by a senior Regional officer, to oversee the implementation of the regional action plan for 15-19 yr olds who are most at risk of leaving school early.

7. That the Department consider the development of a mentor framework to provide further guidance and support to schools in the engagement and use of mentors, in conjunction with other support programs.
Chapter 5: References

Bean, David (2002). *Wise Heads on Young Shoulders: Plan-It Youth Mentoring Youth Connections.* [A report of the evaluation of the pilot Plan-It Youth program. Published by Plan-It Youth Central Coast August 2002]


Appendices

Appendix 1: Research Questions
Appendix 2: List of Persons Consulted
Appendix 3: Interview Schedules
Appendix 4: Case Studies
Appendix 1: Research Questions for the Literature Review

The research questions required to be addressed by this evaluation were:

## Project Objectives

1. **The appropriateness of the Plan-It Youth program.**
   - 1.1 What is the perceived purpose of Plan-It Youth?
   - 1.2 What needs is the program designed to address?
   - 1.3 Are these needs changing over time?
   - 1.4 Do stakeholders have the same perceptions of the needs as intended in the program guidelines?
   - 1.5 What is the size and scope of the problem to be addressed?
   - 1.6 What would be the consequences for stakeholders if the NSW DET did not address this need?

2. **The effectiveness and efficiency of Plan-It Youth in relation to student engagement in learning, retention and attendance in education or training.**
   - 2.1 What are the specific issues that have prevented this cohort of students’ engaging in learning previously?
   - 2.2 What has the program done to address these issues?
   - 2.3 Has the student’s school identified any change as a result of students participating in the program?
   - 2.4 What does best practice look like for an engaged student who has participated in the program? To what extent does Plan-It Youth reflect this practice?
   - 2.5 What measures/indicators of student learning outcomes, retention and attendance are available? Are there benchmark measures available against which progress can be demonstrated?
   - 2.6 What are the helping or hindering factors that assist students in these areas?
   - 2.7 What evidence is there that any outcomes are sustained over time?

3. **The effectiveness and efficiency of Plan-It Youth in relation transition planning by students to continuing/further education, training and employment.**
   - 3.1 How are the transition needs of students identified?
   - 3.2 What specific activities,strategies/initiatives are undertaken with students once these needs have been identified?
   - 3.3 Are the activities/strategies/initiatives perceived to be an appropriate approach for addressing the needs of the target student population?
   - 3.4 What is the gap between what is provided and the identified needs of students?
Project Objectives

Research Questions

3.5 How are the transition needs of students communicated back to the student’s school?

3.6 What activities/strategies/initiatives does the school undertake to meet the transition needs of the student? How are these linked to the Plan-It Youth?

3.7 How are the transition needs of students communicated back to the student’s family?

3.8 What activities/strategies/initiatives are families required to support students to meet their transition needs?

3.9 What does best practice transition planning look like? To what extent does Plan-It Youth reflect this practice?

3.10 What are the helping or hindering factors that assist successful transition planning for students?

3.11 What evidence exists that Plan-It Youth is targeting the students that are most at risk?

4.1 How are students determined to be eligible to participate in the Plan-It Youth program?

4.2 What is the basis for the Plan-It Youth program to be conducted from a school?

4.3 How many PSP schools participate in Plan-It Youth?

4.4 What are the helping or hindering factors that enable a student to participate in the program?

4.5 What has been the level of unmet demand for Plan-It Youth services?

5.1 How does the program identify local community partners?

5.2 On what basis does the program establish links between schools and community partners?

5.3 How regularly are these partnerships utilised?

5.4 What outcomes have been achieved through these partnerships?

5.5 What have been the helping or hindering factors in relation to successful partnership arrangements?

5.6 What still needs to be done to improve efforts in this area?

6.1 How are mentors identified and engaged?

6.2 How has TAFE been engaged to train and support mentors?
Project Objectives
support and retention of mentors

Research Questions
6.3 What type of training is provided to mentors? How effective has this training been?
6.4 What types of support/resources are provided to mentors? How effective has this support been?
6.5 How are mentors linked to students?
6.6 How effective and efficient is the relationship between mentors and the student’s schools?
6.7 How effective and efficient is the relationship between mentors and the student’s family?
6.8 How effective and efficient is the relationship between mentors and the local businesses community?
6.9 How is feedback provided to mentors (both positive and negative?)
6.10 What has helped or hindered mentors in undertaking their roles?

7. The effectiveness and efficiency of Plan-It Youth in relation involvement of sponsors and management and administrative arrangements

7.1 Who are the sponsors/managers of the program?
7.2 What type of sponsorship/management support is received? What accountability is attached to this sponsorship/management?
7.3 Are there separate administrative arrangements in place for each sponsor/manager of the program? If so, what are they?
7.4 What type of data is collected and reported to respond to these administrative arrangements? How often is it reported?
7.5 What type of feedback is provided in regard to these reporting arrangements?
7.6 What are the helping or hindering factors in regard to the sponsorship of the program?

8. The degree of strategic alignment between Plan-It Youth and other related initiatives and programs

8.1 What other initiatives or programs address similar needs to Plan-It Youth?
8.2 What is the relationship between Plan-It Youth and other related initiatives and programs?
8.3 Is there a point of differentiation about Plan-It Youth which distinguishes it from other related initiatives? What are the implications of such differentiation for future program delivery?
8.4 If there is overlap between Plan-It Youth and other programs? Is there scope for greater integration or alignment?
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Project Objectives</th>
<th>Research Questions</th>
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</table>
| 9. Identify the success and hindering factors and opportunities for greater effectiveness and efficiency in relation to 1 and 2 above. | 8.5 Are there linkages with other initiatives?  
9.1 This Project Objective will be addressed through the above. |
# Appendix 2: List of Persons Consulted

The following persons were consulted or provided information as part of this project:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Organisation</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ms Rani Lewis Jones, Manager, Priority School and Equity Coordination</td>
<td>NSW Department of Education and Training</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ms Liz Rushton, Plan-It Youth Project Officer</td>
<td>NSW Department of Education and Training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr Russell Lamb - Principal Education Officer, Illawarra and South East Region</td>
<td>NSW Department of Education and Training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms Cate Ballantyne-Smith - Senior Education Officer, Sydney Region</td>
<td>NSW Department of Education and Training</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ms Lynne Cohen - Senior Education Officer, Hunter/Central Coast Region</td>
<td>NSW Department of Education and Training</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mr Phillip Foster - Senior Education Officer, Western Region</td>
<td>NSW Department of Education and Training</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ms Helen Lansdown - Senior Education Officer, Riverina Region</td>
<td>NSW Department of Education and Training</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ms Jean McLean- Senior Education Officer, South Western Sydney Region</td>
<td>NSW Department of Education and Training</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mr Phil Meehan - Senior Education Officer, North Coast Region</td>
<td>NSW Department of Education and Training</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ms Jan Chisholm - Plan-It Youth Coordinator, South Western Sydney Region</td>
<td>NSW Department of Education and Training</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ms Deborah Coleman - Plan-It Youth Regional Coordinator, Hunter/Central Coast Region</td>
<td>NSW Department of Education and Training</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ms Sandra May - Plan-It Youth Regional Coordinator, Illawarra and South East Region</td>
<td>NSW Department of Education and Training</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ms Jan Noake - Plan-It Youth Regional Coordinator, North Coast Region</td>
<td>NSW Department of Education and Training</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mr Greg Robinson - Plan-It Youth Regional Coordinator, Riverina Region</td>
<td>NSW Department of Education and Training</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ms Jill Rush - Plan-It Youth Regional Coordinator, Hunter/Central Coast Region</td>
<td>NSW Department of Education and Training</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ms Gretchen Trosh, Manager Business Relations</td>
<td>NSW Department of Education and Training</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mr Michael Hyam, Director, Vocational Education and Training in Schools</td>
<td>NSW Department of Education and Training</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ms Alison Soutter, (former LEAP Mentoring Program Coordinator NSW DET)</td>
<td>NSW Department of Community Services</td>
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<tr>
<td>Name</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mr Alan Arkin - Principal</td>
<td>Gorokan High School</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ms Robyn Rainsford - Plan-It Youth In-School Coordinator</td>
<td>Gorokan High School</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mr Mark Hewitt - Principal</td>
<td>Peel High School</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mr Rod New - Plan-It Youth In-School Coordinator</td>
<td>Peel High School</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ms Kerrie Bickle - Principal</td>
<td>Picton High School</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ms Sue Sundstrom - Plan-It Youth In-School Coordinator</td>
<td>Picton High School</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mr Mark Nounan - Principal</td>
<td>Tuncurry Junior Campus, Great Lakes College</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ms Jill Davies - Plan-It Youth In-School Coordinator</td>
<td>Tuncurry Junior Campus, Great Lakes College</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mr Bill Rogers - Principal</td>
<td>Wagga Wagga High School</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ms Annie Fellow - Plan-It Youth In-School Coordinator</td>
<td>Wagga Wagga High School</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ms Lesley Tobin, PIY Reference Group Representative</td>
<td>Dusseldorp Skills Forum</td>
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<td>Mr Doug Wright, PIY Reference Group Representative</td>
<td>NSW TAFE Board</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ms Maureen Burgin - PIY Reference Group Representative</td>
<td>Immediate Past President, ARM</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ms Lindy Cassidy, PIY Reference Group Representative</td>
<td>TAFE Equity Branch</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ms Bronwyn Brahm</td>
<td>TAFE Equity Branch</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ms Monica Clapp - Outreach Coordinator</td>
<td>Riverina Institute, TAFE</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ms Jo Sedgers - Outreach Coordinator</td>
<td>Western Institute, TAFE</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ms Christine Semken-Bastow - Plan-It Youth/Outreach Coordinator</td>
<td>Hunter Institute, TAFE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms Kate Rose - Equity Manager</td>
<td>Hunter Institute, TAFE</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ms Cassandra Ralph - Outreach Coordinator</td>
<td>Hunter Institute, TAFE</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ms Janette Mehan - Principal Manilla Central School</td>
<td>New England Region Plan-It Youth Management Group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms Meghane Clarke - Principal</td>
<td>Quirindi High School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr Gary Turner, Principal</td>
<td>Barraba Central School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr Wayne Chaffey, Principal</td>
<td>Tamworth High School</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ms Nicole Giandomenico, Plan-It Youth</td>
<td>NSW Department of Education and Training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Organisation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Regional Coordinator, New England Region</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mr Gordon Holding, Plan-It Youth Mentor Trainer</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ms Maryanne Munro, TAFE</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ms Louise Matthew, Plan-It Youth Mentor</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mr Peter Johnston, Plan-It Youth Mentor</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Ms Eleze Drew, Tamworth VETNET</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mr Rod New, Peel HS</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ms Vicki Haworth, Equity Coordinator, New England Region,</td>
<td>NSW Department of Education and Training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 Students (past and present) who have participated in Plan-It Youth</td>
<td>Illawarra, South West Sydney and Hunter/Central Coast Regions, NSW Department of Education and Training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20 Mentors (approximate)</td>
<td>Western and Hunter/Central Coast Regions, NSW Department of Education and Training</td>
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Appendix 3: Interview Schedules

Key Stakeholder Interviews

The following areas will be discussed during key stakeholder interviews:

1. Perceived goals of the Plan-It Youth program
2. The role of state/Region/school and related community members or organisations.
3. Major strengths of the program
4. Perceived major challenges of the program
5. Comment on the efficiency and effectiveness of Plan-It Youth in
   - engagement of students
   - enhancing student learning
   - enhancing student attendance and retention in education and training
6. Relationship between Plan-It Youth and related programs (e.g. School to Work Plan) and the role of the state/Region/school in enhancing those links
7. If you are a DET officer, who else knows about and supports the Plan-It Youth program? What type of support do you receive from them?
8. Perceived role and responsibility of the mentor and suggested enhancements for mentor role
9. Qualifications and experience required to be an effective mentor (including relationship between TAFE and DET at a state and Regional level)
10. Current support provided to mentors
11. Current in-kind support for the program provided by state/Region/school
12. Selection of students to participate in Plan-It Youth (explicit? agreed? appropriate?)
13. The role of schools and community partnerships in relation to Plan-It Youth
14. Suggestions for different approaches to address the needs of Plan-It Youth students (appropriateness and effectiveness of delivery model)
15. Role of the Co-ordinator and relationship with mentors
16. Measures for determining the effectiveness of the Plan-It Youth program (efficiency, effectiveness, appropriateness) Prompt on data sets
17. Appropriateness of existing funding models for Plan-It Youth
18. Effectiveness of Plan-It Youth as a tool for student transition planning
19. Effectiveness and efficiency of Plan-It Youth in relation to funding (including sponsors), management and administration
20. Perceptions of best practice in the Plan-It Youth program
21. Suggestions for improvement of the current Plan-It Youth model (follow on from student interviews)
Mentor Focus Group Questions

The following areas will be discussed during mentor focus groups:

1. Perceived goals of the Plan-It Youth program
2. The role of the mentor
3. What do you do with your student in Plan-It Youth sessions?
4. What do you believe to be the optimum length for a Plan-It Youth program to establish relationships and achieve maximum effectiveness?
5. Challenges in the role of the mentor
6. How the role could be enhanced
7. Identification of appropriate mentors
8. Effectiveness and efficiency of Plan-It Youth in
   - Engagement of students
   - Enhancing student learning
   - Enhancing student attendance and retention in education and training.
10. Effectiveness of TAFE training program for mentors
11. Suggested enhancements for mentor training program
12. Qualifications and experience required to be an effective mentor
13. Current support provided to mentors including resources employed.
14. Selection of students to participate in Plan-It Youth- do they know how students are selected to be in the program?
15. The role of schools in relation to Plan-It Youth- what support is provided to mentors by the in-school co-ordinator? Is it appropriate - suggestions for improvement.
16. Mentor knowledge of the school the student attends
17. Factors facilitating student participation in Plan-It Youth.
18. Suggestions for different approaches for addressing the needs of Plan-It Youth students
19. Role of the Co-ordinator and relationship with mentor
20. Measures for determining the effectiveness of the Plan-It Youth program. (What types of data sets are available to support this information?)
21. Are they aware of other school based programs that support Plan-It Youth students? Is there any co-ordination of these initiatives?
22. Perceptions of best practice in the mentoring role
23. Suggestions for improvement of the current Plan-It Youth model
Existing Student – Interview Questions

1. What is the Plan-It Youth program about?
2. How is the program helping you?
3. Briefly describe your plans for the future?
4. Are you involved in any other programs similar to Plan-It Youth at school? What are they? How does Plan-It Youth fit in with them?
5. Which teachers are involved with Plan-It Youth at your school?
6. How does your school link the things you do with Plan-It Youth with other similar programs? (prompt like School to Work)
7. Do you work with any community members or organisations? How have they helped you to make better decisions about your future?
8. What role has your mentor played in linking you with these community members or organisations?
9. How would you describe your relationship with your mentor?
10. What has been the greatest benefit of working with a mentor?
11. How could the mentor role be improved?
12. Has your mentor asked you to share your plans for the future?
13. What sorts of things has your mentor suggested you do to work towards achieving your plans for the future?
14. Do you know how these activities will help you to achieve your plans for the future?
15. Do you share the things you do in Plan-It Youth with your family/carer?
16. What do you see as the greatest strength of the Plan-It Youth program?
17. What is the greatest weakness of the Plan-It Youth program?
18. What would you suggest to make the program even better than it is at present?
Former Student Interview

1. What is the Plan-It Youth program about?

2. In what ways did the program help you to make better decisions about your life choices?

3. Briefly describe your goals for the future and how the Plan-It Youth has helped you achieve them?

4. Were you involved in any other programs similar to Plan-It Youth while you were at school? What were they? How did Plan-It Youth fit in with them?

5. Which teachers were involved with Plan-It Youth at your school?

6. Did your school link the activities you did with Plan-It Youth to other similar programs? (prompt School to Work)

7. What, if any, community members or organisations have helped you during the program? If so, how has this helped you to make better decisions about your future?

8. What role did your mentor play in linking you with these community members or organisations?

9. How would you describe the relationship you had with your mentor?

10. What was the greatest benefit of working with a mentor during Plan-It Youth?

11. How could the mentor role be improved?

12. How did your mentor ask you to share your plans for the future?

13. What types of activities did your mentor suggest you do to work towards achieving your plans for the future?

14. Were these activities useful in assisting you to achieve your plans?

15. Did you share the activities you undertook with Plan-It Youth with your family/carer? Were your family/carer able to assist you in any way?

16. What do you see as the greatest strength of the Plan-It Youth program

17. What is the greatest weakness?

18. What would you suggest to make the program even better than it is at present?

19. Would you suggest other students should get involved with the Plan-It Youth program? If so, why? If not, why not?
**School Case Studies**

The following areas will be discussed during school case studies:

1. Context and rationale for the operation of the Plan-It Youth program in the school
2. From the school’s perspective what are the perceived goals of the Plan-It Youth program
3. The role of the school in relation to the program and students engaged in the program with particular focus on:
   - engagement of students
   - enhancing student learning
   - enhancing student attendance and retention in education and training
4. School resourcing of the program
5. School organisation - does the school modify its timetable to accommodate Plan-It Youth? If not, how do students make up for lessons missed because they are participating in the Plan-It Youth program?
6. Role of the school in relation to parents of students participating in the program
7. The perceived role of the mentor and suggested enhancements of the role
8. School ownership of the Plan-It Youth initiative
9. Alignment between the school management plan, priorities and the Plan-It Youth program
10. Role and relationship of school with Plan-It Youth Co-ordinator
11. Selection of students to participate in Plan-It Youth (explicit, agreed, appropriate)
12. What is the level of unmet demand?
13. How does the school link its activities with the Plan-It Youth in relation transition planning by students to continuing/further education, training and employment.
14. Relationship between the Plan-It Youth and related school based initiatives
15. Link between Plan-It Youth and existing school community partnerships.
16. Appropriateness of existing approaches to address the needs of Plan-It Youth students
17. Suggestions for improving the program to increase the effectiveness and efficiency of the Plan-It Youth program. What role should the school play in the implementation of these improvements?
18. Measures for determining the effectiveness of the Plan-It Youth program (effectiveness, appropriateness, efficiency). What school data is available for past and current students?
19. Perceptions of best practice in the Plan-It Youth program
2007 Mentor Questionnaire

Plan-It Youth Evaluation

2007 Mentor Questionnaire

The purpose of this survey is to seek your views about the way Plan-It Youth works. The results of the survey will be used to help make decisions about the Plan-It Youth program and how it can assist young people with their decisions about their future.

Your response to this survey is confidential. Please do not write your name on this form.

1. **Gender:** Are you: (1) Male □ or (2) Female □

2. How long have you been a mentor?

   Under 1 year □  1 to 2 years □  2 to 3 years □  3 to 4 years □  Over 4 years □

3. What is the name of the school where you mentor? (If you mentor at more than one school please list all schools)

   ____________________________________________________________________
   ____________________________________________________________________

4. How many students do you currently mentor? (Please list total number against each year level)

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5. How often have you met with your students?

   None □  Less than 5 meetings □  5-10 meetings □  11-20 meetings □  More than 20 meetings □
6. What do you see as the main purpose of the Plan-It Youth program?

7. What type of training have you received to become a mentor?
   - TAFE Course
   - Trained by another mentor
   - Other training
   - No training

8. How effective was this training in preparing you to be a mentor?
   - Very effective
   - Mostly effective
   - Somewhat effective
   - Not effective

9. In your experience, how effective do you believe the process of linking mentors with students has been?
   - Very effective
   - Mostly effective
   - Somewhat effective
   - Not effective
10. How often have you discussed the following with your students?  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue</th>
<th>Very often</th>
<th>Fairly often</th>
<th>Not often</th>
<th>Never</th>
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<tr>
<td>Issues they have at school</td>
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<td>Issues they have out of school</td>
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<td>Their plans for the future</td>
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<td>Specific advice about options for the future</td>
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11. What activities/strategies/initiatives have you used with students you work with?

12. Which of these strategies have you found to be most effective? Why do you think they have been successful?
13. How have you linked with other initiatives or programs that aim to assist young people make decisions about their future?

14. How satisfied are you with the level of support you have received as a mentor?

- Very satisfied
- Mostly satisfied
- Not satisfied
- Very unsatisfied

15. Do you have any suggestions as to how you might be better supported?

16. How often do you discuss what you do with your students with a teacher at their school?

- Very often
- Fairly often
- Not very often
- Never

17. How often do you discuss what you do with your students with their parents?

- Very often
- Fairly often
- Not very often
- Never
18. Has mentoring changed any of the following for your students?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>A lot better</th>
<th>A bit better</th>
<th>No change</th>
<th>A bit worse</th>
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<td>Their attitudes towards school</td>
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19. Would you recommend that other people join in mentoring programs like Plan-It Youth if they can?

- Yes □
- No □
- Don't Know □

20. What have been the things that you have most enjoyed about Plan-It Youth mentoring?

21. What have been the things that you have least enjoyed about Plan-It Youth mentoring?
22. Are there any other comments you would like to make about your experience with Plan-It Youth mentoring?

THANK YOU FOR YOUR COMPLETING THIS SURVEY
The purpose of this survey is to seek your views about the way Plan-It Youth works. The results of the survey will be used to help make decisions about the Plan-It Youth program and how it can assist young people with their decisions about their future.

Your response to this survey is confidential. Please do not write your name on this form. Please complete this survey independently.

1. What is the name of your school?_________________________________

2. Gender: Are you (1) Male □ or (2) Female? □

3. What Year level or you currently in?

   Year □ Year □ Year □ Year □ Year □ Year □ Year □ Year □ Year □
   6        7        8        9        10       11       12

4. How often have you met with your mentor?

   None □ Less than □ 5-10 □ 11-20 □ More than □ 5 meetings meetings meetings
5. How often have you discussed the following with your mentor?

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Very often</th>
<th>Fairly often</th>
<th>Not often</th>
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<tr>
<td>Issues you have at school</td>
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<td>Your plans for the future</td>
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<td>Specific advice about options for the future</td>
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6. How often do you discuss what you do with your mentor with your parents?

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<tr>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Very often</th>
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<th>Not very often</th>
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7: How often do you discuss what you do with a teacher at your school?

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<tr>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Very often</th>
<th>Fairly often</th>
<th>Not very often</th>
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8. Has mentoring changed any of the following for you?

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<tr>
<th>Change</th>
<th>A lot better</th>
<th>A bit better</th>
<th>No change</th>
<th>A bit worse</th>
<th>A lot worse</th>
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<tr>
<td>Your school work</td>
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<td>Your enjoyment of school</td>
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<td>Your understanding of options for the future</td>
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<td>Your plans for the future</td>
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<td>Better understanding of your strengths</td>
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<td>Better understanding of ways of dealing with problems</td>
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<td>Your attitudes towards school</td>
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10. What do you hope to do in the next few years?
   • Stay on at school [ ]
   • Stay on at school and then do further study [ ]
   • Leave school this year and go to TAFE [ ]
   • Leave school and get an apprenticeship [ ]
   • Leave school and find a job [ ]
   • Leave school and apply for welfare benefits [ ]
   • Don’t know [ ]

11. To what extent has your mentor helped you to make this decision?
   Great extent [ ] Some extent [ ] Little extent [ ] Not at all [ ]

12. Would you recommend that other students join in mentoring programs like Plan-It Youth if they can?
   Yes [ ] No [ ] Don’t Know [ ]

13. What have been the things that you have most enjoyed about Plan-It Youth mentoring?

14. What have been the things that you have least enjoyed about Plan-It Youth mentoring?
15. Are there any other comments you would like to make about your experience with Plan-It Youth mentoring?

THANK YOU FOR YOUR COMPLETING THIS SURVEY
Appendix 4 Case Studies

Case Study 1

Background/Context of Program

The principal brought the fundamental concept of Plan-It Youth to the school as a result of his experience with the Dusseldorp Skills Forum at his previous school. He was also impressed by the Plan-It Youth mentors' program, the success of which he believes results from "good training rather than goodwill". The program is designed to assist those students who lack the knowledge and skills, and, in some cases, the parental guidance, to make appropriate decisions about their future lives. The program has been operating within the school for more than five years. The current in-school coordinator has managed the program for three years.

How does Plan-It Youth work in the school?

The Principal perceives the program is related to the careers program, the work of year advisers, the welfare program, specific programs for boys and girls and a martial arts program for boys which has resulted in an improvement in their behaviour. The coordinator does not perceive the program to be related to the School to Work program which operates within the school.

The Year Advisers set up the criteria for choosing students to participate in the program. This involves selecting students who are: uncertain of their future in relation to continuation at school or transition to the workforce; at risk to some degree but not at extreme risk, and capable of being guided to make appropriate decisions. In general, qualifying students haven't had a lot of attention. They are basically good young people who are at risk of not making the right decisions.

Initially a ten week program operated for Year 10 students on one day per week in terms one and two and another ten week program on one day each week for Year 9 students in terms three and four. In all, the program catered for approximately 30 students per year. However, issues including the inability of mentors to commit for the whole time and some students not needing or wanting a 10 week program, has led to a greater flexibility in implementation. The program now operates on a rolling basis. If mentors and students feel that after seven to eight weeks they could finish, then new students begin. Conversely, some students spend more time in the program. Mentors feel more valued by this arrangement.

The program is guided by an in-school coordinator with good public relations skills who has developed positive relationships with mentors and parents and is readily able to garner support for the program. The Plan-It Youth coordinator believes that the fact that the in-school coordinator is not the careers adviser is one factor contributing to the success of the program in the school.

The mentor program provides one-on-one support for students. As part of their role mentors take students on excursions to workplaces to provide them with the experiences
necessary for them to make decisions about their future. Profiles of student progress are kept, with meetings held for the purpose of reviewing these on three mornings per week. A Plan-It Youth Workbook developed by the NSW Department of Education and Training (DET) contains suggestions for mentors and mentees and is used by students throughout the program to gather information and to plan future action. It provides a record of the program for students. Debriefing occurs at the end of each mentoring session and students report any issues that may exist to the coordinator.

The school “tops up” the budget for the program from school resources as required.

External Support
The school’s staff is supportive of the program. Parents are also supportive of the program but do not participate in it to any great extent, although some contact the school for information from time to time. Parents are invited to attend presentations to and by students at the end of the program. Year 9 students are also invited to the celebration presentations.

The program provides a potential link between the school and its community but this does not occur to any extent except through the appointment and work of mentors. Links with DET occur through the regional Plan-It Youth coordinator who reports to a regional equity coordinator.

Mentors are drawn from: older professional and non-professional people whose motivation is to give something back to the community; working people from the professions, trades and various religious groups who are also motivated by giving something back to the community; and younger people who are involved in community programs or community courses and are seeking opportunities to enhance their own career goals. Mentors range in age from their early 20s to late 80s. Male representation is slightly less than 50% and there is an attrition rate of approximately 45% in the Hunter Region.

The TAFE training program for mentors, which culminates in a statement of attainment, is conducted over 30 hours, organised on one day per week for six hours over a five-week period. The program includes in-class activities, guest speakers, meeting young people of appropriate age in schools, and other in-school activities. The program encompasses roles and responsibilities, desirable attributes of mentors, the phases in developing relationships, developing empathetic relationships with adolescents, and also provides opportunities for mentors to increase their skills through leadership courses, refresher courses and other activities. Mentors are involved in activities such as excursions, developing computing skills and sharing experiences of their own youth in order to identify themes that remain the same for modern youth.

Effectiveness of Plan-It Youth in the school context
As a result of participating in the program, students develop an understanding about the most appropriate time for them to leave school, that is, Year 10 or Year 12. The effectiveness of the program is due, in large part, to the positive relationships between students, mentors and the school coordinator. It was reported to be relatively easy to match students to mentors as the mentor demographic is very wide in terms of both age and gender.
Students report that their experiences are broadened and they are in a better position to make decisions about their futures, resulting mainly from excursions with mentors to find out what they do and don't like in specific workplaces.

The Plan-It Youth coordinator perceives the program to be very successful although data collection in all schools leaves a lot to be desired in terms of regularity and consistency of approach because of a lack of guidance from State Office. Specification is needed on the data to be collected, how data are to be collected, the use to be made of the data and the feedback to be provided from an analysis of it. Anecdotal data should play an important role in determining the success of the program.

**Facilitating Factors for Success**

One of the major strengths of the program, in the principal’s view, is that mentors are trained in a consistent manner by TAFE personnel using a standard, registered course. This training encourages positive relationships with the students, the school and, in many cases, between parents and mentors. A number of mentors get to know the parents quite well and trust and confidentiality is developed between them.

The in-school coordinator believes that a vital factor in the success of the program is the support of the principal and the Plan-It Youth coordinator. Other success factors include the positive sharing practices among program participants, within and outside the school, and a broad view of teaching as facilitative rather than the simple provision of information. The program within the school is successful, in part, because the in-school coordinator is committed, flexible, well-organised, values volunteers, has a sound understanding of the mentoring process and has positive links with the executive of the school. In addition, very positive relationships have been developed with the Plan-It Youth coordinator, who, in turn, has good relationships with other DET personnel.

Mentors believe that best practices in schools generally include:

- the effectiveness of the Plan-It Youth coordinator in motivating, creating enthusiasm, being able to delegate and match people to positions
- an underlying philosophy of recognition of all stakeholders
- the mutual support of mentors
- confidentiality at debriefing sessions
- an effective selection process which involves students who have the potential to do well and are committed to the program
- matching mentors with students
- a realisation that Year 9 and Year 10 students are very different in nature and needs.

Another important success factor is that mentors do not represent authority and are independent of the school. They represent a significant community investment in the program.

One advantage of a 10 week program is that it represents a term and means that students only miss out on a particular subject on one day per week for that period of time.

**Inhibiting Factors**
The fact that the program operates during the same period in each week sometimes becomes an issue for some students and teachers.

The program could be improved if more students were involved and they had more opportunities in the workplace. This could occur with an extension of each weekly session, at least for some part of the total program. This would involve greater community liaison and the availability of additional resources. It is also possible that the program could be extended to include Year 11 students.

A significant inhibiting factor is the process of renewing mentors so that adequate numbers are available to students.

**Student learning outcomes**

Mentors believe that it is important to realise that success for students is not necessarily immediate but may occur at some future point in time. One of the most significant outcomes and indicators of the success of the program is that the majority of students in the program proceed to Years 11 and 12, although some still leave at the end of Year 10. During the celebration day students make and talk to posters about what they have learned, indicating possible future directions. They indicate an improved capacity for self-evaluation and self-analysis as well as increased self-confidence.

**Suggestions for program improvement**

Although most students enjoy the program, many believe that a longer implementation term is needed for the program to be successful. In the perception of mentors the appropriate timing for the program is 10 to 12 weeks of uninterrupted time. This uninterrupted time should be guaranteed by schools and the program should not occur over school holidays, which sometimes results in mentors losing focus. When the program is arranged factors such as school examinations and excursions should be taken into account so that they don't impinge on the effectiveness of the program.

Mentors believe that programs generally could be enhanced by:

- having mentees talk to mentors during their training
- extending the program to students from Years 11 and 12
- having greater communication with students’ families
- greater publicity for the program
- training more mentors but still using a mentor to student ratio of one to one.

TAFE trainers believe that the program could be improved through expansion, through mentors being upskilled in areas such as Aboriginal awareness training, the use of mentor trainers and the appointment of more Plan-It Youth coordinators. They believe that the training program itself could be improved by having an online component which would increase its flexibility in order to fit better into the lives of prospective mentors.

**Future Directions**

In the future, the in-school coordinator would like to see greater flexibility in the program, greater strategic targeting of participating students, extension of the program to Year 11 students and ex-students talking to prospective students about the program.

The Plan-It Youth coordinators interviewed felt that accountability measures are inappropriate and that, to a large extent, the program generally is ad hoc in nature.
Although it has not always been the case, reporting and data collection processes are obscure. In addition, coordinators felt that, although basic resources to support the Plan-It Youth coordinator’s role are provided, minimal additional support is given. Some of the regular coordinator team meetings have been replaced by teleconferencing, which the regional Plan-It Youth coordinator believes is a much less effective method of communication and sharing ideas.

The State Reference Group was not felt to be closely linked to regions and so one coordinator expressed the view that the program would be enhanced if management was devolved to Regions.

Future enhancements to programs generally could, according to the regional equity coordinator include:

- expansion of the program (a client base exists in every school)
- maintenance and enhancement of community support
- additional support for schools
- focusing the program in schools with most students at risk (those with least access to positive role models)
- ensuring the availability of mentors in specific areas of need
- ensuring Plan-It Youth coordinators each service a maximum of 12 schools.

It was believed that the Plan-It Youth program more closely resembles a transition program than an equity program, and therefore careful consideration would need to be given to where Plan-It Youth might be located within Regional structures in future.
Case Study 2

Background/Context of Program

The school opted to participate in the Plan-It Youth program believing that the structure provided the potential for a new form of engagement for carefully selected Year 10 students.

The program has been conducted in the school since around 2001 and it has been maintained exclusively for students who are perceived as having potential, but appear to lack the organisational skills that are essential for success.

The in-school coordinator, who is the careers adviser, has coordinated the program since its inception. The school acknowledges that the program is ‘resource-hungry’ and it is keen to take advantage of what the program offers but reported that it did not think the program could be maintained without external support to marshal the mentors, in particular.

How does Plan-it Youth work in the school?

Plan-It Youth is one of a suite of programs that the school conducts to support its 15-19 Years Strategy. It is regarded as comfortably located under the careers umbrella although it is seen as a student welfare program with elements that support students with learning difficulties.

The school initially conducted the program twice a year (each semester in a chosen term) and the students were withdrawn from classes. After the very first session, an evaluation pointed to problems: finding an appropriate space; maintaining access to a bank of computers and the withdrawal of students from regular classes. The last problem was most significant while the other problems meant that the school appeared unable to provide the due recognition. Accordingly, for the second session in the first year, the school moved the program to sports afternoon. This has meant that some nominated students have chosen not to participate because of their sporting interest and commitment, but it has meant that the group can be easily assembled and appropriately monitored. Most frequently, the program involves Year 10 students although an occasional Year 9 student has been given the opportunity to participate. Groups of around ten-twelve have been used and is considered to be the most appropriate size.

The Plan-It Youth coordinator attends to all aspects of the training and co-ordinates the supply and arrival of the mentors. At the same time, the school personnel engage in a process to select the students. The process involves the year advisers nominating potential candidates and these are discussed with the school’s welfare team. The final nominees are then discussed at an executive meeting after which the students and their parents are formally approached. The students are generally not those with the most problematic behaviour but are those who show signs of disengagement and who, in the staff’s view, could form a profitable and professional relationship with a nominated mentor.

The Plan-It Youth coordinator usually attends all sessions over the ten weeks and while that is essential at the beginning of any ten-week program, as the mentors become part of the school and understand the expectations, some of the coordinator’s time may be better spent on other duties. The school, accordingly, can conduct the program once all the people are connected and all the administrative and training aspects are in place.
The mentors and student reactions are carefully monitored and there are formal debriefing sessions for both groups after each session. The debriefing sessions are used to detect tensions. The program culminates in a celebration that is attended by the principal and parents and it involves the students publicly articulating their gains and their thanks.

The success of the program can be gauged by the simple fact that these students, vulnerable by definition, choose to remain in the program. Empirical evidence is that no parents have refused permission for their child to participate, few students drop out and few mentors drop out. Some students, however, refuse the initial offer for a variety of reasons and the school believes that it is the students’ right to choose.

External Support

The school depends completely on the Plan-It Youth coordinator to find, train and ‘deliver’ the mentors. Advice from the school is that without that service, there are doubts that it could maintain the program because of competing interests and the fact that the program, while clearly successful, is for so few students.

The school has nothing to do with the training of the mentors and assumes that the Plan-It Youth coordinator, as a departmental officer, has taken all the requisite actions to bring the mentors to the program’s start. The school does check to see that these things have occurred but it also relies on the Plan-It Youth coordinator to convey messages of concern to the mentors. That is regarded as that coordinator’s role.

The students’ parents have been most supportive. None has refused permission and many have attended ‘graduation’ ceremonies. Some have written notes to the school and to the mentors thanking them for the extra opportunity afforded their children.

Effectiveness of Plan-it Youth in the school context

The program is regarded as most successful for the small number of students involved. When the program is in session, the in-school coordinator devotes an entire day, at least, to its organisation because it is essential to maintain the confidence of the mentors and this means the co-ordinator begins the day by ensuring that the students are present. The school believes that there is no room or margin for error in terms of the connections and the accompanying legal and procedural protocols.

The program is successful because the students value its 1:1 nature and the spin-offs are that they are able to focus on the resources the mentors introduce and they are able to discuss these and draw personal conclusions, uninhibited by classmates.

Teachers regularly report that the students show that they are more engaged and committed during and after the program.

The final or graduating ceremony is uplifting and demonstrates the simple fact that the students value the opportunity offered them. Teachers also remark that the students’ attendance improves.

Facilitating Factors for Success

The following were provided as successes:
• The success of the program is contingent on the enthusiasm of the people who are part of it - the Plan-It Youth coordinator, the in-school coordinator, the TAFE teachers, the mentors and the students themselves.

• The fact that the structure of the organisation is brought to the school makes the program possible.

• Having the program on a sports afternoon has been most successful although many teachers in the school are now unaware of the program and its successes.

• The fact that the students are given individual attention and that they have unrestricted access to the Internet to support their searches for information is most important.

• The TAFE course appears to be most worthwhile and the program enhances community participation.

Inhibiting Factors

The following inhibit the program’s success and realisation:

From the school

- That few students are supported by the program in terms of cost and effort
- The program might be assisted if there was a meeting of the in-school coordinators so that ideas and structures could be shared.
- The weakness is that it is difficult to perceive a principal providing the total resources from the school’s budget. Some actions may be possible to refine the structures but at the moment, it relies in this school on other funds for basics, on the mentoring coming at no cost, and that the mentoring is organised totally outside the school. It is doubtful that any school would pick up all those costs out of an ordinary school budget. Similarly, it is hard to perceive how the program can operate in all secondary schools.

From the Co-ordinator

- The TAFE course needs an evaluation and an abbreviated course would be preferred
- Schools need more ownership of the program but it would be most difficult to sustain without a co-ordinator
- The funding basis is ad hoc and it is embarrassing that program continuity is at least somewhat in doubt: the resources the region had as giveaways to recognise mentors have dwindled and need replacing; the flyers and recruitment mailing is a problem because of funds; finding sources of funds through trusts and foundations is near impossible.

From the Regional Perspective

- From the Regional perspective, the co-ordinator’s position seems lonely because the program has run outside the mainstream regional operation. It has occurred accordingly a little as a novelty rather than as part of a suite of potentially worthwhile strategies
The vagaries of funding and the overall costs of the total program

So much seems dependent on the co-ordinator’s position being available

The inherent inequities (number of schools, number of programs, number of students)

The fact that much of the responsibility seems to be with the region rather than the schools … a new strategy and guidelines are required.

**Student learning outcomes**

There is anecdotal evidence from teachers that the students involved assume a new maturity and responsibility and that they are more organised and appear to be more likely to attend school. The students learn to relate to someone who they have not known and they learn that these people come to the school to assist each student alone. That is, an adult shows interest in *them* and maintains a commitment to *them*. They also learn that other people in the community have had experiences that can be valuable in terms of planning a future education and life.

**Suggestions for program improvement**

- The school is adamant that it would be unable to run the program without a Plan-It Youth coordinator. On the other hand, its representatives value the program and believe that they have the resources to deliver the actual 10-week program alone. They do not have the resources to attract and train mentors. Accordingly, some rationalisations of the program structure appear desirable.

- The issue of funding is a considerable problem because at the moment, while the availability of the co-ordinator is dependent on a statewide provision (that is clearly inequitable), the funding at the school level depends on a capacity to use School-to-Work funds which are not guaranteed. The school estimate is that a minimum budget of $600 is required annually for incidental costs. If the program is to continue, it needs to be put on a more appropriate financial footing.

- The program guidelines require reconsideration and a rewrite in order to encapsulate the matters above.

**Future Directions**

All people interviewed for this case study (principal, in school coordinator, Plan-It Youth coordinator, regional equity coordinators, TAFE course deliverers) believe strongly that the program is worthwhile for the students it serves and that the program provides the students chosen, with an impetus to improve and understand.

Many understand the financial imperatives and conundrums.

The key directions that emerged were:

- that schools need to develop much more ownership of the program and this can only be achieved when it is perceived as something the schools do rather than have it done to them or even with them

- a Plan-It Youth coordinator is essential
there is potential for the program to be less segmented in terms of the links among TAFE, the region, the mentors, and the schools

the funding must be better structured in order that the program is not regarded as an add-on but is, as the school perceives it, one of a suite of programs available to support certain students.
Case Study 3

Background/Context of Program

This school is situated to the south-west of Sydney in the Southern Highlands. It is a co-educational comprehensive school, serving a semi rural community, which has a small migrant component. The school population is approximately 1130 students. Students from diverse backgrounds are catered for by the school and encouraged to achieve to the best of their abilities by participating in an innovative and extensive curriculum, welfare programs and student support systems.

Accommodation is a challenge for the school as the original design of the facility was developed for a student population of 750 students. An example of the current accommodation challenges was provided by the Plan-It Youth in-school coordinator, who is the school careers adviser, whereby the proposed Agricultural Shed now houses the school library.

The local community of the school is viewed more as a conglomeration of villages than a major rural centre. The socio-economic status is changing from predominantly middle class rural families to a high representation of low earning single parent families. A potential reason for this change is due to the decline of traditional industries that supported the community in the past, such as mining and farming.

Due to the decline in employment opportunities in the local area, most parents need to travel to Sydney for employment which leaves many children in extended child care arrangements. With minimal public transport available, students are limited in their ability to travel to visit school friends. The in-school coordinator viewed that as a result of this community profile many students felt isolated once they left school each day.

The Plan-It Youth Program commenced at this school in 2003. After a slow start, numbers of students participating in the program quickly rose in 2004 to its current capacity of 15. The school was the first in its educational Region to participate in program.

The current Principal has been at the school since 2004 and is fully supportive of Plan-It Youth. She believes that the mentoring provided through Plan-It Youth forms an integral part of the school’s overall Welfare Program options. This view is reflected within the school’s strategic plan, whereby the Plan-It Youth program sits within the responsibilities of the Welfare Team. This has been a purposeful decision by the school to ensure that every effort is made to support students participating in the program beyond each mentoring session. Plan-It Youth is viewed by the Welfare Team as various interventions that might be considered when assessing students’ needs. In this regard, all students at risk of leaving school may not necessarily be directed to Plan-It Youth and may be directed to an alternative intervention. The Principal advised that students included in the program are more than likely those that have the potential of achieving good educational or employment outcomes but are at risk of disengaging with school.

How does Plan-It Youth work in the school?

Students are selected for Plan-It Youth at this school after the student has completed an application form. The in-school coordinator advised that the profile of students who are encouraged to complete this application process by the Welfare Team generally:
are not achieving 85% attendance rates

have already received one or many suspensions from school

have been brought to the attention of the school by a parent or carer that might be at risk of leaving school

have been referred by the Department of Community Services, or

are self-referred.

When the program commences, students and mentors meet as a plenary. After this meeting, students identify 2 to 3 mentors that they might like to team up with for Plan-It Youth. The mentors are asked to undertake the same process by identifying students they believe they would enjoy mentoring. The in-school coordinator, the Plan-It Youth coordinator and the Welfare Team leader sit down to match mentors to students.

Following completion of the matching process, mentoring sessions commence. Sessions are run once a week for one hour. At this school sessions are held during first period every Friday during term time. At the completion of the mentoring session, mentors stay for an additional hour to debrief. Each Friday either the Plan-It Youth coordinator or her assistant is in attendance. The in-school coordinator is also in attendance at these mentoring and debriefing sessions.

A Plan-It Youth Student Workbook is provided to each student to assist plan their mentoring sessions. Contained within the Workbook are areas for discussion and enquiry such as job investigation, planning for future education and employment, career goal setting and mapping. A Strength, Weakness, Opportunities and Threats (SWOT) analysis is also included as an activity in this Workbook. Mentors and students generally use these Workbooks as a basis to their discussion during each session; however, if a student wishes to investigate a particular area further flexibility to do this is supported.

Due to the lack of available physical space at this school the target number of students for the program per year is 15 students. Students once accepted on the program stay indefinitely or until the student choose to discontinue the mentoring sessions. Since the commencement of Plan-It Youth in 2003, school students have participated in Plan-It Youth for an average of 2 years. School figures detail student duration in the program since starting in 2005 as follows:

- 11% of students have stayed in the program for one term
- 28% of students have stayed in the program between one and three terms
- 61% of students have stayed in the program between four and six terms.

The numbers of students graduating the Plan-It Youth program per school year since the commencement of the program in 2003 are detailed below:

- 2003 - 10
- 2004 - 12
- 2005 - 9
- 2006 - 12
- 2007 - 12.
The profile of the students participating in the program varies. Some students come from dysfunctional and violent home lives, which is supported by the notification received from mentors, whereas others come from stable family settings. The proportion of males to females participating in the program has changed regularly over its duration at this school. For example, in 2006, 75% of participants were boys whereas in 2007 this percentage now applies to female participants.

The in-school coordinator plays a strong role in supporting Plan-It Youth at the school. Her support role includes supporting mentors whilst in attendance at the school each Friday, setting up the mentoring room including the provision of home-baked morning tea for students and mentors and completion of all administration tasks associated with Plan-It Youth. No identified release time is provided in the Career Advisers teaching load to undertake this coordination task. However, the in-school coordinator is committed to the program due to the positive outcomes experienced by many students.

In addition to the Welfare Team and in-school coordinator, Year Advisers are informed of student progress in the program to ensure that students are encouraged and supported outside the mentoring sessions wherever possible. As a result of this communication with the Year Adviser, Plan-It Youth is valued by these teachers. Other teachers potentially do not hold a similar view with many Plan-It Youth students suggesting the constant need to substantiate where they are going each Friday. Trying to make some teachers value this time was noted as a challenge by some students. The in-school coordinator also noted this challenge but indicated that it had improved since the commencement of the program in 2003 due to the time that it has been running at the school and increased awareness of the program.

External Support

The Plan-It Youth coordinator for the Region identifies and trains the mentors. The in-school coordinator indicated that the school could not undertake this task and doubted that it could maintain the program without the support of the Plan-It Youth coordinator. The school does not provide any direct funding for these activities, however, it does make space available each Friday for the sessions to be conducted and provides morning tea for the students and mentors.

To raise funds for the program in the region, mentors had recently conducted a trivia night. Representatives from the school attended the evening and indicated that it was a positive community building event. It was understood that the funds raised were to pay for a Plan-It Youth assistant and computers.

Through the program many community links have been established by the school. These include those with individual mentors who bring their own expertise to the school and also provide various career development opportunities for students. Enhanced relationships with job networks and TAFE have proven beneficial for work experience placements and more particularly, links with a local youth group, established by a mentor, have ensured that the students can be supported after school hours.

Parental permission is sought prior to a student being allowed to participate in the program. Further engagement of parents is not explicitly sought until a student graduates from the program when the parent is invited to participate in the celebration or award ceremony.
Effectiveness of Plan-It Youth in the school context

The program is regarded as a positive program for those students who participate by many of the teaching staff at the school. Students are noted for increased engagement in their learning, improved attendance and possessing better knowledge about their future education and career direction.

Post destination data is gathered by the school to identify the paths taken by those students who have participated in Plan-It Youth. It was noted that post destination data was not gathered for those students that did not participate in Plan-It Youth as a control group. As this data was not gathered, it was acknowledged by the in-school coordinator that it would be difficult to compare the success of the intervention.

In addition to the above data, mentors are sought to reflect on their experience in Plan-It Youth through the completion of an evaluation form at the end of each term. Information gathered through these evaluation sheets are utilised to improve activities each term. As Plan-It Youth continues indefinitely for students until they decide to opt out, mentors are asked in these evaluation forms whether they want to continue with the same student. At graduation students and mentors are asked to complete a final evaluation form.

Overall, these evaluations reflect that students and mentors value the opportunity to participate in Plan-It Youth. Students have indicated that they feel supported to make good decisions about their future schooling and employment opportunities.

Notwithstanding the collection of the above data, data in regard to student engagement has not been gathered by the school. The in-school coordinator is currently considering developing a survey for teachers to complete for students participating in Plan-It Youth to be able to quantitatively gauge achievement in this area.

The Principal indicated that from the perspective of the Welfare Team, measurement data had not been gathered in terms of what the welfare program achieves the best outcome for students. With limited resources, the school found it extremely difficult to track the many programs on offer to students. However, a Head Teacher is about to commence a mapping exercise to gather this data in order to enable the school to better identify the most appropriate intervention for individual students.

Facilitating Factors for Success

Plan-It Youth was fully supported by the Principal at the school who considered it to be one of the stronger mentoring programs available to students. She placed a lot of this success on the longevity of the program at the school.

The Principal suggested that the strengths of the program included:

- the consistency of having the one Plan-It Youth coordinator over the 4 year duration of the program
- the effective management of the mentors by the Plan-It Youth coordinator
- community people providing their voluntary support to the program
- the philosophy and guidelines behind the program and
• the competency of the mentors in discussing issues that are important to students in terms of their future educational and employment needs.

In addition to the Principal’s support, the in-school coordinator believed the strength of the program was in the regular meetings held between herself and the Plan-It Youth coordinator. These meetings allowed appropriate planning to be undertaken to reduce the impact of the mentoring sessions on the school to ensure maximum outcomes for students and mentors.

Inhibiting Factors

The in-school coordinator indicated that the lack of engagement with parents in the early stages of the program has limited the impact of the program beyond the weekly mentoring sessions. Even though parental consent is sought for their child to participate in the program, any further involvement such as meeting with the mentor before the mentoring sessions commence or attending an information evening has not been strongly supported. Due to the relatively small community within which the school operates, mentors have tried to work one on one with parents to engage them in the program more effectively. This has been relatively successful.

Resourcing and funding of programs such as Plan-It Youth were noted by the Principal as areas requiring constant management by the school. She acknowledged that Plan-It Youth runs on a small budget and often the good-will of the mentors to provide catering and sourcing materials for use during each mentoring session.

Additionally, the tight accommodation issues at the school limited the number of students able to participate in the program. The school currently provides Plan-It Youth mentoring to a maximum of 15 students. With a waiting list of students identified as suitable for Plan-It Youth, accommodation at the school is seen as an inhibitor to the growth of the program.

The Plan-It Youth coordinator advised that limited numbers of available mentors restricts the number of students that can participate in the program. Noting that recruitment of mentors as an area requiring a lot of her time to ensure that the appropriate number of mentors is available each year to support the program.

Student learning outcomes

As the program has been operating at the school for four years, many success stories have been noted. One student, after participating in the program because she was skipping school and disengaging with her learning in Year 9, was now attending university studying to become a Creative Arts teacher. A similar profile was given by a Year 11 boy who had recently discontinued his mentoring sessions and is now studying to complete Year 12 and then follow a career in the timber industry through future TAFE training. To complement this outcome, this student has designed a logo for Plan-It Youth in the region entitled “Walking with your Mates”.

In addition to these stories, students currently participating in the program expressed their satisfaction with the mentoring sessions in providing an alternate approach to exploring future education and employment options.

Another positive outcome demonstrated by students that participate in Plan-It Youth is involvement in a mini mentoring program run at the school. This program encourages older
students to mentor younger students in literacy and numeracy. The in-school coordinator suggested that this program assisted to wean students participating in Plan-It Youth off receiving mentoring themselves by making them start to think about mentoring others by sharing their knowledge and experience in regard to mentoring. The majority of the Plan-It Youth students become involved in this mini mentoring program which the in-school coordinator thought was an indicator of the success of Plan-It Youth.

As mentioned earlier in this case study, post destination data is the only formal data collection undertaken for the program. No formal data is collected on student learning outcomes.

Suggestions for program improvement

A key area for improvement identified by the school was in regard to aligning the work undertaken by the Plan-It Youth program to each student’s six-monthly education review. It was envisaged that at this point an opportunity for the school and parents to come together to discuss the activities undertaken by the student would be available. This meeting could also be used to map future targets for the student and better identify and link other interventions available within the Welfare Program for each student.

Future Directions

The school is currently looking to align the mentoring session with the School to Work program being implemented by the NSW Department of Education and Training. Mentors have been briefed in regard to this program and the Plan-It Youth coordinator is training mentors to work with students in identifying their skills as required by the School to Work program. New activities such as mentors conducting mock interviews will be incorporated into the mentoring session to enhance support for this program.
Case Study 4

Background/Context of Program

This school is located on the outskirts of a large regional centre. Built in the 1970s, the facilities are well maintained and provide an attractive environment for learning. It currently enrols between 400 and 450 students each year. A large number of students leave during the year to become employed in the local community. A significant number of students (38 per cent) are from Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander background. The school also enrols many students from low socio-economic backgrounds, and receives Priority Action Schools funding. There are 42 teachers on staff plus Aboriginal In-class Tutors.

The school receives Schools in Partnership (SIP) funds, which provides significant resourcing for the school for improving outcomes for indigenous students. This has allowed the school to implement personal learning plans (PLPs) for all students. The PLP process has been evolving, driven by some very committed staff members. There has been a small team including the principal established to develop the process. The PLP is based on identifying progressive goals that are achievable over 5-week periods. It has provided an opportunity to build on what students enjoy about schooling, to increase connectedness.

How does Plan-it Youth work in the school?

Plan-It Youth has been running in this school for two years. The principal had previous contact with Plan-It Youth through the Hunter region and thought that it was well suited for this school. He believed that Plan-It Youth can work well with students who are at risk, but not those most at risk, because mentoring can, over time, change the school culture as well as student attitudes, by influencing students whose negative attitudes can provide an improper role model for other at-risk students.

The trial at this school was considered successful and has spread to other towns and schools in the region. Schools in the region are asked to commit $2,000 to a fund to allow the program to run. As well as the in-kind costs the schools will incur in in-school coordination. In this school’s estimation, the cost of running Plan-It Youth successfully is the same as running a Key Learning Area. Asking schools to commit financially to the program was seen to be a way of ensuring that the program is given some priority in the school.

At this school, Plan-It Youth is built into the school plan. Plan-It Youth “fits” strategically with all of the other areas the school wants to address where they are underperforming, such as retention. Plan-It Youth is a strong part of this school’s School to Work program. As a result of the work of the school and the formation of a regional management committee, Plan-It Youth also figures in regional strategic planning documents.

The model of Plan-It Youth that operates in this school is based on an 8-10 week program, aimed mostly at at-risk Year 10 students, although some Year 9 students have been allowed to participate.

All students agree to participate through self-nomination, although some high-achieving students are also included in the group and are those that say they still do not have a good idea of what they want to do in future. Teachers can also refer some students. All staff in the school are said to be aware of the program, however, because it only runs in Years 9 and 10, the Year Advisers for these grades are the most aware. The coordinator has become more proactive in targeting individuals who are thought to be able to benefit from the
Targeting has been very selective - students with behavioural problems are not selected, with the preference being for “mature” students and those with a willingness to engage in the process.

Mentor training is provided by TAFE and runs for 16 hours, followed by 10 week practical training. Many consider this to be too long and an imposition on mentors. Training sessions are run 2 or 3 times per year, using a structured program and manual. The program has been specifically tailored for Plan-It Youth - no other people do the training, although the course is being considered as a model for training for an Aboriginal mentoring program. There are usually 25 people who start the training, of which 18 will complete, and from these 12-15 who will actually become active mentors.

The last group of mentors trained were mostly professional people, since local service clubs had taken an interest in supporting the program, but these people have high demands on their time. Local industries are interested in Plan-It Youth to help them address skills shortages. Plan-It Youth is seen to be the most effective vehicle that has been tried recently in helping students to understand career directions and the opportunities available to them. There are enough mentors available to this school to enable mentors to take time off from the program if they need to.

The mentors follow a very structured program but there is some flexibility if they need it. Some follow the guidebook to the letter while other mentors develop negotiated content with their student. Some of those initially involved in mentoring are now working in other capacities within the school.

The Plan-It Youth coordinator and in-school coordinator match students to mentors. The school believes it knows enough about the mentors’ skills, personality and background and the individual students’ needs. They believe that this process has been very successful, and only one mentor has turned out to not be suitable. They agreed that the success of the partnership between mentor and students rests heavily on having the right “match”.

Mentors come to the school for one hour per week. Mentors usually come to the school 15 minutes early and can talk to the coordinator if needed. It was stated that having the coordinator available for debriefing was also important, as mentors want to feel needed and valued.

Getting students involved was initially difficult, as students were very sceptical about meeting with adults. After 2 years, this is less difficult because the credibility of the program has been spread by word of mouth.

The mentors have been very supportive of the program, going well beyond what might have been expected of them. They have collectively helped to pay for a mentor to accompany a student to Sydney for a scholarship interview, for example.

The in-school coordinator (a classroom teacher) is given one period per week to manage the program in the school, but in reality it often demands more time than this. The regional Plan-It Youth coordinator is also physically located in this school. The in-school coordinator thought that without the direct involvement of the regional Plan-It Youth coordinator the program would struggle. It would be beyond the capacity of the in-school coordinator to take on the task of recruitment and training of mentors.

External Support

The program has been well-supported by the regional office and TAFE. The program is supported by a regional management committee, comprised of principals of participating
schools, mentor representatives, regional personnel and business/community organisations. There is some cross-over of membership of this committee with other regional committees, such as that for School to Work, which was considered to be useful in making strategic linkages with these other programs. The role of this committee is to support the Plan-It Youth coordinator and to provide strategic direction, by asking “how can we make it better, and what can we learn from this?”.

As noted above, the program is supported by community organisations such as The Smith Family and business organisations. Other local service clubs have been approached by the Plan-It Youth coordinator and their members have been encouraged to become mentors.

**Facilitating Factors**

The support given by the Plan-It Youth coordinator and her co-location on the school site, the strong direction of the regional management committee and the support of the principal were all considered to be critical to the success of the program. Also important has been establishing a clear and limited focus for the program. The Plan-It Youth coordinator has made clear that the program is about broadening students’ horizons and improving student outcomes. She agreed there is a fine line between welfare support and the above goal. For this reason, she believed that it was necessary to place limits on what mentors can do. It is essential that the mentors do not duplicate what the school is already doing. Selecting the “right” students has also been important. Selecting those most at risk was not considered to be appropriate since it was believed that they would not have benefited from the kinds of experiences offered through the structured Plan-It Youth program. These students, it was believed, required more intensive and specialist support.

**Student learning outcomes**

The principal said that it is hard to measure the outcomes from Plan-It Youth but he believed that non-attendance is lower for the students in Plan-It Youth on the days when mentoring occurs. The school conducts surveys after every round of mentoring which are always positive. In general, these surveys report that students say they would not have remained at school without PAN-IT YOUTH. Teachers are asked to comment on any changes they perceive for the student, eg attendance or behaviour. Some of this is done verbally. However, it is the things that can’t be reported that are considered to be the most important outcomes of the program. The personal support that is offered is thought to give the students more focus in the classroom, e.g. developing personal confidence.

The principal believed that the experience of being mentored was very powerful in allowing students to talk to another adult about career options - and to be given flexibility to go to work places to see what the real world of work was about. The mentors helped the students to consider options, in a non-threatening way. This fitted well with the schools’ belief in students taking responsibility for thinking about their future through the PLP process. Having a person outside the family and school seems to be the key to success in this. The mentors are supportive but highly skilled and capable of portraying the reality of community standards and expectations (one-on-one).

The Plan-It Youth program has allowed this school to have contact with the community and has helped to build community capacity. It has drawn people from PCYC, The Smith Family and retirees into the school. The program is credited with changing negative perceptions of the school and young people in the community, as mentors have spread the message based on their own perception that “they are not that bad”.

The Plan-It Youth program has also been seen as useful in building bridges between schools in the region. Part of this comes from the involvement of principals on the regional management committee but also from the capacity of the Plan-It Youth coordinator to move between schools.

**Suggestions for program improvement**

There is a need to get the right balance between the amount of information about a student that is shared with the mentor. There are questions of privacy to be considered, but mentors need to be as best prepared as possible. The in-school coordinator does not have enough time to do the detailed work in preparation for each individual. The upside of this is that the mentors do not come with pre-conceived ideas. It was recognised that the quality of mentors available to this school was very high, and without this, the program would not be nearly as successful.

The greatest challenge for the program is that the needs of the mentors vary considerably, hence the need for flexibility. Not all have the same level of skill, and most do not have the capacity to deal with high needs students.

A weakness in the program was the lack of Aboriginal mentors. The requirement for potential mentors to undergo police check was seen to be one of the major factors inhibiting greater involvement of Aboriginal mentors.

A lot of time has also been spent on seeking sponsorship but it has had only limited success.

**Future Directions**

There are no plans to change the Plan-It Youth program in this school. A CD-ROM has been created by a student to help publicise the program further, but it is recognised that without additional resources further expansion of the program is not practicable.
Case Study 5

Background/Context of Program

This school is one of a cluster of schools operating in an expanding coastal town. It was created from the amalgamation of the previous two high schools in the area. The school serves students in Years 7-10, and is co-located next to a senior campus, comprising a Years 11-12 campus and a TAFE college. The College structure allows greater breadth of curriculum choice. Some cross campus teaching occurs. The senior campus has 450 students and achieves strong HSC results. The size of the school (450 students) allows greater subject choice and specialisation than would have been possible in the previous arrangement.

While not a Priority School, it was reported that there was a significant number of dysfunctional families in the school community.

ELLA and SNAP results have always been good, but School Certificate shows patchy results. The junior school arrangement allows greater focus on middle schooling and on the welfare needs of the students.

There are 10 students and 8 mentors involved in the program at present.

How does Plan-it Youth work in the school?

The program generally runs for one semester in this school (about 15 weeks), but this can vary depending on the individual needs of students at the time. Some are allowed to continue beyond the end of the main program. Mentors have a set of resources that help them to plan lessons and guide discussions, but mentors can choose which if any of the activities are suitable for their students. It was believed that the content of the mentoring, such as résumé development, interview skills and so on that are part of the program, are a means to an end — the development of greater self confidence being the real goal of the program.

Parents sign a permission note to allow students to participate in mentoring, but otherwise there is very limited formal involvement of parents during the program, except in special circumstances. It was said that there are often issues of confidentiality about family relationships discussed during mentoring that would not be appropriate to pass on to parents in detail.

The school believes that welfare and transition issues are intertwined — the development of transition skills helps develop self-esteem and confidence and vice versa. Plan-It Youth was seen to offer a safety net for students who had lost direction and self esteem. It was thought that community members might be able to give these students a sense of the bigger picture of schooling and to help them make better decisions. The principal believes that Plan-It Youth is important in proving leadership and a positive example for supporting community partnerships, so it has been given a high priority in the school.

This school believes that Plan-It Youth is best targeted at Year 9 and 10 students. The school targets students who they think can most benefit from the program, not those who are described as “desperate” but those that are thought to best fit with the mentors available. Plan-It Youth is seen to be one of the strategies that are available to the school alongside other programs. Some of the children in the school are referred to the DEST
funded Youth Pathways program. Very few Aboriginal children are involved in the program. It was noted that there are other specialist indigenous role modelling programs operating in the region (such as project Reconnect) that were thought to be more appropriate in some communities.

The in-school coordinator’s role has developed over the time the program has operated in this school. The initial understanding was that the role of the in-school coordinator was to select the students and hand out permission notes. It has grown into a much greater role for example, involving conducting group debriefings, leading the matching of students and mentors, and providing individual support for mentors. This requires a great deal of support from the school and the availability of timetabled support to allow the in-school coordinator to have the time to devote to the program. The school’s careers budget is used to provide funds for hospitality, folders for mentors and students resource books and so on.

The in-school coordinator seeks nominations of students suitable for the Plan-It Youth program with teaching staff and Year Advisers, and discusses cases with the school’s student welfare committee, of which she is a member. The welfare committee does examine data in relation to students who have come to the attention of staff for some reason (usually misbehaviour or disengagement). The in-school coordinator is also a Pathways Mentor, as well as Head Teacher Welfare, so is well placed for the role. This Pathways training was considered to be important for helping the in-school coordinator to see “how all of the pieces in the puzzle” (of the various transition and support programs available) fitted together.

External Support

Other than the extensive support provided by the regional PIY coordinator and the mentors themselves, no other external support has been provided for the program in this school.

Effectiveness of Plan-it Youth in the school context

Teachers were said to be able to observe changes in students’ attitudes and behaviours, but systems to gather data to confirm these observations was said to be in a developmental stage. An evaluation is conducted at the end of each program that asks what students perceive to be the benefits of their participation, what they have enjoyed, and how it could be improved. Mentor evaluations are also conducted. These comments indicate that it has generally been perceived to have been a positive experience.

The development of relationships and role modelling by mentors was seen to be the greatest strength of Plan-It Youth. The team approach adopted by all mentors was also seen to be important. The fact that all of the mentors were known to all each other was seen to be important in allowing coverage when mentors are not available for a particular session.

Facilitating Factors for Success

The success of the program in the school was seen to be a function of having a strong in-school coordinator who had time to devote to the program, and to interface with other school welfare committees. The dual focus of the program on welfare and transition was also seen to be positive. The reputation that the program has developed in the community through the celebrations was also seen to be contributing to its ongoing success. The support given by the principal in providing a period allocation to the in-school coordinator was also seen to be critical to the success achieved by the program.
Inhibiting Factors

Finding time within the timetable was seen to be the greatest limitation to the program. There are many demands on students’ and teachers’ time. However, class teachers and students negotiate missed work. The in-school coordinator said that there had been few complaints and that this supported the school’s policy that it was the student’s responsibility to follow up on missed work.

Retention of mentors is a continuing challenge for the program. It was said that without the ongoing work of the regional coordinator, finding additional mentors would be difficult. In this region, only about one-third of the mentors trained are active at any one time.

Student learning outcomes

The principal observed that one of the benefits of the program is that the mentors gain from the experience as well. He believed that if the Plan-It Youth program was to end, he would endeavour to retain mentoring as one of the school’s strategies for addressing the needs of students.

No formal tracking of students’ behaviour, attendance or engagement is kept after they have participated in Plan-It Youth, although there are sometimes informal discussions between the coordinator and teachers about their progress.

Future Directions

Greater connection with mainstream teachers of the target students is sought for the future. It was believed that most teachers have little idea about what specifically happens during mentoring. As noted above, parental participation in the program is also not strong, and feedback about the program is managed on an individual basis by mentors. The school would like to increase this contact in future. The school has asked parents if they would be interested in joint career planning, but had very limited response.