

# Our youngest carers invisible in classrooms

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UP TO 80 per cent of teachers in South Australia have little or no idea how many students in their classroom are carers of sick and disabled family members, according to a report calling for urgent statewide systemic change.

The report, by SA Commissioner for Children and Young People Helen Connolly, says the state's education system is failing many of the more than 14,800 children aged under 18 caring for parents and siblings.

The Take Care report makes three recommendations, including "urgent action" from the Education Department to improve the educational, social and community inclusion outcomes for young carers.

It says although many teachers provide additional support to young carers, some feel discriminated against, socially stigmatised, overlooked, fearful and unsupported by their schools.

Part of the report involved a survey of teachers last year, which received 97 responses. The findings included that:

MOST respondents were not able to say how many young carers they were teaching;

OF the 20 per cent who reported they did know, most said there were "one or two" in their classrooms;

70 PER CENT said their training did not equip them to deal with vulnerable students, specifically carers;

TEACHERS with a young carer in their classroom described them as mature, compassionate, resilient, anxious for the day to end, tired and socially isolated.

Research has found young carers lag behind their peers in numeracy and literacy, and have higher rates of unemployment and poor mental and physical health.

Ms Connolly obtained feedback from 150 students aged from eight to 21 who care for a family member with a physical disability, a chronic or terminal illness, a mental illness, a degenerative disease, and/or drug and alcohol issues. She said her "eye-opening" conversations with students was the "tip of the iceberg", with many schools "falling short" in adequately supporting them.

Early Years and Child Development acting executive director Sarah Anstey said the Education Department had strategies to ensure young carers were supported. "The department is aware it is often difficult for staff to be sure one of their students has a caring responsibility, as young

carers often do not identify due to fear, embarrassment or concerns about divulging private family matters," she said.

"Where they do identify, support is often led by the school's student wellbeing leader in collaboration with the student's teachers."