

Commissioner reports steady progress on SA child rights but no time for complacency

Commissioner Helen Connolly has today released a series of reports on South Australia's progress on child rights. Launched to coincide with International Human Rights Day (10 December) the progress reports cover six separate child rights issues highlighted by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child as areas of concern. They include child health, education, physical punishment, disability, child justice and child protection.

The progress reports prepared by the Commissioner indicate there is still considerable work to be done in the areas of child justice, child protection and health. Overall some evidence of progress can be seen across all six areas highlighted.

The UN Committee's recommendations range from 'considering what is in the best interests of the child' to 'prompt investigation of all cases of abuse and maltreatment'; that government 'explicitly prohibit the use of isolation and force' and 'do more to address the shortcomings of the Closing the Gap measures for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, so that they reach the targets set on school attendance and literacy and numeracy'. This recommendation includes 'investing in teachers' cultural competency within remote communities'.

Areas which show no clear evidence of progress, but which appear to be 'easy wins' include providing children who are in contact with the law with information about their rights and how they can report abuses. Explicitly outlawing physical punishment (aka corporal punishment) and raising the criminal age from 10yrs to 14yrs to bring us into alignment with other jurisdictions around the world should also be achievable.

One of the areas in which the State needs to continue to improve its performance relates to the true cost of education. This needs to be addressed to ensure all children across South Australia can fully participate and access the benefits of school. Although introduction of the Inclusive SA plan and requirement for each state authority to develop a Disability Access and Inclusion Plan (DAIP) is encouraging, unfortunately many of these are failing to adequately recognise children and young people and therefore do not address their unique needs. There also remains a strong need to combat stigmatisation of and prejudice against children with disabilities as a foundation for their improved life outcomes.

While some of the Child Protection initiatives introduced by the government over the last twelve to eighteen months are promising, South Australia consistently spends less than other Australian states and territories on services designed to prevent children coming into state care. A far greater proportion of the overall budget needs to be allocated to services that enable earlier interventions that can assist in preventing children from being removed from their families in the first place.

South Australia is doing well in relation to addressing bullying in schools with introduction of a statewide bullying prevention strategy in 2019. It has also demonstrated a commitment to providing support to child victims of school bullying, in particular lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and gender diverse children.

Every five years, the Australian Government must meet its international obligation to report to the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) explaining how Australia is faring in relation to child's rights. This means that the State must provide feedback on how it has fulfilled its obligations under the UNCRC in the areas over which the State has responsibility – such as education, health, child protection, youth justice, disability, etc.

In response to Australia's fifth and sixth periodic reports, the Committee highlighted key areas of concern, making a series of recommendations that need to be implemented if Australian governments, at both the Federal and State levels, are to fulfil their obligations under the Convention.

Each of the progress reports prepared by the Commissioner looks closely at the UN Committee's recommendations in relation to South Australia's responsibilities using a status rating that indicates 'clear', 'some' or 'no' evidence of progress.

Quotes attributable to Commissioner for Children & Young People, Helen Connolly
In a year where time has been simultaneously moving both quickly and slowly due to the impact of COVID-19 it has been pleasing to see that plans are in place and that progress is being made in many of the areas identified by the UN Committee. I would caution against any complacency at this time. South Australia will need to dial-up its efforts in 2021, if we are to meet our child rights obligations under the UNCRC. There needs to be a full throttle applied so that we can see some big ticket changes made on these important child rights issues.

To download the suite of progress reports go to: www.ccyp.com.au/ccyp-reports

FURTHER INFORMATION

For more information about the work of the South Australian Commissioner for Children and Young People go to: www.ccyp.com.au

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