



Pathways of Care Longitudinal Study (POCLS)

Educational outcomes for children and young people who experienced out-of-home care: reading achievement and trajectories

Key Messages

Children and young people who experience out-of-home care (OOHC) have lower academic achievement overall than the general population, which is associated with poor adult life outcomes. Nonetheless, a small proportion of children and young people who experience OOHC have positive educational outcomes.

This Evidence to Action Note presents key findings from two research publications commissioned by the Pathways of Care Longitudinal Study (POCLS) to Maclean and colleagues (2023, 2024), focusing on the positive reading achievement of children and young people in OOHC.

The POCLS shows that children and young people with average or above average cognitive ability, low levels of socio-emotional challenges, and highly educated caregivers¹ (with a Bachelor/diploma or higher Certificate) who are actively involved in their education, tend to achieve better reading outcomes in the NAPLAN. Access to additional support services also contributes significantly to improved reading achievement.

A summary of key messages is presented on page 2.

¹ 'Caregivers' refers to all types of carers including birth parents. 'Carers' refers only to foster and relative/kinship carers.

Higher reading achievers in OOHC



- Almost half of all the children in the POCLS (46%) scored the higher achieving range² in the NAPLAN Year 3 reading assessment.

Factors associated with higher levels of reading achievement



- Average or above average cognitive ability.
- Low externalising behaviours.
- Highly educated caregivers.

Support and services reported by caregivers for all students at Year 3 NAPLAN



- 31% reported that the child had an OOHC Education Plan/ Learning and Support Plan (LaSP)³.
- 61% reported that the child received help with their homework at home a few times a week or more.
- 6% reported the child received additional help or tutoring from outside the household; this was higher for Aboriginal children (11%) than non Aboriginal children (6%).

Patterns of achievement over time for all students⁴



- **Stable low:** 49% of students were below the top three bands in all three NAPLAN tests (Year 3, 5, 7).
- **Declining:** 19% of students who started in the top three bands and dropped below in later years.
- **Stable high:** 15% of students were in the top three bands in all three years (Year 3, 5, 7).
- **Improving:** 7% of students who started below the top three bands reached the top three by Year 7.

Trajectories of reading achievement for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students⁵



- Three achievement trajectories were identified among non-Aboriginal children: high (12%), medium (41%), and low (48%).
- The high achieving group was the only group to consistently maintain high reading achievement across Years 3 to 7.
- Two achievement trajectories were identified among Aboriginal children: high (15%) and low achievement (85%).

Factors associated with positive reading trajectories



- Higher cognitive ability.
- Younger age at entry to care.

² Top three bands in the year level.

³ An Education Plan is a structured document, also referred to as Learning and Support Plan (LaSP), developed collaboratively by schools and caseworkers to support the educational needs of children and young people in OOHC. This approach supports a single integrated plan to avoid duplication across agencies and enables coordinated implementation and oversight. In this Note, the terms 'Education Plan' and 'Learning and Support Plan (LaSP)' are used interchangeably. This Plan was previously known as Personalised Learning and Support Plan (PLaSP) which has been streamlined to strengthen planning for students and the term 'personalised' has been removed.

⁴ These are descriptive categories based on whether a student's NAPLAN reading score was above or below the top three bands at each of three time points (Year 3, 5, 7). The remaining percentage (10%) includes students with fluctuating patterns, incomplete data, or patterns not fitting the main categories.

⁵ Trajectories are statistical groupings based on overall trends across all time points (Year 3, 5 and 7). Trajectories were identified by tracking students' actual NAPLAN reading scores over time and comparing them to the growth of a typical student (using 'Equivalent Year Levels'), rather than by using only the top three NAPLAN bands as a cutoff.

Introduction

This Evidence to Action Note presents key findings from two research publications by Maclean and colleagues (2023, 2024), focusing on the positive reading achievement of children and young people in OOHC. The first paper focusses on children's earliest reading assessments in Year 3 using the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) data (Maclean et al., 2023; Paper 1). The second paper focusses on the NAPLAN assessments in Years 3, 5 and 7 to identify trajectories in reading achievement (Maclean et al., 2024; Paper 2). Both papers reported results for the entire cohort of children and young people, as well as separate results for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students. The findings are intended to inform policy and practice about the factors associated with children and young people's positive reading outcomes and their reading achievement trajectories.

The POCLS tracks the trajectories of children and young people over time, including those who remain in OOHC and those who have transitioned from OOHC to restoration, guardianship, or open adoption. This Note presents analyses based on the POCLS interview data from Waves 1 to 4 collected over an eight-year period since the child or young person first entered OOHC.

This Note should be read in conjunction with the POCLS publication (Report 14) commissioned to Townsend and colleagues on educational outcomes of children in OOHC in NSW (Townsend et al., 2020) and the related Evidence to Action Note (Number 5).

The key findings from Paper 1 (Maclean et al., 2023) are:

- Almost half of the children in the POCLS (46%) scored in the higher achieving range, i.e., the top three reading bands in the NAPLAN Year 3 reading assessment. Although a lower proportion than in the general population (74%), it shows many children who experience OOHC are achieving at a satisfactory level.
- Among the higher achievers in Year 3, 44% had received between 6 and 20 Risk of Significant Harm (ROSH) reports prior to entering care. Among high achieving students, just over half (54%) had their most recent placement in foster care, while 46% were placed in relative/kinship care.
- Higher achieving students within the POCLS cohort were a diverse group. They came from a range of socio-economic status levels, varied in cognitive ability and socio-emotional wellbeing (as measured in the POCLS), included Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children, and males and females.
- Around 4 out of 5 caregivers of all children who participated in the Year 3 reading assessment indicated they were involved with schooling (such as the caregiver contacting a teacher, attending a school event, etc). Only 47 of the 562 children were reported by the caregiver to have additional help or tutoring from outside the home.
- Higher levels of achievement in reading were associated with a range of factors including average or above average cognitive ability, low externalising behaviours and highly educated caregivers. Supports provided through OOHC casework were associated with higher

achievement in reading including children having an Education Plan/LaSP and caregivers attending training.

The key findings from Paper 2 (Maclean et al., 2024) are:

- There were three common trajectories⁶ of reading achievement among non-Aboriginal students: high, medium and low achievement. The high achieving group, comprising 12% of non-Aboriginal students, was the only trajectory group to maintain their level of achievement across Year 3, 5 and 7 reading assessments.
- Among Aboriginal students, there were two common trajectories: high achieving, and low achieving. Approximately 15% of the Aboriginal students followed a high achieving trajectory, with remaining 85% following a low achieving trajectory.
- Improving achievement over time was rare for all children who experienced OOHC while falling behind was common regardless of whether their Year 3 reading scores were high, medium or low.
- Children and young people in care often need additional support to achieve well in school, even if they are doing well early on.

In line with the NSW Child Safe Standards for Permanent Care (Standard 10), the NSW Department of Communities and Justice (DCJ) policy has a renewed focus on providing collaborative, timely and tailored educational support for each child and young person in OOHC. The findings presented in this Note underpin DCJ's current policy and practice highlighting the importance of early assessments, regular monitoring, multi-agency supports and services to improve the educational outcomes of children and young people in OOHC. Continued research and analysis using more waves of the POCLS data, particularly when the infant cohort are in high school will help assess whether current strategies are being implemented effectively to support children and young people in OOHC to reach their full potential.

⁶ Reading achievement trajectories were identified by tracking students' actual NAPLAN reading scores over time and comparing them to the growth of a typical student (using 'Equivalent Year Levels'), rather than by using only the top three NAPLAN bands as a cutoff.

Summary of literature

Australian and international research has identified several factors contributing to the poorer educational outcomes observed among children and young people who experience OOHC. Recent large scale studies suggest lower achievement is not caused by placement in OOHC, but rather by the adversities children and young people experienced before entering care (Berger et al., 2015; Maclean et al., 2018).

Children and young people in care often face multiple risk factors for low educational achievement, including maltreatment, socio-economic disadvantage, ethnicity and various parent and child risk factors (Maclean, Taylor, & O'Donnell, 2016). The POCLS data showed that children and young people with child protection histories, particularly those with a higher number of ROSH reports, and those exposed to prolonged maltreatment, are at heightened risk of poor educational outcomes compared to their peers in the general community (Townsend et al., 2020). While in OOHC, children and young people may experience additional challenges such as multiple school changes, placement moves, and trauma from their experiences of abuse and neglect, all of which can disrupt their education and prevent them from reaching their full potential (Maclean et al., 2017; Rouse, 2017; Townsend et al., 2016).

Although OOHC may not appear to be a direct cause of reduced achievement (Berger et al., 2015), certain placement characteristics—such as stability, type of care and support—can influence educational outcomes (Brownell et al., 2015; Zima et al., 2000). The POCLS adds strong new evidence to this body of research, showing that student wellbeing is directly linked to educational engagement and performance (Townsend et al., 2020) reinforcing the importance of holistic support systems that address both emotional and academic needs.

Only a small number of studies have explored positive educational achievement among children and young people in OOHC. These qualitative studies, often involving young adults, highlight the importance of caregivers who value education, support aspirations, foster a sense of belonging, and create environments that facilitate learning (Jackson & Ajayi, 2007; Martin & Jackson, 2002; Skilbred et al., 2017).

International research also shows that with appropriate support, poor educational outcomes can improve (Holmes and Dowker, 2013). However, children and young people in OOHC often show more variability in their achievement levels over time, with declines and stable low achievement being prevalent (Melkman, 2020). Despite challenges, some children and young people demonstrate improvement over time—for example, progressing from a low or middle level achievement at Year 3 reading to top third in Year 9 assessments (Maclean, 2016).

This Note describes how this new POCLS evidence can inform OOHC policy and practice to improve the educational outcomes of children and young people who have experienced OOHC, helping them achieve full learning potential. Understanding the factors associated with positive reading outcomes is crucial for supporting the educational outcomes and long-term wellbeing of children and young people in OOHC.

How are children and young people's reading achievement and developmental outcomes measured in the POCLS?

Reading achievement

Educational achievement including reading, was measured using the NAPLAN. The NAPLAN is a standardised, national assessment, providing the opportunity to compare the results from vulnerable groups such as the POCLS cohort where children and young people have a child protection history resulting in entry to OOHC, with results from children and young people in the general population. The NAPLAN assessments are undertaken annually, for children and young people in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9 in Australian schools.

Reading scores are standardised in 10 different performance levels from Year 3 to Year 9 called 'bands'. The first six bands cover student performance in the Year 3 NAPLAN test; bands 3 to 8 represent student's score scales for the Year 5 NAPLAN test; and bands 4 to 9 define Year 9 NAPLAN assessment scales. For the two papers discussed in this Note, students scoring in the top 3 bands at each year level NAPLAN reading assessment were considered as representing higher achievement within the POCLS cohort.⁷

The following measures are standardised instruments used in the POCLS survey. While these measures are widely recognised as gold-standard tools, their validity and reliability have not been tested with Aboriginal populations. As such, these measures may not fully capture culturally grounded knowledge, identity strength, learning approaches, or ways of demonstrating capability that are important to Aboriginal children, families and communities. This limitation needs to be acknowledged in the interpretation of findings.

Child and Behaviour Checklist (CBCL)

Children and young people's socio-emotional wellbeing was assessed using the CBCL. The CBCL was completed by caregivers and teachers of children and young people aged 3–17 years. Versions validated and normed for use with children 1.5–5 years of age and 6–18 years of age were used (CBCL, Achenbach & Rescorla, 2000). The CBCL yields subscale scores for a range of conditions and competencies, but the principal focus for the POCLS was the two composite syndrome profiles: internalising and externalising behaviours. Internalising includes the anxious-depressed, withdrawn-depressed and somatic complaints syndrome scales. Externalising captures problems relating to external behaviours including rule breaking and aggressive behaviours.

⁷ Students in the fifth band from the top are considered to meet National Minimum Standards. The cut-off chosen for higher achievement therefore places children and young people comfortably above National Minimum Standards, but this is not a high threshold with 72% of all Year 3 and 48% of all Year 9 students in NSW achieving this level.

Matrix Reasoning Test from the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children (WISC-IV)

The Matrix Reasoning Test (WISC-IV) is a measure of logical reasoning or fluid intelligence administered to children and young people aged 6–16 years (Wechsler, 2003). Children and young people in the POCLS completed 35 Matrix Reasoning Test items from the WISC-IV.

Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test (PPVT-IV)

The PPVT-IV is a measure of verbal knowledge administered to children and young people aged 3–17 years. There are 228 items with different starting points for children and young people of different ages. The test yields raw scores based on correct answers and errors, as well as standardised scores ($M = 100$, $SD = 15$) for different ages. Scores higher or lower than the reference point of 100 indicate the extent to which the child and young person's vocabulary compare with peers in a sample of the general population (Dunn & Dunn, 2007).



Summary of findings

The results presented in this Section include data collected from both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children, young people and families. Interpretation of the data should consider the factors associated with the over-representation of Aboriginal children and young people in child protection and OOHC including the legacy of past policies of forced removal and the intergenerational effects of previous forced separations from family and culture. This erosion of community and familial capacity over time needs to be considered in any reform efforts as it may continue to have a profoundly adverse effect on child development. Children and young people in OOHC demonstrate remarkable resilience, cultural strength and learning potential. Many achieve strong reading outcomes despite experiencing systemic disadvantage. This document recognises these strengths and the importance of culturally safe, stable and community-led supports. The implications for policy and practice should highlight strengths, develop Aboriginal-led solutions, connection to culture and the cultural complexity of families. This Note presents findings that did not aim to address that complexity in its findings.

As discussed earlier, this Note presents key findings from two papers by Maclean and colleagues (2023, 2024). The first paper involved children who completed the Year 3 reading assessment and had at least one caregiver interview before the assessment (n=778) (Maclean et al., 2023). Using the first four waves of the POCLS data, the authors examined the prevalence of higher achievement among Year 3 children, considering child and background characteristics, child protection and OOHC history, caregiver factors, and supports and services linked to higher achievement.

The second analysis focused on children and young people who completed the NAPLAN reading assessments in Years 3, 5, and 7, and had at least one interview before the Year 7 test (n=325) (Maclean et al., 2024). This paper explored the reading trajectories from Year 3 to Year 7 for children and young people in OOHC, identifying factors such as child, caregiver and placement characteristics, as well as supports and services, associated with positive reading trajectories.

For clarity, the term *children* is used when referring to findings from the Year 3 reading assessment (Paper 1, Maclean et al., 2023), as these participants were under 12 years of age. The term *children and young people* is used for findings related to reading trajectories across Years 3, 5, and 7 (Paper 2, Maclean et al., 2024).

Proportion of children in the higher achieving group for Year 3 reading assessment

Overall, 46% of children in the first analysis (n=778) (Maclean, 2023) scored in the higher achieving group, i.e., in the top three of six bands of the Year 3 NAPLAN reading assessment. In comparison, 74% of children in the general population scored at this level in Year 3.

Characteristics and circumstances of the higher achieving group for Year 3 reading assessment

The results from Paper 1 (Maclean et al., 2023) showed that higher achieving children came from diverse backgrounds. They included both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students, males and females, and were spread across different socio-economic areas. While a slightly higher proportion of high achieving children lived in more advantaged neighbourhoods compared to lower achievers (23% vs. 15%), many high achieving students still faced significant disadvantage (21%) living in the most disadvantaged areas.

Among the high achieving students, nearly half (44%) had experienced between 6 and 20 ROSH reports before entering care, and 11% had a recorded disability. Cognitive ability (as measured by the PPVT-IV and Matrix Reasoning Test) and socio-emotional wellbeing (as measured by the CBCL) also varied among higher achievers. Most had average cognitive test scores, although those with above-average scores were more likely to perform well academically. Around one in five (21%) had clinical levels of externalising behaviours, such as aggression or hyperactivity, while internalising problems like anxiety or depression were less common (10%).

The students' care histories were also mixed. Half of the higher achieving children had foster care as their main placement during their first care period, and 46% had relative/kinship care placements. Placement stability varied with just over one-third having only one placement, another third having two or three placements, and one in four having four or more placements before their Year 3 NAPLAN tests. Overall, these children showed resilience in achieving well at school despite facing similar levels of adversity, instability and vulnerability as their peers in OOHC.

Caregiver report of supports and services received

The results presented in this Section refer to all children (n=772) from Paper 1 (Maclean et al., 2023), including both higher and lower achieving children in the Year 3 NAPLAN reading assessment, unless otherwise specified.

Caregivers were asked questions about a range of services and supports that might benefit the child, either directly or through support provided to the caregiver. Among supports directly related to helping students learn, caregivers were more likely to report that children received help within the home rather than from outside sources:

- **School involvement:** 79% of caregivers reported being involved with the child's school such as contact with teachers or attending school events. This proportion was similar for Aboriginal (80%) and non-Aboriginal children (79%).
- **Help with homework and tutoring:** 61% of caregivers reported that their child had help at home with their homework a few times a week or more. Only 6% of caregivers indicated that the child had received additional help or tutoring from outside the home. Notably, caregivers of Aboriginal children more often reported their child received tutoring or other help outside the home (11%) compared to non-Aboriginal children (6%), though rates were still low overall.

- **Access to professional services:** A high proportion of children were reported to have received professional services, including from a General Practitioner or Aboriginal Medical Service (93%), Eye, Ear, Nose and Throat specialist (61%), Pediatrician (47%), Early Childhood Health Center (<5%) or services related to child developmental needs (49%).
- **Education Plan/LaSP:** Just under one-third of the children were reported to have an OOHC Education Plan/LaSP. Among higher achieving Aboriginal children, a higher proportion of caregivers reported an Education Plan/LaSP (41%), compared to lower achieving children (31%). Among non-Aboriginal children, this figure was 27% for higher achievers and 30% among lower achievers. The relatively low proportion highlights variability in implementation across settings and reinforces the need for continued interagency coordination to ensure consistency and quality.
- **Caregiver training:** 41% of all caregivers indicated they had attended training provided by their OOHC provider in the past 12 months. Most caregivers indicated they were satisfied or very satisfied with aspects of OOHC such as balancing care and family schedules, being able to reach the caseworker, and assistance from the caseworker. Fewer indicated that the caseworker had explained to them the OOHC Care Plan, OOHC Health Plan, Family Time/Contact Plan, LifeStory book and Cultural Plan.
- **Family time:** Caregivers reported that contact was most common with mothers (72%), followed by the siblings (52%) and then fathers (46%). In addition, actions aimed at maintaining cultural connections were reported by caregivers of 86% of Aboriginal children.

Reading achievement trajectories for all children and young people across Year 3, 5, and 7 reading assessments

This Section shares results from Paper 2 (Maclean et al., 2024) focusing on reading achievement trajectories across Year 3, 5 and 7 NAPLAN reading assessments (n=325). Reading achievement trajectories were identified by tracking students' actual NAPLAN reading scores over time and comparing them to the growth of a 'typical student' (using 'Equivalent Year Levels'), rather than by using only the top three NAPLAN bands as a cutoff. In simple terms, this means the 'high achieving' trajectory group was defined by children and young people who started out performing above their grade level and maintained expected years of progress in reading over time, not just by being in the top three bands each year.

Overall, 9% of the cohort showed a stable high achievement trajectory over time. Two other reading achievement trajectories were identified: a middle level group, and a low achieving group. The middle level group, comprising 34% of the cohort, showed reading growth close to typical scores but did not reach high achievement levels. The low achieving group, representing 58% of the cohort, started with low reading scores and continued to fall further behind their peers in the general population over time.

Reading achievement trajectories for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children and young people

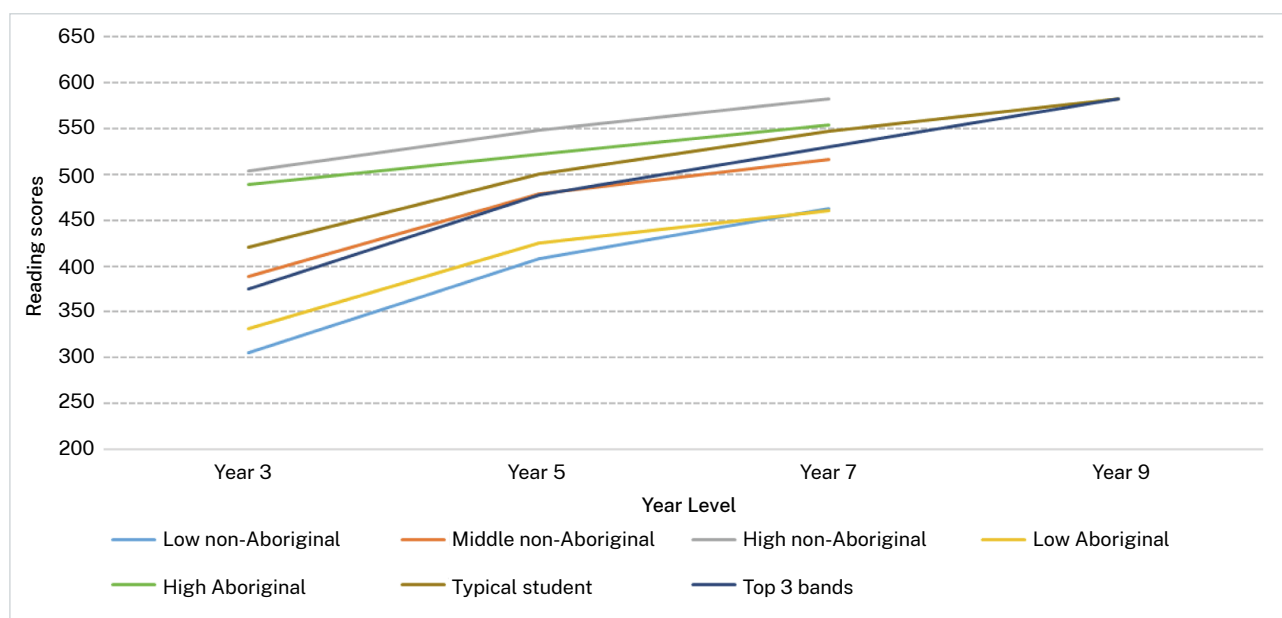
In their second paper, Maclean and colleagues (2024) analysed reading achievement trajectories separately for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students, as shown in Figure 1. Note, two comparison trajectory lines are presented in Figure 1 below to aid interpretation: the cut-off for high achievement (top three bands) and 'Equivalent Year Level' which depicts the reading score growth trajectory of a 'typical student' using NAPLAN data.

Aboriginal students

Figure 1 shows, among Aboriginal students, there were two trajectories: high achieving, and low achieving. Approximately 15% of the students followed a high achieving trajectory, beginning with very high achievement in Year 3 and declining slightly to remain just above average by Year 7. In Year 3, this group of Aboriginal students was at Equivalent Year Level between Year 4 and Year 5, but in Year 7 this fell between Equivalent Year Level Year 7 and Year 8.

The remaining 85% of Aboriginal students followed a low achieving trajectory, starting below average in Year 3 which is between Equivalent Year Level Year 1 and Year 2, and continuing to fall significantly behind their peers by Year 7 which is around the Equivalent Year Level Year 4, meaning students were three years behind a 'typical student' in their year.

Figure 1: Trajectories across Year 3, 5 and 7 NAPLAN reading assessment for Aboriginal (n=115) and non-Aboriginal (n=210) students in the POCLS



Non-Aboriginal students

Figure 1 shows, for non-Aboriginal children and young people, there were three trajectories: a high achieving trajectory, a middle level trajectory, and a low trajectory. The high achieving trajectory accounts for 12% of non-Aboriginal children and young people in the cohort. This trajectory is consistently above the threshold marked by the top three NAPLAN bands and remains at an Equivalent Year Level two years ahead of the student's actual year level. This group showed four years of progress over the four years of the study (Year 3-7).

The middle trajectory (41%) follows close to the threshold for the top three NAPLAN bands and shows a slow progress with less than four years growth between Year 3 and Year 7.

Similarly, the low achievement trajectory (48%) is characterised by slow progress and begins from a low level of achievement in Year 3, which is close to Equivalent Year Level Year 1 and continues to fall further behind their 'typical' peers at Year 7 by three years.

Factors associated with higher reading achievement and trajectories of reading achievement

The findings presented here are based on both analyses, as reported in the papers by Maclean and colleagues published in 2023 and 2024.

All children and young people who experienced OOHC

Several factors relating to the child, young person, caregiver and supports were significantly associated with higher achievement (this includes both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal cohorts):

- **Cognitive test scores:** Students with average or above-average cognitive test scores for both verbal and non-verbal ability were more likely to achieve higher reading scores in Year 3 NAPLAN assessment (Maclean et al., 2023). This finding was also supported by the second paper which showed that students with low cognitive test scores were less likely to be in the middle or high trajectory groups across Year 3, 5 and 7 (Maclean et al. 2024). Nonetheless, many students with typical (average or above average) cognitive ability were also in the lower achieving groups for Year 3 and also followed a low trajectory in reading achievement over time (Maclean et al. 2024). These children and young people are capable of higher performance than they are currently achieving.
- **Externalising behaviours:** Children with typical levels of externalising behaviours (as assessed by the CBCL), were more likely to achieve higher Year 3 reading scores than those with clinical levels. Particularly, it was found that children with high externalising behaviour problems were 70% less likely to be in the higher achieving group for Year 3 assessment (Maclean et al., 2023). However, children and young people's CBCL scores did not predict reading achievement trajectories over time (Maclean et al., 2024).
- **Disability:** Having a disability was associated with a lower likelihood of higher reading achievement in Year 3 (Maclean et al., 2023). Similarly, it was found that children and young

people with a disability were less likely to be in the middle or high trajectory groups for reading achievement over time (Maclean et al., 2024).

- **Caregiver characteristics:** Caregiver's education level and living in low socio-economic areas were both associated with children's reading achievement in Year 3 (Maclean et al., 2023). Consistent with this, trajectory analysis in Paper 2 also found that children and young people with highly educated caregivers were more likely to be in the high trajectory group for reading achievement over time (Maclean et al., 2024).
- **Tutoring:** Tutoring was found to have a significant negative relationship with higher achievement both at Year 3 and with the high achievement trajectory over time (Maclean et al., 2023; 2024). This reflects that tutoring is typically provided to students who are already struggling academically, rather than indicating that tutoring itself is ineffective. These findings highlight the importance of earlier and proactive academic support, rather than reducing access to tutoring.
- **Age at entry to care:** Although children's age at entry to care was not found to be associated with being in the higher achievement group in Year 3 (Maclean et al., 2023), the trajectory analysis showed that children who entered care at an older age were less likely to be in the high achievement trajectory group from Year 3 to Year 7 (Maclean et al., 2024). Furthermore, being in care at Year 7 was found to be associated with lower trajectories.
- **Aboriginality:** Non-Aboriginal students were significantly more likely than Aboriginal children to have higher reading achievement and show positive reading trajectories (Maclean et al., 2023; 2024).

Aboriginal children and young people who experienced OOHC

For Aboriginal children, some of the same factors associated with higher achievement in the overall cohort, such as cognitive test scores and externalising behaviours, were also important. However, caregiver related factors played an even more significant role. In particular, having an older caregiver (over 60 years old) or a caregiver with a lower level of education was linked to lower reading achievement at the Year 3 assessment (Maclean et al., 2023). Additionally, Aboriginal children who entered care between the ages of two and four years were more likely to achieve higher Year 3 reading scores compared to those who entered care under the age of two years (Maclean et al., 2023).

Further analysis of the POCLS data showed that relative/kinship carers of Aboriginal children were more likely than foster carers to be older, have completed less education, and live in more disadvantaged areas. Relative/kinship care families also tended to receive fewer supports and services (Maclean et al., 2023). These findings should be interpreted in context. Aboriginal relative/kinship carers bring important cultural knowledge, continuity and strengths for children, and differences in outcomes reflect the need for systems to ensure carers are adequately supported and resourced.

Implications of the research to improve child educational outcomes

This Evidence to Action Note presents the findings from two papers by Maclean and colleagues focussing on higher achieving students who experienced OOHC (2024, 2025). The findings have several important implications for policy and practice to improve children and young people's educational outcomes. Notably, the importance of supporting both students and their caregivers who require additional assistance. The authors highlight that reading outcomes are shaped by a complex interplay of factors underscoring the need for multi-agency collaboration between agencies responsible for child protection, OOHC, health, early childhood and school education.



This Section outlines strategies to support children and young people, their caregivers, and caseworkers, to enable positive educational outcomes.⁸ These strategies are informed by the research literature including the POCLS⁹ and align with the NSW Child Safe Standards for Permanent Care (Standard 10) and the DCJ Practice Framework. The strategies emphasise multi-agency collaboration between DCJ, Department of Education (DoE) and NSW Health to enable effective school practices.

Information contained in this Section is based on knowledge and understanding at the time of writing and is subject to change.

⁸ Some of these strategies are discussed in the POCLS Evidence to Action Note 5 (2020)

⁹ Please refer to the POCLS Snapshot 2025: What does ten years of the Pathways of Care Longitudinal Study data tell us about children and young people in out-of-home care in NSW?

Strategies to support children and young people

- **Early assessment and ongoing monitoring:** Routine clinical assessments on entry to OOHC, followed by ongoing monitoring for all children and young people, are essential. Assessments and services need to be culturally appropriate, timely and repeated over time to address the complex and changing needs of the children and young people.
- **Early intervention and school readiness:** Ensuring children attend childcare centres or pre-schools in the year before starting school is critical for school readiness and catch-up growth. Early intervention lays the foundation for later achievement and helps prevent children and young people from falling behind academically.
- **Case Planning:** Annual OOHC Case Plans should review and identify changes in children and young people's development needs including cognitive, socio-emotional and behavioural and ensure access to culturally appropriate professional counselling, psychological support and other educational services to support them reach their full potential.
- **Academic monitoring and targeted support:** The NAPLAN assessment markers should be used to identify students who are achieving at or below minimum standards. Culturally appropriate interventions and additional support both inside and outside of the school such as tutoring should be provided as needed, including for students who start strong but may decline over time.
- **Extending potential for all students:** Ongoing culturally appropriate support is needed not only to prevent declining outcomes but also to extend the potential of talented students. The provision of tutoring and structured homework help need to be explored for all children and young people in OOHC, not just those identified as requiring additional support.
- **Learning and support:** Implement systematic and tailored services when planning meetings to develop or review the LaSP/Education Plan to address individual needs and promote higher achievement. The LaSP meeting should be undertaken within 30 days of a school becoming aware of a student's entry into statutory OOHC. Following the meeting, a LaSP should be developed through a collaborative process involving school staff, OOHC caseworkers, carers, and the student (where appropriate). LaSPs should be reviewed annually or earlier if circumstances change.¹⁰
- **Integrated pathways and collaboration:** The OOHC Education Pathway and OOHC Health Pathway frameworks ensure coordinated support and collaboration between DCJ, DoE, NSW Health, non-government providers and caregivers to address the child's educational needs including integrated behaviour support practices to address behavioural challenges that may impact educational engagement and achievement.
- **Culturally safe and community-led support for Aboriginal students:** For Aboriginal children and young people, all assessments and supports should be culturally safe and community-led including strong connections to family, community and culture. DCJ is responsible for overseeing the development and review of OOHC Cultural Support Plans. Schools are responsible for embedding cultural considerations into educational practice in the classroom and school environment in collaboration with OOHC caseworkers and caregivers. Accountability for integration is shared through interagency planning processes, including LaSP meetings and LaSP/Education Plan reviews.

¹⁰ Note that for Aboriginal students, a Personalised Learning Pathway (PLP) strengthens cultural identity and engagement. PLPs and LaSPs serve different purposes but are complementary: PLPs focus on cultural and learning goals; while LaSPs address broader educational and support needs for students in statutory OOHC. In practice, some schools combine PLP and LaSP into a single integrated plan to ensure cultural considerations are embedded in cultural support.

Strategies to support and train carers

- **Assess and address carer support needs:** When recruiting carers, and during case planning, assess their needs in relation to confidence and skills in supporting children and young people academically. The Carer Development and Support Plan is used to identify carer support needs and ensure they inform training and resources provided to carers. It is important to recognise that Aboriginal relative/kinship carers bring significant cultural knowledge, continuity and strengths that support children's identity, wellbeing and learning. When carers are older and have lower levels of formal education, caseworkers should ensure carers are adequately supported and resourced to assist children and young people's learning.
- **Culturally appropriate and accessible services:** Ensure all support services for carers are both culturally appropriate and accessible. Provide clear information about government and non-government programs and services, including eligibility and how to access them.
- **Equip carers to value and support education:** Carers should be fully informed of their responsibilities regarding education and training and the benefits of education to children's long-term outcomes. Training and resources should be provided to increase carers' confidence and skills, enabling them to collaborate with teachers and support learning both at home and outside the home.
- **Manage school refusal:** In situations where children and young people in OOHC refuse school, clear guidance and escalation pathways should be available to the carers. Initial steps include engaging the school's wellbeing team and implementing attendance support strategies under the OOHC Education Pathway. If refusal persists, the OOHC caseworker can convene a collaborative meeting involving the school, carer, and OOHC provider to review and update the Education Plan/LaSP. Where underlying issues such as trauma or mental health are identified, referral to culturally appropriate therapeutic services should occur promptly.
- **Promote school attendance and engagement:** Support carers to understand the importance of regular attendance and active engagement in school as protective factors for children and young people. Boosting attendance has significant consequential benefits for learning and wellbeing. This strategy should also include caseworkers alongside carers to reinforce shared responsibility for educational engagement.
- **Ensure educational continuity in residential care settings:** For children and young people in residential care, where residential care staff rotate daily, consistency in educational support can be challenging. To address this, ensure clear documentation of educational goals in the OOHC Education Plan/LaSP, and establish communication protocols between residential and school staff. Regular handover processes and designated education coordinators within residential services can help maintain continuity and support engagement with learning.
- **Maintain connection to Country, family and culture:** Ensure carers actively support a child's connection to Country, family, and culture. These connections are fundamental to Aboriginal children and young people's identity, wellbeing, and educational engagement while in OOHC. Strategies should include collaboration with Aboriginal community-controlled organisations, implementation of Cultural Support Plans, and embedding cultural practices in school engagement.

- **Aboriginal-led initiatives and trauma informed support:** For Aboriginal children and young people in OOHC, support Aboriginal-led initiatives and provide trauma informed responses for their carers, recognising the historical and cultural context. Training should equip carers to understand intergenerational trauma and apply culturally safe practices that promote healing and educational success.

Strategies to develop OOHC casework skills and casework supervision

- **Information sharing and collaborative planning:** Caseworkers need to provide the school with relevant information about the child and young person's history, current schooling, support needs, care arrangements and the Behaviour Support Plan (BSP). The BSP provides critical context for schools to identify and meet a child's educational and behavioural needs. Caseworkers need to meet mandatory timelines to respond to school requests for Case Planning including transition planning and risk assessment. For information sharing: within 14 days of a child entering OOHC, a 'Notice to School' form must be completed and sent to the DoE. Additionally, when there is a planned or unplanned change in a child or young person's circumstances, caseworkers are required to complete and send a 'Change of Detail Advice' form to the DoE within 7 days.
- **Record keeping:** DCJ caseworkers are required to upload the child's LaSP into ChildStory using the designated "Education Plan" field. Non-government agency caseworkers with case management responsibility are required to retain a copy of each child's LaSP within their organisational information systems.
- **Participate in planning and review:** Participate actively in the LaSP, PLP meetings and reviews, and in planning for the child's health, wellbeing, learning, and behaviour. Work with NSW Health and the DoE to facilitate assessments for mental, physical or functional needs.
- **Professional development and accountability:** Ongoing professional development for caseworkers and casework supervisors will ensure policy is consistently reflected in practice.
- **Strengthen cultural connections and collaboration:** For Aboriginal children and young people in OOHC, ensure caseworkers actively link with Aboriginal Education Officers¹¹ and Aboriginal-led initiatives to support culturally responsive educational planning. Caseworkers should work in partnership with schools, caregivers, and Aboriginal community organisations to maintain each child and young person's connection to Country, family, community and culture. These connections should be reflected in the OOHC Education Plan/LaSP, and monitored through regular reviews to ensure cultural needs are embedded alongside academic goals.

¹¹ Aboriginal Education Officers are employed in NSW public schools to support Aboriginal students' learning, wellbeing, and cultural identity. They act as a vital link between schools, Aboriginal families, and communities, ensuring culturally responsive education and improving educational outcomes for Aboriginal students.

Current policy and practice initiatives

NSW Department of Education (DoE)

OOHC Education Pathway

The OOHC Education Pathway Program is a well-established partnership between the NSW DoE and the Catholic and Independent school sectors, designed to support children and young people in OOHC to fulfil their learning potential. The OOHC Education Pathway Program recognises that children and young people in OOHC experience poorer education and life outcomes compared to their peers who are not in OOHC and are more likely to have diverse or additional needs.

Learning and Support Plan (LaSP)¹²

- All preschool and school-aged children and young people in OOHC attending government schools are required to have a learning and support plan. Therefore, under the OOHC Education Pathway Program, a LaSP meeting is undertaken within 30 days of a child entering OOHC, or within 30 days of a child who is in OOHC starting school for the first time.
- Following the meeting, a plan is developed by the school to ensure each child's developmental, and education needs are met, monitored and reviewed annually, which children and young people are encouraged to participate in.
- These plans are instrumental in raising educational attainment for children and young people in OOHC and are designed to increase educational outcomes, school engagement, improve student wellbeing to support their learning needs and goals.
 - LaSP require regular child-centred and collaborative conversations between all the key people in a child's life including caseworkers, support people, carers, educators and the child themselves if appropriate. A yearly planning meeting must occur at minimum.
 - Once the plan is finalised, and each time it is reviewed, the school principal must provide a copy to the student, caseworker, carers and any agency with case management responsibility as soon as possible.

Personalised Learning Pathway (PLP)¹³

All Aboriginal children and young people who attend a NSW government school will have a Personalised Learning Pathway (PLP) education plan developed in accordance with their individual needs as part of the LaSP. This planning process:

- Supports culturally responsive teaching and learning

¹² A Learning and Support Plan (LaSP) is a structured document, also referred to as Education Plan, developed collaboratively by schools and caseworkers to support the educational needs of children and young people in OOHC. This approach supports a single integrated plan to avoid duplication across agencies and enables coordinated implementation and oversight. In this Note, the terms 'Education Plan' and 'Learning and Support Plan (LaSP)' are used interchangeably. This Plan was previously known as Personalised Learning and Support Plan (PLaSP) which has been streamlined to strengthen planning for students and the term 'personalised' removed.

¹³ DoE is currently reviewing and streamlining the number of different plans for students. The recently developed LaSP processes addresses cultural needs.

- Promotes collaborative conversations between students, families, and educators
- Identifies the student's strengths, aspirations and cultural connections
- Aligns learning goals with strategies that respect and embed Aboriginal perspectives.

Funding and Resources

- Change Funding enables school staff to provide tailored educational planning and supports
- Additional interest-based activities and education costs, such as tutoring, can be approved in a child or young person's Case Plan when identified as a need
- Equity Loadings under the Resource Allocation Model (RAM) - schools receive four types of equity loadings 1) socio-economic background, 2) Aboriginal background, 3) English language proficiency, and 4) low-level adjustment for disability. All students in statutory OOHC automatically attract the socio-economic equity loading by default. This funding supports tailored educational planning, targeted literacy and numeracy programs, wellbeing initiatives, and adjustments that promote equitable access to learning.

Professional Learning

DoE offers optional professional learning for trauma-informed practice to all schools. Face-to-face training consists of four 90-minute modules delivered by more than 200 trained facilitators, providing foundational understanding of childhood trauma and its impact on student learning and wellbeing.

Upcoming Enrolment Procedure Updates (2026)

- Students in OOHC must not be removed from enrolment in Electronic Registration Number (ERN) until confirmation of enrolment in another education setting is received.
- Local enrolment applications for students in OOHC are to be processed within 2 school days.
- Where a risk assessment or statutory signature/document cannot be completed in that timeframe, the OOHC teacher must be notified for assistance.

NSW Department of Communities and Justice (DCJ)

Information Exchange and Record Keeping

- Schools lead education planning through the LaSP process. DCJ holds system accountability for ensuring that the LaSP is developed, recorded, supported in OOHC case plans and kept current.
- ChildStory has provision for DCJ caseworkers to upload the LaSP in a field called "Education Plan". Non-government agency caseworkers with case management responsibility are required to keep a copy of each child's LaSP on their information systems. This approach supports a single, integrated plan, avoids duplication across agencies, and enables coordinated implementation and oversight.

- DCJ, or a delegated non government organisation with case management responsibility, must notify the DoE within 14 days when: a) a child or young person already enrolled in a NSW government school enters OOHC for the first time and is under the parental responsibility of the Minister for Families and Communities and Disability Inclusion; or b) a child or young person in OOHC commences education, including preschool or first enrolment in a NSW government school.
- The findings presented in this Note indicate that a low proportion of children and young people currently have an Education Plan/LaSP, which aligns with the *System Review into OOHC (2024)* identifying significant gaps in existing plans and practice. Recommendation 12 from this review calls for a comprehensive review and strengthening of Education Plan/LaSP to ensure they are consistently implemented, regularly reviewed, and tailored to individual needs. This recommendation is driving key reforms and interagency initiatives between DCJ and DoE to improve consistency, quality and effective implementation.

Training and support for carers

- Carers are supported through communication and collaboration with schools and caseworkers. Resources such as the [Education Pathway Guide](#) and [carer reference group presentations](#) have been developed to further assist carers.
- All carers in NSW have a development or learning plan, reviewed annually and comprehensively every five years. AbSec supports Aboriginal carers through helplines, support groups, and cultural training. DCJ has also conducted carer training programs covering: identifying and responding to trauma-based behaviours, supporting and responding to trauma-based behaviours in children and young people and practical strategies to help them.
- Carers of children and young people who have experienced significant trauma may be referred to therapy-based services such as Functional Family Therapy through Child Welfare (FFT-CW®), LINKS Trauma Healing Service and OurSPACE. Referrals for Aboriginal children and young people should follow cultural consultation protocols under the Aboriginal Case Management Policy (ACMP).

Interagency Collaboration and Data Sharing

DCJ and DoE have a Memorandum of Understanding for monthly data exchange about children and young people in statutory OOHC who are enrolled in NSW Government schools. A revised data sharing schedule will include details of primary placement type and reasons for absences. This enhanced data sharing aims to strengthen our understanding of school engagement and inform early interventions.

Educational programs and policies aim to provide a structured and supportive interagency collaborative environment. Ongoing refinement based on feedback and research is essential to meet the evolving needs of children and young people in OOHC and ensure children reach their full potential.

References

- Achenbach, T. M., & Rescorla, L. A. (2000). *Manual for the ASEBA preschool forms and profiles*. Burlington, VT: University of Vermont, Department of Psychiatry
- Berger, L. M., Cancian, M., Han, E., Noyes, J., & Rios-Salas, V. (2015). Children's academic achievement and foster care. *Pediatrics*, 135(1).
- Brownell, M. D., Chartier, M., Au, W., MacWilliam, L., Schultz, J., Guenette, W., & Valdivia, J. (2015). *The educational outcomes of children in care in Manitoba*.
- Dunn, L. M., & Dunn, D. M. (2007). *Peabody picture vocabulary test fourth edition*, manual. Minneapolis, MN: Pearson Assessments
- Holmes, W., & Dowker, A. (2013). Catch up numeracy: a targeted intervention for children who are low-attaining in mathematics. *Research in Mathematics Education*, 15(3), 249–265. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14794802.2013.803779>
- Jackson, S., & Ajayi, S. (2007). Foster care and higher education. *Adoption & Fostering*, 31(1), 62-72. <https://doi.org/10.1177/030857590703100110>
- Maclean, M. J., Lima, F., & O'Donnell, M. (2023). Positive reading achievement outcomes in children who experience out-of-home care: Characteristics and predictors. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 149, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2023.106282>
- Maclean, M. J., Lima, F., & O'Donnell, M. (2024). Investigating positive reading trajectories among children who experienced out-of-home care. *Children & Youth Services Review*, 16, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chilyouth.2024.107728>
- Maclean, M. J., Taylor, C. L., & O'Donnell, M. (2018). Out-of-home care and the educational achievement, attendance, and suspensions of maltreated children: A propensity-matched study *Journal of Pediatrics*., 198, 287-293. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpeds.2018.03.027>
- Maclean, M. J., Taylor, C. L., & O'Donnell, M. (2016). Pre-existing adversity, level of child protection involvement, and school attendance predict educational outcomes in a longitudinal study. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 51, 121-131. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2015.10.026>
- Martin, P. Y., & Jackson, S. (2002). Educational success for children in public care: Advice from a group of high achievers. *Child & Family Social Work*, 7(2), 121-130.
- NSW Department of Communities and Justice. (2020). Educational outcomes: Children and young people in out-of-home care. Pathways of Care Longitudinal Study: Outcomes for Children and Young People in Out-of-Home Care. Evidence-to-Action Note Number 5. Sydney: NSW Department of Communities and Justice.
- Scott, D., O'Neill, C., & Minge, A. (2005). *Contact between children in out-of-home care and their birth families*. Centre for Parenting and Research, NSW Department of Community Services.

- Skilbred, D. T., Iversen, A. C., & Moldestad, B. (2017). Successful academic achievement among foster children: What did the foster parents do? *Child Care in Practice*, 23(4), 356-371. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13575279.2016.1188764>
- Strozier, A., McGrew, L., Krisman, K., & Smith, A. (2005). Kinship care connection: A school-based intervention for kinship caregivers and the children in their care. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 27(9), 1011-1029. Wechsler, D. (2003). WISC-IV technical and interpretive manual. San Antonio, TX: Psychological Corporation. <https://images.pearsonclinical.com/images/pdf/wisciv/WISCIVTechReport2.pdf>. <https://doi.org/http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2004.12.026>
- Townsend, M., Robinson, K., Wright, I., Cashmore, J. & Grenyer, B. (2020). Educational outcomes of children and young people in out-of-home care in NSW. Pathways of Care Longitudinal Study: Outcomes of Children and Young People in Out-of-Home Care. Research Report Number 14. Sydney: NSW Department of Communities and Justice.
- Wechsler, D. (2003). *Wechsler intelligence scale for children* (4th ed.). San Antonio, TX: PsychCorp.
- Zima, B. T., Bussing, R., Freeman, S., Yang, X., Belin, T. R., & Forness, S. R. (2000). Behaviour problems, academic skill delays and school failure among school-aged children in foster care: Their relationship to placement characteristics. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, 9(1), 87-103.

Pathways of Care Longitudinal Study

The Pathways of Care Longitudinal Study (POCLS) is the first large-scale prospective longitudinal study of children and young people in out-of-home care (OOHC) in Australia. The study collects detailed information about the life course development of children who enter OOHC and the factors that influence their safety, permanency and wellbeing. The POCLS links data on children's child protection backgrounds, OOHC placements, health, education and offending held by multiple government agencies; and matches it to first-hand accounts from children, caregivers, caseworkers and teachers. The population cohort is a census of all children who entered OOHC for the first time in NSW over an 18-month period between May 2010 and October 2011 (n = 4,126). A subset of those children who went on to receive final Children's Court care and protection orders by 30 April 2013 (n = 2,828) were eligible to participate in the study. Information about the study and publications can be found on the POCLS webpage.

The POCLS acknowledges and honours Aboriginal people as our First Peoples of NSW and is committed to working with the POCLS Aboriginal Governance panel and DCJ's Transforming Aboriginal Outcomes team to ensure that Aboriginal children, young people, families and communities are supported and empowered to improve their life outcomes. The DCJ recognises the importance of Indigenous Data Sovereignty and Governance (IDS & IDG) in the design, collection, analysis, dissemination and management of all data related to Aboriginal Australians. The POCLS will continue to collaborate with Aboriginal Peoples and

About this evidence-to-action note

The POCLS data asset is used to improve how services and supports are designed and delivered in partnership with the policy and program areas to improve the outcomes for children and young people who experience OOHC, the support provided to caregivers and families, and the professional development of staff.

This Evidence to Action Note was prepared by the POCLS team at DCJ and the report authors with input and endorsement from members of the Evidence to Action Working Group including representation from the Department of Education. This note is intended to be a resource for policy makers and senior practitioners.

This Note should be read in conjunction with a POCLS publication (Report 14) and related Evidence to Action Note (Number 5) on educational outcomes of children in OOHC in NSW.

Recommended citation

Educational outcomes for children and young people who experience out-of-home care: reading achievement and trajectories. Pathways of Care Longitudinal Study Evidence-to-Action Note Number 15, 2026. Sydney. NSW Department of Communities and Justice.

Study design

NSW Department of Communities and Justice - Family and Community Services Insights, Analysis and Research (FACSIAR); Australian Institute of Family Studies; Sax Institute, Professor Judy Cashmore, University of Sydney; Professor Paul Delfabbro, University of Adelaide; Professor Ilan Katz, University of NSW; Dr Fred Wulczyn, University of Chicago.

Data collection by Ipsos Social Research.

Ethics approvals

The University of NSW Human Research Ethics Committee (approval number HC210985); Aboriginal Health and Medical Research Council of NSW Ethics Committee (approval number 766/10); NSW Department of Education and Communities State Education Research Approval Process (SERAP, approval number 2012250); NSW Population & Health Services Research Ethics Committee (Ref: HREC/14/CIPHS/74 Cancer Institute NSW: 2014/12/570) All the POCLS publications are available on the [POCLS webpage](#).