

# Vulnerable Young People Hurt by School Zones

## A youth worker perspective.

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As an adult, imagine that you had to work for the same organisation for six years. You find that you don't fit in with many of your co-workers. Maybe you experience bullying or you're struggling with the management decisions. Or you find that the culture of your work place isn't aligning with yours. What if I told you, you had to stay and had no other options?

That would be outrageous right? What impact would that have on your mental health? Maybe you would find yourself "work avoiding"? In reality, any sane person would move on and find another place to work. However young people in Victoria are not often offered this luxury.

In Victoria, public secondary schools are very strictly zoned. Many families are scrambling to move to the zones, where the more desired public schools are located. Most zones have one public school and if you live in that zone the Victorian Department of Education says you have to go there... check your zone at... <https://www.findmyschool.vic.gov.au/>

So why is this an issue? Because it contravenes young people's right to education and even goes against DET own vision to, "give every Victorian the best learning and development experience". This lack of choice is having a serious detrimental impact of the health and wellbeing of Victoria's young people. It's hurting our vulnerable young people the most. Those who are homeless, on low incomes, from single parent families and out of home care. As well as our indigenous and newly arrived, migrant, refugee and asylum seeker young people.

While school zoning is having a wonderful impact on house prices in our most affluent suburbs, there is no doubt that some of our most disadvantaged young people are paying a very high price. If you have enough money, the zones won't impact on your choices because you can simply pay and transfer to the private school of your choice, that best meets your needs. This is not the case for most young people.

Let's look at a few myths that contribute to strict school zoning

Myth One: One size fits all

A senior school administrator recently told a 13 year old, that his right to education is limited to his local zoned school. Basically, if he doesn't go there he forfeits his right.

Many kids, just like this one, becomes disengaged from school because the "one size" that is offered, doesn't fit at all. Some of the reasons young people disengage include:

- Persistent and unaddressed bullying
- School cultures where diverse young people don't feel safe and included.
- Environments where mental health needs can't be met.
- Systems to don't allow for neurodiversity.
- Expecting all young people to conform to standards.
- The myth that all young people are equal. `

In 2014, The Age reported that in Victoria, “more than 10,000 students in years 9 to 11 disengage from the education and training systems every year. A further 6000 drop out within 12 months of transferring to the vocational education and training (VET) system.” (The Age 2014) Clearly this “one size fits all” is not fitting. I’m certain the numbers today are still significant.

Myth 2: Senior school administrators priorities the wellbeing of young people.

As a professional youth worker who has specialised in school disengagement for the last five years. I have worked closely with young people, their families, schools and services. However, in my role I have seen case after of case of principles not allowing unzoned students to entre their school despite this being in the best interest of the young person. They have gone against the advice of entire care teams. They argue that students who don’t attend regularly reflect badly on their data, or, if they offer a place to an out of zone student it will take a place from a local student, or they talk about very strict Zoning rules.

These kind of black and white decisions mean that young people either completely disengage or it means that process of reengagement take sustainably longer place the young person at further risk. These decisions are not based on the best interest of the young person and leave the young person without agency or choice to choose in there own self interest.

While I believe DET have established some great initiatives to support vulnerable student. I believe I’m not alone in saying that school zoning is having the unwanted consequence of further marginalising our most vulnerable young people.

This is a concern because as we know, “young people who disengage from education early put themselves at greater risk of both short- and long-term unemployment. In Victoria, unemployment rates for young people not in full-time education are higher than unemployment rates for all people” (DET 2017: pg. 76).

That State of Victoria is signatory to the Convention of the Rights of the Child in which all State institutions must upholds its principles. In particular, Article 28 recognizes “the right of the child to education, and with a view to achieving this right progressively and on the basis of equal opportunity.” The way that zoning impacts on disengaged young people means that they don’t have equitable access to education.

While most young people go to school and are not affected by this issue, it doesn’t make sense to do things the way things have always been done without considering its full impact. I understand the need for zones but they can’t be at the expense of young people who need to change schools to be able to continue their education. There has to be room for some flexibility and putting the voices of our young people first is paramount. At the very least we need to talk about this and understand how strict zoning is hurting our young people.

Please note these views are my own and not representative of organisations I an affiliated with.

## References

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