

What it means to walk alongside:

Exploring the Our Place partnership

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Introduction

In November 2017, a landmark agreement was signed between the Victorian Government and a philanthropic organisation, the Colman Foundation, to establish a unique place-based and integrated education approach at ten school sites across Victoria called Our Place.

This built upon an agreement signed between these parties in 2012 which saw this unique place-based and integrated education approach created at what came to be called Doveton College.

It created the conditions for a unique cross-sector collaboration across education, early learning, health and adult education systems and lays the foundation for what could be the next – and quite transformative – step in this process. One that leads to real systems change.

This paper explores how the agreement came to be and what can be learned from philanthropy and government working differently together. It shows how individuals with courage, vision and a willingness to bypass short-term agendas and organisational agendas came together to create a unique partnership for change. And it explores the journey to get there and the opportunities and benefits being created.

In interviewees own words, it outlines the enabling conditions that allowed the partnership to come to life including strategies such as:

- Working to a shared vision
- Enrolling senior stakeholders from the start
- Taking the time to build relationships and trust
- Unleashing the boundary spanners
- Support at the highest level makes all the difference.

And it shows how formalising the partnership and carefully navigating the space between high level vision and local level implementation is so important. For the Our Place approach, key steps include:

- Articulating the approach for translation, not replication
- Getting the governance right
- Formalising the collaboration beyond key individuals
- Focusing on site level implementation
- Growing Our Place as an intermediary for scaling and capacity building
- Enrolling new partners
- Always maintaining a vision for what might be.

The findings draw upon in-depth interviews with key actors in the establishment of Our Place as well as a review of Our Place documentation and wider literature. They reveal the amazing potential for government, philanthropy and community to genuinely “walk alongside” each other to empower children, families, and communities to thrive.

Origins

Our Place has its origins in Doveton, an outer suburb of Melbourne, Victoria, Australia.

Doveton College was founded in 2012 as a government school, designed in partnership with Colman Foundation, to holistically meet the needs of children from birth to Year 9 and their families. Years of planning and hard work preceded the opening.

Its focus is on creating a significant change environment for children and families by engaging the children, their parents and the entire Doveton community. This was made possible through an earlier partnership between the state government and the Colman Foundation. This partnership gave the College the extra freedom and ability to come up with fresh ideas and innovative programs to help Doveton children and their families.

At the time of establishment, Doveton was identified as an area experiencing significant social and economic disadvantage, with a highly transient and culturally diverse population. When Doveton College first opened in 2012, nearly 47% of children were starting school with significant developmental vulnerability and over two thirds of students were below national minimum standard in literacy and numeracy. At the time, within the school system across Doveton, the research evidenced that:

- Infrastructure was dated, offering poor and limited physical environments
- Traditional teaching methods predominated the pedagogy
- Low attendance and retention rates characterised too many children
- Students performance in literacy and numeracy was low compared to elsewhere in Victoria
- There was a general lack of parent involvement in the school curriculum
- Parents reported that they did not feel welcome in the classroom
- There were poor linkages between schools and other services that sought to support families with young children.

Doveton College was created to address these challenges by bringing together on site many of the resources and services young children need to develop well, that students need to succeed at school, and that families need to thrive. Doveton College made them available, accessible and appropriate for the families in the community.

Doveton was a combination of both the structural realignment of education delivery as well as the lining up of wrap around services in a way that hadn't been done before. Early learning, health and wellbeing services for children and families, and adult engagement, education and employment services are all integrated through a single entrance into the school and a co-designed service model that put people at the centre – "school as the hub of the community". This makes a difference because of the relationships the school builds with families, their focus on igniting and meeting the community's aspirations, and creating a sense of belonging for families.

Since 2012, Doveton College has become a high-growth school that is rapidly catching up to national averages. Changes that have occurred between 2013-2018 include:

1. Children are better prepared for school and ready to learn (language and self-regulation).

- Analysis of 2017 data suggests children attending Doveton Early Learning Centre have achieved significantly higher performance on Prep entry testing in reading than those that did not attend. These children also achieved significantly higher performance on reading and numeracy measures at Year 3 level.
- The Our Place approach at Doveton College is engaging parents and families from early in a child's life through maternal and child health. Playgroups and high quality early learning have contributed to a material reduction in the number of children identified as developmentally vulnerable on one or more domains as measured by the Australian Early Development Census of nearly one-third since 2012 (from 55% to 37%).

2. Students are spending more time in school and have a more positive view of school.

- There has been an overall reduction of 24% in days absent since 2012.
- More than 90% of Year 7-9 students report feeling that learning is stimulating and feel motivated and interested in learning, putting them in the top quartile of students in Victoria, a major improvement from 2013 where they were below the state average.

3. Children are developing social skills and discovering broader opportunities (e.g. art, music, technology) through activities at Doveton College outside regular school hours.

- Today, more than 60% of children undertake at least one activity, up from 7% in 2015 (while nearly half undertake at least two activities).

4. Parents are far more engaged in their children's education.

- More than 100 parents volunteer each week (half in classroom activities and specialist lessons, half in broader activities such as after-school activities, breakfast club etc.). The significant participation levels are a result of a coordinated approach and open school philosophy.
- Since 2016, there has been a 20% increase in the number of parents reading to their children, parents are twice as likely to talk about reading with other parents and children are twice as likely to ask to be read to.

5. Parents are actively developing their own life skills and education, providing role models for their children.

- Adult attendees from the Doveton College community have completed more than 150 courses at Certificate III, Certificate IV or Diploma level since 2013.
- Almost 100 parents that completed study or were provided with career/job support from the Our Place community team have transitioned into sound employment, many for the first time.

Creating the enabling conditions

It was the success of Doveton College that paved the way for the 2017 partnership agreement between the Victorian Department of Education and Training (DET) and the Colman Foundation.

Conversations began several years earlier about the success of the Doveton College approach and how this could be applied in other areas experiencing similar challenges.

DET was interested in exploring this option. As were the originators, who by then saw that the Our Place approach had the potential to become much more than a programmatic response but one capable of delivering system change.

I get asked why are we working alongside of government when it makes it so much harder? My answer is yes, it may be easier to work outside of government. But if we really want to make an impact – to create systems change – we have to work with government. This will help deliver the sustainability and policy shifts that are needed. And, of course, that's what good governments want as well.

The ability to have such a vision is aided by the ten-year investment horizon committed to by the Colman Foundation and its recognition that more individual programs won't change the trajectory of disadvantage. DET saw this as well and through careful collaboration and negotiation, the partnership was created.

Steps in generating an enabling environment included:

- Working to a shared vision
- Enrolling senior stakeholders from the start
- Taking the time to build relationships and trust
- Unleashing the boundary spanners
- Support at the highest level.

Working to a shared vision

It was critical from the beginning that there was a shared vision between the parties on what an integrated approach to education could look like, and the potential role that schools could play in becoming a hub for the community.

There was a values-based connection around trying to support some of our most vulnerable communities with on-ground real support. That was the context.

Creating this shared vision was made easier by the fact that all those involved in developing the partnership had a common belief in the potential of education and the notion of a school being the hub of the community to overcome disadvantage, create greater equity, and improve social cohesion in community.

Our Place – a joined-up approach to delivering:

- High quality early learning, starting prenatally
- High quality intentional teaching in primary school
- Provision of wrap-around health and wellbeing support, including Maternal and Child Health, allied health, GPs, paediatricians and immunisations
- Access to a range of adult activities including volunteering, formal and informal education and training, and job-seeking support
- Provision of a wide range of out of hours activities (before/after school and weekend) for children and families.

(DET and the Colman Foundation: A collaborative partnership, 2017)

The Victorian Government's vision that "every Victorian has the opportunity to succeed in life, regardless of background, place or circumstance" was wholly consistent with the Colman Foundation's vision of improving social outcomes by placing education at the heart of disadvantaged communities. Additionally, alignment with the government's broader objectives around place-based approaches meant that Departmental staff could confidently engage in discussions about forging a partnership without perhaps feeling that they were stepping too far outside their mandate.

The partnership agreement eventually formalised a commitment from both partners "to work in collaboration to deliver improved educational and social outcomes in targeted disadvantaged communities in Victoria". Having this commitment meant that any time negotiations entered difficult moments around contracts and funding, or when the partners hit against red tape, there was a strong purpose holding the group together.

Enrolling senior stakeholders from the start

In complex collaborations, leadership from the different partners is essential in navigating differences and keeping the purpose high on the agenda (Kuenkel, 2015). The foundation of this partnership was a joint interest, by the Foundation and senior executives in DET, in the exploration and co-creation of the strategy. This meant that the concept of such a possible and innovative partnership was supported by senior leaders within government. This included the Departmental Secretary, the Regional Director and other departmental staff who each made a conscious choice to invest time and political capital in developing the idea and advancing it towards fruition. This no doubt helped the Department bring onside those who had dismissed it as "all too hard".

The importance of the sponsorship of the Secretary can't be understated. That was probably one of the key things that made it work – that you had someone in a position that could say "We think this is really worthwhile doing and I'm going to sign an agreement and then we have to make it work from there".

Unquestionably, without this endorsement the partnership would never have materialised. Government must constantly balance a variety of priorities and a deluge of requests for action. It is strongly felt that a key enabler for a collaboration like this was the willingness of senior departmental staff to be prepared to invest their time and intellect to help the project germinate and to champion the initiative in a way that motivates others to see this as a worthwhile use of their time. Otherwise, "it can just sit there as just another fringe dweller of the many, many, many projects that people are trying to get up in a service system like education".

Taking the Our Place approach through the next step was not business as usual. It required a mix of internal and external advocacy and persistence to get it across the line.

Taking the time to build relationships and trust

If there is one key ingredient in collaboration, it's trust. This requires building personal relationships and interactions that foster mutual understanding and shared motivation (Emerson et al., 2012). At the organisational level, trust is needed for the process to be respected by the key parties. Here individuals are negotiating and collaborating on behalf of organisations and need this comfort to do so.

None of this plays out on a blank canvas. The relationships that enabled the Our Place partnership didn't arise from nowhere. There was pre-existing trust and history between different people within the partnership. Not everyone knew each other but there was enough overlap to create confidence that a partnership could be successful. This is not unusual. Research shows that many organisational decision makers rely on the network of past partnerships in forming new alliances (Lee and Restrepo, 2015).

That being said, trust and relationships had to be built between senior leaders in both the government and philanthropy camps. And this trust-building process took place over time. There were the formal meetings and negotiations. There were also personal interactions and informal meetings. For example, the then Regional Director of the Department took the time to take the Founder of the Colman Foundation on a road trip together to visit one of the possible Our Place sites and understand each other's thinking about site selection.

Trust also meant knowing that actions behind the scenes wouldn't always be visible, but having confidence that each person would be working to the best of their ability to bring the partnership to life in their own way. Departmental staff commented on this in particular. They acknowledged that a lot of the work that policy makers do is not visible to outsiders and "bureaucrats can work in the shadows a little bit". Knowing it can seem like a lot of work and not much progress, they were grateful that others in the partnership gave them the space to do the work that needed to be done internally without them always having to explain it.

There are certain things that only certain people can do - the work with the Minister and the office and the Secretary behind the scenes. It's knowing how all of that works and how to then give confidence to the partners that you also understand their business as well and what their needs are. And I think we've always been really open to learning and listening to each other rather than kind of, "No, this is the mechanism".

I went around and picked him up from his house. And I took him to Morwell to see and show him what I was talking about in terms of place, why we wanted him to go there and why I thought it was important. And that meant that we spent a few hours in the car being able to talk through more of that value of what we are trying to achieve here. I could see and hear his commitment.

Unleashing the boundary spanners

The organisational contexts for government and philanthropy are strikingly different. Getting to an agreement required a range of people who played boundary-spanning roles on both sides. This included mediating the clash of different world views, different systems and alternative ways of getting things done. Unleashing “boundary spanners”, those that could see both sides and understand how to meet in the middle, was a key enabler for Our Place. Boundary spanners are important because they can see and empathise with the competing institutional logics that affect cross-sector collaborations (Newman et al., 2011). They typically end up being the ones who negotiate any mismatches. They are able to cope with ongoing sources of tension, paradox and ambiguity and have an important strategic capability (Heuer, 2011, Bryson et al., 2006).

For example, key people within the Department of Education and The Colman Foundation were able to draw on past experience inside and outside of government, as well as personal relationships, to build bridges across organisational barriers. Departmental staff chose to work with the Colman Foundation to understand and navigate complex government processes. They worked on the documentation and development of the Our Place approach itself, presenting it in a way that would prove credible. They worked to overcome barriers and manage a lot of internal resistance in order to see the partnership come to life. Likewise, the Colman Foundation team drew upon past experience to engage with the right people at the right moment, and to pace their work to fit with government processes and rhythms. They worked strategically, in addition to deploying their content expertise, to clarify key elements of the approach and determine what was non-negotiable and what could be codesigned.

Support at the highest level makes all the difference

Sometimes things just didn't go right. This partnership was proposing an entirely new way of working, as well as a new way to build and operate in a school environment. This led to a lot of resistance initially from some people within the Department. And it was in these moments that having senior leaders on board was critical for those working on implementation. It was also when persistence and good relationships at multiple levels meant that it was always possible to find a pathway forward.

We were doing something different so everyone blocks you internally and says we can't do that. And you say, "Ok, that's a shame - we'll have to raise that with the Foundation" and they will have to take it to the Minister. And suddenly they'd find a way of doing it. Because everybody who says no, they're the only people who know how to get around it.

Within the Department, it was acknowledged that having a well-known philanthropist involved, who had the in-principle support of the Minister and other key leaders, helped overcome internal resistance at several critical points in time.

For the Our Place team, being an independent organisation with philanthropic backing has meant that they could retain a degree of separateness from “power plays” occurring at local and state levels as people felt that their way of working, or their mandate, was being taken over or disrupted by Our Place.

Our Place's independence has also meant they have a degree of credibility and influence that can be important as they play a brokering role between partners on the ground. This independence removes suspicion around motives or hidden agendas. It also enables the respectful challenging of drivers in partner organisations with competing priorities and the exploration of solutions that might not otherwise be apparent to those within the organisation.

Formalising the partnership

The Victorian Department of Education and Training and the Colman Foundation signed a Collaborative Partnership agreement in November 2017. The 14-page agreement set out:

- An overview of the Our Place approach for integrated learning communities
- A commitment to a collaborative partnership
- Shared objectives
- Guiding principles for the selection of Our Place sites
- Policy Alignment
- Project identification and approval processes
- Partnership governance framework.

To get to this point, considerable effort went into articulating and agreeing on these aspects of the agreement. There had to be enough in the way of guiding principles and areas of focus to create a sense of clear parameters. While at the same time, there was room left for work to be done to develop further details on what the Our Place approach actually meant and involved.

We had to get it into a form where we had a common narrative around the objectives and the goals - why you'd pick certain places and not others, what's in and what's out, and what will be expected of all the players involved. We had to create a sense of some boundaries and parameters around it.

The challenge was setting sufficient clarity about the parameters of what the "it" was, without necessarily locking it down to the extent that it would prevent the necessary adaptations at each of the sites to account for the local context. Many meetings were held by the partnership to focus on what these parameters might encompass. This included debating over how site selection would occur and how to ensure that local government, early childhood and other partners were interested and engaged around an integrated infrastructure and service delivery model.

In some ways, with the formalising of the partnership through the agreement, the work had just begun. Key steps included:

- Articulating the approach for translation, not replication
- Getting the governance right
- Formalising the collaboration beyond key individuals
- Focusing on site level implementation
- Growing Our Place as an intermediary
- Enrolling new partners
- Embedding evidence and evaluation in the approach.

Articulating the approach for translation, not replication

If you can change a community, then you've got a chance at changing a school. You cannot change a school unless you get the community onboard.

Creating a more detailed description of the Our Place approach was an important next step, and not as easy as it sounds. While seeking “replication” to some extent, at the heart of the approach is a deep commitment to responding to the specific needs, priorities, aspirations and interests of communities where Our Place is working. This is consistent with an approach that is genuinely developmental and participatory, with an emphasis on practice-based evidence, not just evidence-based practice (Gamble et al., 2019). In efforts to unpack the approach, the emphasis has been on creating high level principles and guidance for translation, rather than instructions for replication. At the core of the approach is the emphasis on the local school as the heart of the community, and on the community as central to the success of education.

It's really tricky because the first five years was just doing the doing. It was still very deliberate. We had very strong principles and research underpinnings. But we never did it with a view [for] replication... and now we are starting to write the “what and the why” and trying to explain the core reasons why you do things. I'm grappling with it...it is an attitude and a value. How you work matters so much, but how do you document the practice of relationships?

Our Place began with the creation of Doveton College. It was not formed from a recipe but through a principles-based approach that evolved through trial and error. And yet, in order for this approach to be translated to other sites, the approach had to be codified and spelt out to define exactly what is being translated and to spell out clear implementation practices (Riddell and Moore, 2015). This capturing and codification of knowledge hasn't been simple, especially given the emergent nature of the innovation in Doveton and the heavy reliance on developing relationships and building social capital. A lot of the processes and actions that were tacit knowledge and personal expertise have needed to be made explicit – formalised and put in paper in some way.

A lot of progress has been made in a relative short amount of time. For example, the approach has been consolidated into five key elements, as per the diagram below (Figure 1). This has been derived from what evidence and experience shows is effective for an integrated place-based model.

Materials have also been created to explain how each of these elements must be supported by infrastructure and resources to facilitate implementation and impact. A simplified overview of the implementation process has also been documented (Figure 2).

Figure 1. The Our Place Approach

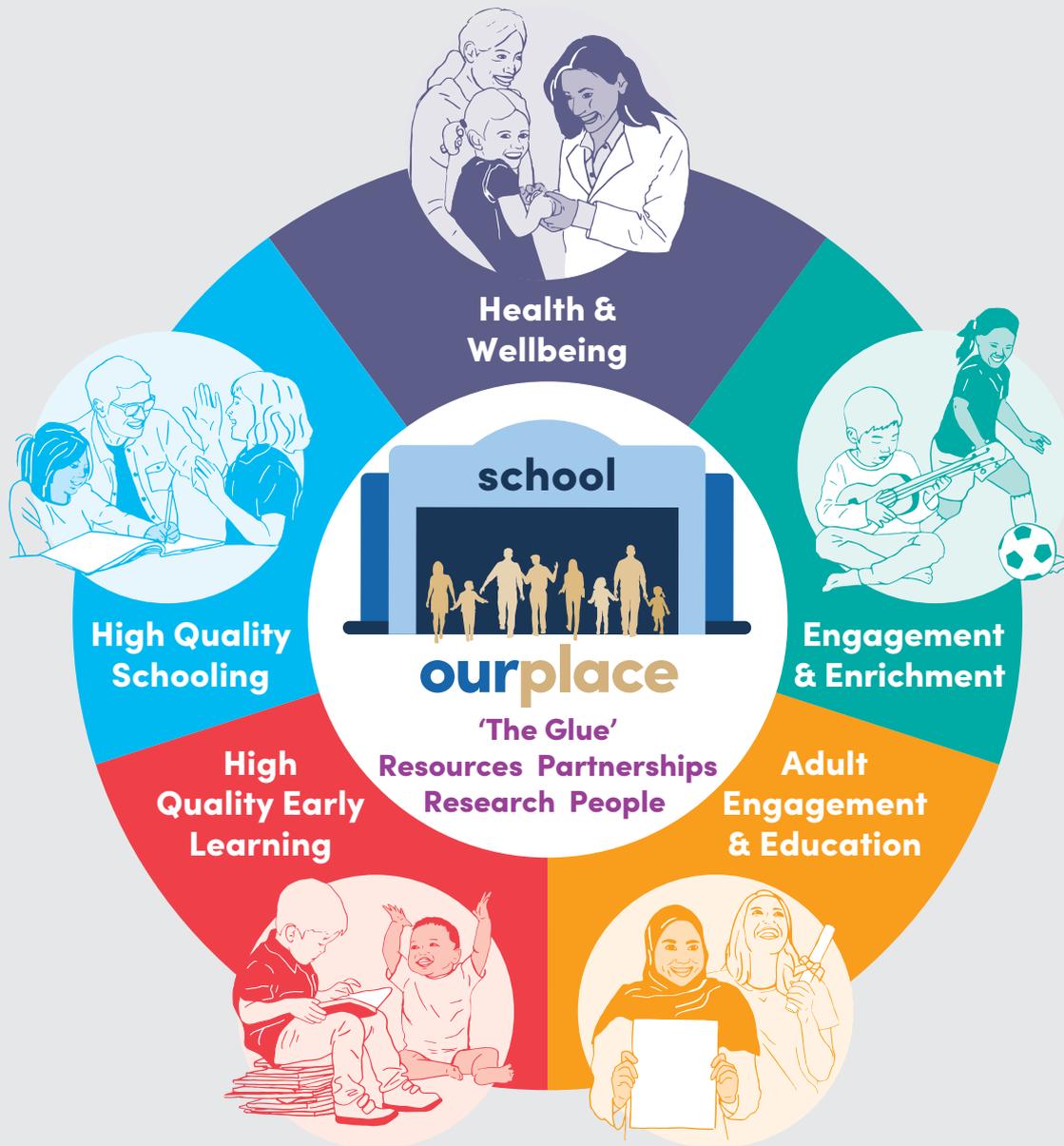


Figure 2. Our Place Implementation Overview



The Our Place team’s work is essential to translation across sites and context specific adaptation. The Our Place approach requires deep collaboration with the schools they partner with. They must work together to develop a locally relevant but aligned vision, to build the capacity to enable and facilitate implementation and to measure progress. Local site staff are critical in brokering relationships with numerous state and local government entities, philanthropic partners, community organisations and researchers.

To facilitate local level implementation, there has been a focus on articulating ways of working, not just the education related content of the approach that is being implemented. This is critical in a process that involved working with families, schools, communities and a diversity of service provider organisations. In particular, creating and embedding local stakeholder relationships are seen as essential. Without quality stakeholder relationships there can be little trust, leadership, commitment or resilience (Dovey et al., 2017).

To this end, the Our Place approach emphasises the need for a strong commitment to the following principles:

- Relationships and trust are preconditions for impact. We invest in people whose primary responsibility is building strong, respectful relationships.
- Families should have seamless access to education and the support they need. We adopt a single / shared entrance, a “no wrong door” policy, a single storytelling experience by making the school the heart of the community.
- People need opportunities to experience pride, self-worth and success. There is shared commitment across the Our Place sites to work with each community to identify and achieve their own aspirations. We do not impose solutions and we work “with” and don’t do “to”.
- Collaborative partnerships are the key. We work with government, partners and the community to develop: a shared vision, effective use of resources and to achieve new ways of working that reduce system level barriers.
- Good decisions are informed by data and evidence. We get to know our communities and implement responsive and evidence-based approaches and programs to make a lasting difference.
- Sharing knowledge is necessary for big-picture change. We monitor implementation, evaluate outcomes and generate the evidence needed for policy and system change.
- Transformation and impact take time – so we make a long-term commitment and investment to allow flexibility and innovation for our relentless pursuit of impact.

These ways of working are constantly evolving but they provide a starting point for communicating with local staff about the importance of partnership at all levels of the work.

Getting the governance right

The Our Place partnership involves a range of actors and scales, which can complicate implementation (Ansell and Torfing, 2015). At a site level, it involves local community and school leadership. At a state level, it involves regional as well as state-based decision makers. As one interviewee described it, Our Place is something of a “vertical village” extending from the coalface at the community level, through to the school, regional and departmental level leadership. This has meant that getting the partnership governance framework right has been critical. While a high level partnership can be agreed in principle, there

is always the need for a clear process for reaching agreement on collaborative activities on an ongoing basis, and overcoming any disagreements. To ensure the partnership governance framework adequately addressed these complexities, a three-tiered governance structure was created.

Tier 1 – Steering Committee: an overarching governance body to establish the Our Place framework, assist in resolving system-level barriers, provide strategic direction for the partnership arrangements, endorse recommendations for Our Place sites, monitor progress, and report to the Minister for Education and Minister for Families and Children. The membership includes the Secretary (DET), DET Deputy Secretaries, CEO Victoria School Buildings Authority, Colman Foundation Director and Our Place CEO, and CEO Municipal Association of Victoria.

Tier 2 – Strategic Management Group: supports the alignment of site projects to broader strategic priorities, shares collective learnings, identifies system-level barriers, supports issue resolution, facilitates access to expertise and resources, fosters accountability, and monitors outcomes. The membership includes representation from Our Place sites, government officials from DET and other departments, community service representatives and philanthropy.

Tier 3 – Site Implementation Group: co-design, shared ownership for priorities, actions and outcomes, and sustainable, community-driven change are central to the Our Place approach. Being guided by data, site level governance harnesses collective will, identifies and acts on opportunities for improvement or innovation and delivers transparency and accountability.

Such an approach didn’t happen by accident. It was the result of deep deliberation and recognises that collaborative leadership works best when roles are fairly allocated and fulfilled, including chairs, sponsors and champions (Thomson and Perry, 2006). Likewise, enabling broad membership of the governance groups also helps to raise the profile of the initiative, enrol additional champions and sponsors, and creates an authorising environment for others in the department to legitimately spend time working on these things.

In the governance groups, we were very intentional about who was at the table. They were the people who were in charge of the things that needed to change to enable this to happen. They could decide. It was very intentional.

An important point here is that the Colman Foundation committed to working within the system rather than trying to bypass it. This is reflected in the governance structure where issues raised go through the proper channels. Although this sometimes means that matters are resolved slowly, the benefit is greater legitimacy.

Formalising the collaboration beyond key individuals

It's important that this happens now because if I leave or someone else leaves, then there's still an approach in place that's formalised and that can be left behind. Otherwise it's just reliant on people and not embedded in structure.

This widening of the membership has been a means of ensuring the longevity of the approach. Relationships are key in collaborations but they can also be a weakness. There needs to be an ongoing commitment from the organisations involved, not just the individuals. Otherwise, when staff move on to new roles, the trust is lost with the personal relationship. Interviewees drew on past experience for this, speaking of being involved in previous collaborations led by likeminded individuals, which had fallen apart as soon as the individuals who founded the collaboration left. The Our Place partners have been very conscious of this risk and have sought to formalise the collaboration through the governance arrangements described above. Cultivating learning communities can also help to ensure social innovations can spread and take root in very different regulatory, social and cultural contexts (Riddell and Moore, 2015). Efforts to this effect, such as the Our Place Principal's Network, are described further below.

Focusing on site level implementation

Getting a high level partnership agreement is one thing. It is a whole other effort to deliver implementation at a site level. Sites have been selected based on guiding principles that include:

- A specific and quantifiable need to improve educational offerings and outcomes in a specific community.
- A community with quantifiable disadvantage and complex challenges requiring a "joined-up" approach to service delivery.
- Infrastructure works designed to facilitate a single entrance to the school and community services.
- Local government, early childhood and/or other partners interested and engaged around integrated infrastructure and service delivery model.

The challenge has been that these filters have been applied and sites selected based on criteria that isn't only about community-driven demand. To this end, careful attention and negotiation has been required to bring school and community leaders on board from the chosen sites. Other local actors such as local government, early childhood and other service providers have also had to be carefully engaged around what integrated infrastructure and service delivery would mean for them. To date, announced sites include: Officer; Robinvale; Frankston North (x 2); Morwell (x 2); Corio-Norlane; Carlton and Seymour, with additional locations currently being negotiated.

In this process, the Site Implementation Groups have played a major role – and a key part of their work has been to develop Site Operating Agreements. Each agreement includes a set of principles and minimum requirements for implementation. The agreements provide an important communication mechanism to ensure that everyone is on the same page in terms of what is required and understands what this entails.

It is important to note that there is a degree of flexibility in the agreements at a local level. While partners are expected to deliver the key elements of the Our Place approach, and roles of different organisations are specified, there is some scope for negotiation on a site-by-site basis.

One of the benefits of having more than one site is that the sites can learn from each other – they see that they're part of a bigger thing.

Each agreement includes the five elements of the Our Place approach: high quality early learning and schooling; wrap around health and wellbeing; adult education and employment; and engagement and enrichment for children and families. Having such an agreement is critical, given the diversity of local actors and the need to forge shared commitment and motivation to see greater innovation and improvement on site (Holton, 2015).

The fact that we now have site implementation groups means there is a concentrated effort on how we're going to work together and what it means to be an Our Place site.

Growing Our Place as an intermediary

Since the signing of the partnership agreement, Our Place as an organisation has rapidly developed from a small team at Doveton College to an important, independent intermediary organisation. As an intermediary, Our Place plays a brokering role across networks and boundaries, promoting collaboration and mediating demands (Ansell and Torfing, 2015). The team also acts as facilitators and enablers that pull the elements of the integrated, place-based approach together to support capacity building of actors across the sites to better work effectively as a whole. To enable this, Our Place now employs a Partnership Manager for each site who coordinates and supports the Community Facilitators, of which there are at least two at every site. Then there are a range of specialists available as advisors to the sites as well as a dedicated research and evaluation team to support impact measurement and learning. The team is constantly walking the line between implementing predetermined guidelines versus working with the individual sites to determine what bespoke processes and documentation would best help and to create it together. As time goes by, lessons are being learnt from implementation at the different sites and the team acts as knowledge broker as well.

Investing in learning is a key focus for Our Place. To facilitate greater shared learning, Our Place recently announced the creation of an Our Place Principal's Network which has met for the first time with the value of this group immediately apparent to all in attendance. Plans are in place to create an Early Years Network. These networks will become places for connection, conversation and knowledge exchange.

In March 2019, Our Place also hosted an event that brought together site teams from all the 10 sites (5 announced and 5 in the pipeline) for a day of learning and knowledge sharing. It was the first time all the sites had been together in the one room and took a significant amount of trust building before the event could even take place. It proved to be an important means of demonstrating to the different actors from the individual sites that they are part of something bigger. It gave them a chance to see the great potential of the wider partnership, but to also realise that there is support available in the wider network and that they are not required to implement the approach alone. For those that were feeling nervous about what being an Our Place site entailed, this was important reassurance and encouragement at a key moment in time.

To sustain this isn't just a matter of getting it to a certain point - there's going to be significant ongoing effort and renewal needed.

This shared learning will help inform evolution of the approach, one that appears deceptively simple but is in fact an increasingly rich and complex model that seeks to apply across a range of different scenarios and contexts. To allow for this evolution, flexibility is a key part of the approach. This flexibility will likely include governance. As scaling occurs, new governance structures may be required that can work across multiple levels and systems (Heuer, 2011). It may also include the physical infrastructure of the site as well. For example, while a single entry is a key component of the approach, how this entry is built and what special features it requires will no doubt evolve as evidence shows what aspects are most effective.

Enrolling new philanthropic partners

In addition to the partnership agreement between government and philanthropy, there have also been significant shifts within the way philanthropic organisations are working together to provide supportive, flexible and long-term support for the Our Place vision. There are now five philanthropic organisations supporting Our Place over the long term: Colman Foundation; Dusseldorp Forum; Paul Ramsay Foundation; Ray & Margaret Wilson Foundation; and William Buckland Foundation. Each has come on board because they see great potential in the Our Place approach, and understand the importance of sustained long-term support in order to achieve lasting change.

More than anything, it's a philosophical shift around not just writing a big cheque and then saying: alright, good luck, come back and tell us if it worked or what went wrong. Instead we're saying we are all in the boat together, let's all figure out how to get there.

The Colman Foundation has pledged funding to support these sites for ten years and the William Buckland Foundation and Dusseldorp Forum have committed to sharing the funding commitment over the ten-year timeframe. The Paul Ramsay Foundation is investing heavily upfront in the infrastructure and scaling of Our Place as the backbone organisation supporting implementation.

As part of their commitment, these organisations have also worked together to ensure that they are supporting Our Place in the most effective way possible. They are creating alignment through a partnership agreement of their own. This agreement covers a higher-level intent to collaborate as high value strategic partners for Our Place in coming years. It also extends to practical matters such as aligning the reporting requirements for funding acquittal by the Our Place team. The effort to avoid duplication and minimise the administrative burden of reporting requirements is unique amongst philanthropy and an important one that helps Our Place direct its precious time and resources to other matters.

A long-term commitment is required to address really complex and challenging problems. The idea that you can design a solution on the basis of a 12-month funding arrangement is simply unrealistic. The ten-year horizon recognises the extent of the challenge and the need to create trust and align parties that have worked in different ways for so long.

The ten-year commitment from investors has been critical and enables the Our Place team to take a longer-term view of their work. And it fits with the recognition that addressing disadvantage and shifting the dial in these communities will potentially take decades.

Embedding evidence and evaluation

An evidence-based approach is at the heart of the Our Place approach. To ensure that evidence continues to be amassed, the site implementation agreements include a requirement for data collection and evaluation which the Our Place team has retained responsibility for overseeing - while working in collaboration with both central office and site-based department staff. It was felt that holding this role within the Our Place organisation was important, particularly given the ten-year timeframe and the likelihood that department restructures and school staff turnover will occur during that time. It was also deemed important that the data be captured in a consistent manner that would enable analysis across sites as well as within them in order to make better sense of the outcomes.

Otherwise evaluation could go from department to department and we don't get the long term buy-in or the long-term sustainability that we want.

A core strategy has been to build the data capacity of site staff themselves, so that while Our Place supports data collection and analysis across the whole, each site plays a key role in the ongoing interpretation and use of data to show and drive change. There are also very clear guidelines and qualitative case studies that can be drawn upon to inform the key principles underpinning the current design of the approach.

The importance of evidence is partly about being able to continually improve and evolve the approach. It is also about seeking to demonstrate its success. Showing impact will be important, not just at a site level but also in efforts to scale up and create large systems change. To this end, Our Place is working on establishing systems that allow for longer term data tracking and research that contribute to the broader evidence base of the Our Place elements and how they effect change for children, families and communities - from high quality early learning to the engagement of adults in volunteering, education and employment.

The big value will be the ability to tell a story about what the approach achieves at a scale that doesn't seem to get achieved in comparable populations.

It is acknowledged that there will be many challenges in showing the contribution that Our Place has had on population level outcomes over time - particularly in areas with high mobility. For example, in a community such as Doveton, the school can see up to 30 percent mobility in the student population per year which means long-term consistency in data may not be present.

There's a lot of work to do before we can put our hand on heart and say "yes we've been able to impact ten different communities and we've been able to adapt the approach successfully". There's a long way to go before that happens and we still need to unpack all of the reasons why Doveton's been successful to begin with.

Another complicating factor will be the time lag required before quantitative change in many communities is evident. Change may be measured in decades rather than months or years. While data in Doveton is becoming available, it may be another several years before the data collected from newer sites visibly demonstrates changes.

Looking beyond our place

In ten years' time, if we've got ten schools that are the best ten schools in the world, is that enough? Will that be success? No. What will we have done? We'll have created a small lighthouse effect with a small ripple effect. Success lies in the model being more and more widely used to turn around disadvantaged and other communities into places that are more cohesive, more collaborative and more content - where children and families are proud of where and who they are.

Our Place is a unique partnership that has been brought to life by a group of dedicated individuals with a shared commitment to tackling entrenched disadvantage through early learning and education. Since the formalisation of the partnership agreement in 2017, Our Place has been navigating what it means to "scale out" to new sites.

But Our Place has always been about more than scaling to new sites. The goal has always been to "scale up" as well – to affect larger-scale systems change through eventual shifts in policies, regulations, resource flows and practices.

The deeper hope is that Our Place leads to deeper changes in how public services are joined up within communities, how children and families are put at the centre of service delivery, and how bureaucracy and sector-based structures can be changed to make integrated education the new normal, not the exception.

It is still early days but there are signs that seeds of systems change are sprouting. For example, a recent government announcement to invest in the co-location of early learning and schooling across Victoria was partly attributed to the Our Place approach. Of course, the risk is that co-location occurs without the joining up of services or a truly integrated experience for families. But it is a start.

There is also dissemination of the Our Place approach beyond the ten sites. For example, Doveton College now host approximately 100 visits per year of education stakeholders from school principals through to local councils, state government and non-government representatives who are interested to see how an integrated approach is being implemented in reality. Then there are the subtle changes that have happened in the Department by virtue of the partnership, including approaches to building new school infrastructure.

A key part of the partnership agreement involved changes in governance arrangements and departmental structures to drive work on the ground and ensure practice change and sustainability over time. The department is also undertaking a review of governance arrangements for early childhood in schools that has been influenced by Our Place. There has also been a noted shift towards some other schools becoming much more open facilities.

The Our Place team would love to see shifts such as these embedded in policy and operating guidelines. They want to see it sustained and spread beyond Our Place to the whole Victorian education system; that this and other “system ripples” are something that will be actively pursued going forward. They see the future as one where cross-sector collaboration means all parties are working together outside their silos towards defined and measurable goals with a shared focus on one thing – the needs of children and families.

The big policy shifts are still to come: the joined-up curriculum and pedagogy; the whole staffing issue between early childhood and schools; leadership; major reform of the early years of schools; a review of the early years learning framework; and a different curriculum going forward that is much more intentional and flows into schools. There are still major pieces of work that need to happen. And that absolutely is the future. But it can be more.

For others seeking to create such partnerships, the Our Place example shows how carefully creating the enabling conditions can allow the partnership to come to life. This includes strategies such as:

- Working to a shared vision
- Enrolling senior stakeholders from the start
- Taking the time to build relationships and trust
- Unleashing the boundary spanners
- Support at the highest level makes all the difference.

It also shows how formalising the partnership and carefully navigating the space between high level vision and local level implementation is so important. For Our Place, key steps included:

- Articulating the approach for translation, not replication
- Getting the governance right
- Formalising the collaboration beyond key individuals
- Focusing on site level implementation
- Growing Our Place as an intermediary
- Enrolling new partners
- Embedding evidence and evaluation.

It is hoped that this paper helps to fuel the conversation about the value of cross-sector collaboration and the amazing potential for government, philanthropy and community to genuinely “walk alongside” each other to empower children and families to thrive. It will take time, but Our Place shows what is possible when individuals with courage, vision and a willingness to bypass short-term agendas come together they, can create pathways for long-term change.

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