

WHY OUR PLACE?

Evidence behind the approach



ourplace
education is the key to the door



Acknowledgements

Thank you to the interviewees who feature in *Success: Stories from Doveton College*. The quotes in this report are drawn from that publication.

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Introduction

Our Place is a place-based approach to supporting the education, health and development of all children and families in disadvantaged communities by utilising the universal platform of a school.

Purpose of this paper

Since its establishment, Our Place has evolved in line with the latest academic research and practical on-the-ground experience from Australia and around the world.

Our Place has built on and adapted what works, according to the evidence, in order to suit the unique contexts in which Our Place operates. This paper distils a vast array of research and insights to explain the 'why' behind the Our Place approach.

It is intended as a concise and accessible summary for the busy reader. The content is presented according to the known evidence that leads to better outcomes for children and families experiencing disadvantage. The links between the evidences and the Our Place elements is discussed.

As Our Place expands to additional sites across Victoria, the 'how' of Our Place implementation is also being documented with a range of guidelines and evidence for sites to draw upon. Further insights on implementation will be made available in subsequent publications.

About Our Place

An initiative of the Colman Education Foundation, Our Place is a unique cross-sector collaboration between education, early learning, health and adult education systems. Through the Foundation's ten-year partnership with the Victorian state government, Our Place is being implemented in ten school sites across Victoria, with the support of philanthropic partners.

The publication 'What it means to walk alongside: exploring the Our Place partnership' details the partnership with the Department of Education and Training that enabled Our Place to come to life. The work is also consistent with the Department of Premier and Cabinet's strategy of empowering communities to lead change through place-based approaches.

The Our Place approach is built on the strong body of evidence of what actually works and the translation of learnings from the lighthouse site at Doveton College, which commenced operation in 2012. It seeks to improve the education, health and development for all children by:

- Supporting high-quality environments for children – at home, in early childhood settings and in schools
- Supporting the service system to better address known biological and environmental risks allowing for prevention and early intervention
- Driving better outcomes from the existing service system

The Our Place approach has been designed to achieve this by focusing on more than the classroom. The focus is on changing the overall environment for children and families. It has been built on the recognition that families must be able to meet children and young people's health, developmental and wellbeing needs, and that those closest to the child (especially parents) must value education and role model learning in ways that support aspirations and realise opportunities.

Our Place also recognises that in communities experiencing disadvantage, there are many things that families need in order to step through the door and make the most of the opportunities available.

Our Place works with one of the most important community resources – schools – to expand the whole-life opportunities open to children and families in highly disadvantaged communities. Our Place brings together the resources children and families need to thrive – in ways that meet the needs and help fulfil the aspirations of the community. >

› The vision is about a holistic approach to untapping potential, not prescribing ad hoc services. It is reflected in five core Elements at the heart of the Our Place model, which describe the evidence-based strategies that contribute to achieving positive outcomes for children, families and communities. The Elements are:

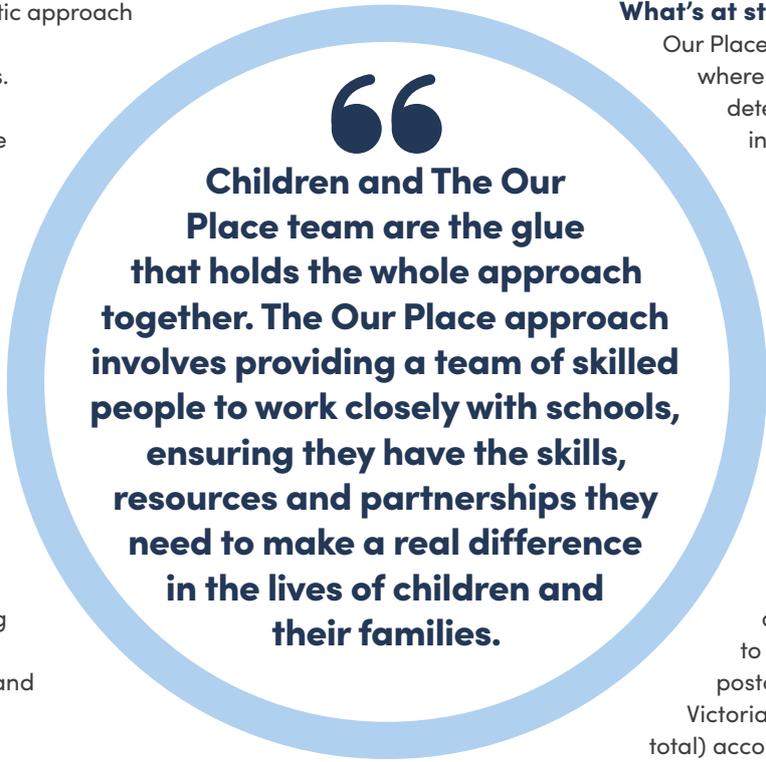
- High-quality early learning, health and development
- High-quality schooling
- Wrap-around health and wellbeing services
- Engagement and enrichment activities for children
- Adult engagement, volunteering, learning and employment

Our Place facilitates partnerships that enable the school to be the central place for education and support services that are known to improve the lives and aspirations of children and their families. We refer to this role as being 'The Glue'.

Our Place does not deliver or fund any services or programs, rather assists in reshaping local services by providing essential resources to drive action, impact and innovation. Its expertise is building meaningful relationships and facilitating lasting partnerships with local leaders and the community to create opportunities for participation.

In particular, Our Place invests in people, such as supporting Principals and Early Years leaders to create teaching and learning environments that ensure each child receives the support they need to achieve and thrive.

Our Place recruits Partnership Managers and Community Facilitators; skilled practitioners whose primary responsibility is trust and relationship-building and who work on the ground at each school forging connections between families, schools and the wider community.



What's at stake?

Our Place is built on the belief that where you are born shouldn't determine your opportunities in life. Unfortunately, in Australia, too often the opposite is true and the benefits of economic growth are not shared as evenly as they once were (ACOSS, 2015b).

The current trend of growing inequality is increasingly characterised by geography. This means that complex and entrenched disadvantage is continuing to be concentrated in certain postcodes. For example, in Victoria, just 11 postcodes (1.6% of total) account for 13.7% of the most disadvantaged rank positions (Yule, 2015).

Inequality should be everyone's concern, no matter their postcode. Excessive inequality is harmful to our society, our economy and our democracy. It limits the ability of people to participate in social and economic opportunities, and it undermines social cohesion. The Scanlon Foundation national survey in 2019 examines community perceptions of social cohesion annually. The domain of 'social justice and equity' registered a sharp fall between 2009 and 2010 from 112 to 92 points.

While marginally improved in 2019, with a score of 93, it has never returned to past highs of 2009. The decline reflects heightened concern over lack of support for those on low incomes, the gap between rich and poor, lessened economic opportunity, and low trust in government.

Likewise, in 11 years of the survey, 2019 had the lowest score in response to the proposition that 'Australia is a land of economic opportunity where in the long run, hard work brings a better life'. Only 73% of respondents indicated agreement ('strongly agree' or 'agree'), down from a peak of 82% in 2011 (Markus, 2019).

These gaps are real and if left unaddressed, they will result in rising inequity and the hardening of socioeconomic lines between communities. Worse still, our ability to thrive as a nation will be eroded. •



Figure 1. The Elements: evidence-based strategies







Children

QUALITY LEARNING AND ENCOURAGING ENVIRONMENTS

The need

Setting the foundations for lifelong learning, health and wellbeing

A child's earliest years set the foundations for their lifelong health, learning and wellbeing. It is during this time that children need to achieve as learners and have the chance to develop well.

Neuroscience shows us the importance of early brain development. By age 3, 80% of synaptic connections in the brain are made – influencing how children learn to speak, think, and regulate their behaviour (Shonkoff and Phillips, 2000).

Developmental science shows that how young children feel is as important as how they think. This is particularly critical in the first five years of life, which evidence shows is when their bodies and brains are shaped by the experiences they have and the relationships they form (Moore et al., 2017, NSCDC, 2004a, NSCDC, 2004b, NSCDC, 2007, NSCDC, 2010).

Healthy early development depends on nurturing and dependable relationships. This means that, in order to achieve as learners and develop well, children must engage in learning and social opportunities. To do this they need to be happy, healthy and supported by the influencers in their life.

Sport, recreation and cultural activities are also important because these types of activities help children develop non-cognitive skills. Non-cognitive skills include perseverance, conscientiousness, self-control, trust, attentiveness, self-esteem, resilience and empathy. These skills contribute to young people's wellbeing and their ability to participate and work with others in class. Children with these skills have better school attendance, behaviour and relationships (Jacobson and Blank, 2011, NEA, 2008). Later, these skills are important for the workforce and community life (Kautz et al., 2014a).

Early learning and development, school readiness, high quality schooling and after-school enrichment activities all form part of the enabling conditions needed to set children on positive life trajectories.

What works

High quality, early learning to significantly reduce levels of developmental vulnerability

Research shows that high-quality early learning services, playgroups and other parenting supports are of benefit to all young children – directly and also by enriching their home learning environments. In particular, when it is of high quality, early learning significantly reduces levels of developmental vulnerability and the gap between advantaged and disadvantaged that is evident at school entry (Goldfeld et al., 2016).

High quality early years services can monitor a child's development as well as parent and carer support needs. They can intervene early if they believe the child is at risk of poor developmental outcomes (e.g. language delay, family disruption). Early years educators can also assist the parents, carers and families to make connection with the support that is right for them as well as role-modelling ways that they can support their children to learn as in many cases they have not benefited from strong role models during their own childhood.

In addition to strengthening cognitive development, high quality early learning supports a child's social and emotional wellbeing – with impacts that can be sustained into adolescence (Melhuish et al., 2015, Taggart et al., 2015). They balance a focus on cognition and literacy skills with comparable attention to the emotional and social development of all children, including those with special needs.

Education that improves the life chances of children and young people

Education really is the key to the door. Success at school impacts young people's transition into employment, their income throughout their lives, their health and wellbeing, reduces the likelihood of going to prison, and improves their opportunity to lead productive and happy lives without the stress of poverty (Heckman, 2006, Lamb and Huo, 2017, Kautz et al., 2014b).

A priority for education systems across the world are schools that deliver positive education outcomes and opportunities for all students – regardless of background. >



› There is a growing consensus about the core building blocks of high performing schools, and the conditions that create and enable quality teaching that meets the needs of all children (Zbar et al., 2008, London Leadership Strategy, 2016, Jensen, 2014, OECD, 2012, CESE, 2014, Leithwood and Azah, 2016).

These building blocks are incorporated in the Department of Education and Training framework for Improving Student Outcomes (FISO) and can be summarised as:

- Strong leadership that raises expectations and is distributed across the school;
- High quality teaching with rich and creative curriculum, within and beyond the classroom, fully meeting the needs of individuals and groups of students;
- Teacher development that is personalised, effective and allows for the continuous development of knowledge and skills within a learning community that provides opportunities for teachers to share, learn from each other;
- Tracking impact through measurement of student learning, with a sharp focus on individual student data and progress to support the highest levels of attainment and achievement;

- A positive school culture based on the highest expectations of all members of the school community, and effective approaches to supporting student wellbeing;
- Promoting student voice and agency, and lifting aspirations for the future; and
- Engagement of parents in children’s learning, strengthened belief in the importance of education and increased aspirations for children.

After-school activities that are good for a child’s development

After-school activities like sport, music, craft and dance build children’s confidence, help them make friends and learn to get along with people (including adults), keep them fit and healthy, and help them develop new skills and discover talents and interests (ABS, 2012, Tanner et al., 2016, The Smith Family, 2013). In other words, they are good for a child’s development.

For example, children who participate in visual arts and music activities at ages 7–12 years develop better persistence and concentration, and learn to work as part of a group. They also achieve more academically (Metsäpelto and Pulkkinen, 2014).



The challenge

A child's earliest years are being shaped by socio-economic status

While we know what outcomes are needed, unfortunately Australia remains a nation where socio-economic status is a critical determinant of a child's earliest years. For example, children who are disadvantaged benefit the most from high quality early learning. However, it is these children who are less likely to attend early learning services and services offered through maternal and child health (Sylva et al., 2009). This means that barriers to achievement start before they've even begun school.

The Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) is a population-based measure of how children have developed by the time they start school. It looks at five areas of early childhood development: physical health and wellbeing, social competence, emotional maturity, language and cognitive skills (school-based), and communication skills and general knowledge.

In the 2018 Census, nearly 33% of school entry age children in the most disadvantaged communities in Australia were found to be developmentally vulnerable in one or more of these categories. This compares to 22% for the Australian average (AEDC, 2019). These concerns tend to exacerbate over the school years and can have lifelong negative effects in terms of future employment and mental and physical health. There is no good reason for the most disadvantaged children to keep missing out and yet they do. This is true for access to quality early learning and education. It is also true extra-curricular activities.

Children experiencing disadvantage still struggle at school

Socio-economic status, whether measured by parent education, family income or neighbourhood status, also has a disproportionate impact on young people's educational opportunity and achievement at school (Ainley and Gebhardt, 2013, Masters, 2016, Bonnor and Shepherd, 2016, ABS, 2014a, ABS, 2014b). At each key stage, from school entry to transition into the workforce, nearly a quarter of young people are behind – with children experiencing disadvantage bearing the brunt (Lamb et al., 2015).

Children experiencing disadvantage can struggle at school for a range of reasons, including (Perry and McConney, 2010, Machin, 2006, Redmond and Skattebol, 2016, Gonski et al., 2011, Lacour and Tissington, 2011):

- Different exposure to books, language and learning opportunities in the early years;

- Low family income, making it hard for families to make sure children have enough food, access to healthcare, and resources like school books, uniforms and shoes;
- Complex life circumstances like parental mental health, family violence, insecure housing and high levels of family stress;
- Low levels of confidence, aspiration and belief in the importance of education and their ability to succeed; and
- Schools that are inadequately resourced and equipped to provide the additional support needed, combined with the increasing concentration of disadvantage and less access to high quality teaching and learning and safe and supportive school climates

In many of the communities Our Place has been introduced, families and children were faced with: schools featuring dated infrastructure; limited physical environments; traditional teaching methods and pedagogy; low attendance and retention rates; and poor linkages between schools and other services that sought to support families with young children.

Parents reported that they did not feel welcome in the classroom and there was a general lack of parent involvement in the school curriculum. Children felt judged for not conforming, for not behaving in a certain way, or for not 'fitting in' to the ideal of a 'good student'. This was exacerbated by teachers who were ill-equipped to succeed with only traditional teaching models, lacking specialised strategies and expertise in trauma-informed practice to address student needs for healing, growth, and achievement, in addition to increased risk of burn-out as a result of not being effective or making a difference in such a challenging environment.

Children growing up in low-income households do fewer after-school activities

To add to the challenge, disadvantaged children are also disproportionately missing out on the benefits of after-school activities such as sport, music and dance. As stated above, these benefits include perseverance, trust, self-esteem and teamwork.

In low-income households, children do fewer after-school activities and at least 50% don't do any at all (The Smith Family, 2013). In particular, research shows that children are less likely to do extra-curricular activities if they live in: families with lower income; single-mother households, with the mother not in paid employment; and jobless couple households (Rioseco et al., 2018). ▶

Our Place strategies



High-quality Early Learning

› We provide high quality learning opportunities no matter the postcode

It is for above reasons that Our Place ensures there are high quality early learning services, playgroups and child health and parenting support available to all families, no matter where they live. This is about onsite learning.

It is also about creating positive home learning environments. Each early learning service takes a holistic view of each child and family, because the child does not exist in isolation from the home environment and community.

The interactions early years educators have with parents, carers and children are critical to a child's development. Educators forge strong relationships with families and building parents' and carers' capacity to support their children's play and learning. They effectively engage families and work with them in a respectful way.

Services engage parents and carers early in their parenting journey and support is tailored rather than dictated to children or parents.

An emphasis is placed on play-based learning and enabling children's regular attendance with a consistent group of friends and educators.

It is also important that early learning educators are trained to understand child development and support intentional teaching practices and quality interactions. It is important that they can respond to children's feelings and thinking.

This includes the ability to work with complex behaviours and with children who have experienced trauma. Importantly, educators who may be experiencing stress are also provided with professional support.

The Our Place approach also seeks to increase the continuity in learning between the early years and school. This means that early years educators and school teachers work and plan together to ensure a more continuous learning experience for children.

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In the past, parents kept quiet about a lot of issues that were important to them, including those that are culturally significant. They were brewing under the surface and now they are actually coming forward and feel able to talk about it with us.

SALLY, COMMUNITY FACILITATOR, CARLTON



High-quality Schooling

We support schools to provide the teaching and learning conditions for all students to thrive

In partnership with the Department of Education and Training (DET), Our Place supports schools to create the conditions that enable high quality teaching that meets the needs of all children. Integrated schools have greater capacity to support the building of community, connections with families, the partnerships and pathways needed to support student wellbeing, and a whole-of-community focus on supporting children to reach their potential (Moore et al., 2014, Valentine and Hilferty, 2012).

So Our Place works in partnership with school principals and leadership teams, providing the information, resources and support that they need to shape their schools as community hubs - a place where a blend of services and supports are available from across what are traditionally siloed sectors requires collaboration and partnerships. These additional resources are especially important for children and communities experiencing disadvantage.

Reframing the school as a community hub requires a different way of working for schools. It means shifting to a worldview that values children and parents as the experts in their lives, that allows for the school to be domain of more than education, and that opens its doors to the wider community. Our Place therefore convenes two networks -



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First impressions were it looks too good to be here. Because it was all brand new, swanky. From everything else that had been in Doveton it was brand new and looked a bit out of place. But when you walk through the doors and everyone was welcoming it was great. Right from the beginning. Within a couple of weeks, you'd walk through the door and you'd be greeted from the staff all the way through. It became like a second home.

PATSY, PARENT AND PREP EDUCATIONAL SUPPORT STAFF MEMBER, DOVETON

for early years leaders and for school leaders – giving them opportunities to learn from each other, and provide links to experts and learning opportunities as needed.

From taking that first step inside the school gates, to being involved in volunteering and the community activities requires courage and a sense of safety for children and families. Just having the opportunity is not enough. This is why the Our Place approach emphasises the importance of both psychological safety as well as working to provide a range of opportunities for families. In partnership with DET, Our Place has worked with each school to reconfigure their layout to include a single entry. A single, shared entrance for school and early learning, with a welcoming reception and community spaces, physically opens the school to the local community. It allows the community stigma-free access to additional services and opportunities.

When arriving at the school, the entrance space provides multilingual signage, space for prams and pram parking, a child friendly space in the waiting area and access to

community information. There is dedicated space for families, consultation rooms, meeting rooms and sufficient space for activities and events. The shared reception is staffed by friendly and knowledgeable people who are committed to the seamless experience for families and to providing stigma-free and welcoming access to additional services and opportunities.

A single entry means that early learning, school, adult learning and community spaces are all literally behind one door. A parent or carer dropping a child at school can easily then attend a playgroup with a younger sibling or take steps to re-enter the workforce through an onsite Work and Learn program.



Engagement & Enrichment

We create opportunities for everyone to be involved, join a team, volunteer and contribute

Providing support for children to participate in expanded learning opportunities helps reduce the impact of poverty and disadvantage. These opportunities help children develop skills and increase school attendance. They are also a way for children to spend time in a positive environment where adults pay attention, praise and encourage them – which helps build their self-esteem and wellbeing. This pattern needs to continue from early learning in to school because positive school experiences and school engagement increase students' interest in school and are particularly important when students reach adolescence (Geagea et al., 2017).

To this end, Our Place ensures that all children are provided with affordable before/after school recreation activities including opportunities for physical activities. They are also provided with opportunities to engage in activities that hold special interest such as cooking, music, homework clubs, sport, art and craft activities outside of school hours.

Schools lead the selection and oversight of these activities, with advice from the Community Facilitator around children and families' interests. The Community Facilitators and Partnership Managers also help coordinate and support community volunteers on site, and help locate suitable partners. They assist school staff to identify sources of funding for the school's delivery of the activities through links with sporting association, targeted government programs, and local community grants. •





Families and Community

OPPORTUNITIES AND PARTICIPATION

The need

Supporting the creation of optimal learning conditions for children and families

All parents and carers can be supported in creating appropriate learning conditions for their children – conditions which are underpinned by confidence. Confident families feel a strong sense of self-worth. They learn together, are connected and socially included, and have a sense of pride and belonging. This confidence can be fuelled by enabling parents to actively develop their own life skills and education, providing role models for their children.

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I never imagined I can make one friend. One day when I finished CCL [Creating Capable Leaders], they said you could bring any parents, grandparents or kids to see you get the certificate. But nobody came [for me]. She [the Community Facilitator] said, don't worry, I am coming. I am your friend. And that feeling, oh it helped me a lot. I never forgot... Believe me, Doveton College helped me a lot. I talk to the Aussie people, I learn lots of words and make lots of friends. My daughter says, Mummy, you have lots of friends. Everybody says hi and hello, you have more than I have!

SUMONA, PARENT AND CHILDCARE CENTRE COOK, DOVETON

What works

Parent education and employment overcomes intergenerational disadvantage

Better outcomes for vulnerable, young children can be achieved by investing in strengthening the resources and capabilities of the adults who care for them (Shonkoff and Fisher, 2013). Parent and carer education and employment are particularly important. When parents and carers have access to and value education and employment, children do better at school (Baxter et al., 2007). This is especially true for mothers' education, which is linked children's health, development and academic achievement.

A positive home learning environment reduces the impact of socio-economic disadvantage

This is critical as we know that a positive home learning environment can reduce the impact of socio-economic disadvantage on children's development during the early years. In fact, the home learning environment is the single most important factor in the development of early speech, language, communication and social and emotional skills – for example, self-regulation.

As well as impacting on a child's development in the early years, the home learning environment has ongoing impacts on children's learning and development throughout their schooling. This is linked to stable, meaningful work which improves the home learning environment (Harding et al., 2015, Magnuson, 2007, Magnuson and McGroder, 2002, Gershoff et al., 2007, Green et al., 2009). Appropriately paid work also enhances the wellbeing of parents and carers, and provides financial security to families (Baxter et al., 2007, Baxter et al., 2012, Gray and Baxter, 2010).

Volunteering gives people the chance to participate in and contribute to the community

Social inclusion in the wider community is a critical factor. Inclusion fosters a sense of belonging. The benefits of belonging are associated with improved mental health, more effective parenting, improved child behaviour and stronger communities (Crisp and Robinson, 2010, Zubrick et al., 2008). Opportunities to attend and engage in community events can be a first step in greater inclusion. ▶

The challenge

› The barriers to employment and education remain high

While meaningful work is important, many adults in disadvantaged communities face significant barriers to getting and keeping stable, well-paid jobs. For example, across Australia high unemployment is a significant issue in 23 out of 37 most disadvantaged communities around the country (ACOSS, 2015a). And when someone has been long-term unemployed, the barriers to employment become even higher. It's hard to get a job in an area with low vacancies, with little recent work experience, and a mismatch of skills with jobs available. It's also hard to sustain hope in the face of repeated rejections (ACOSS, 2015a).

Low self-confidence and poor self-esteem prevent engagement

For many families, the feeling of confidence and self-agency in an education context is a foreign concept. Adults

who grew up in disadvantaged communities often had a tough time at school, have difficulties getting or keeping a job, and may have mental and physical health challenges to deal with as well. All these things can contribute to low self-confidence and poor self-esteem.

When they do visit the school, they often face more judgement, the sense they are in the way, or tokenistic programs that only reinforce that others do not understand where they are coming from or their needs. They can become socially isolated, which is a danger to children's development because it is linked to mental health problems, abuse and neglect within families (Zubrick et al., 2008). It is too often assumed that such parents don't engage because they are lazy, don't care or don't have aspirations. Meanwhile, they are constantly being held down by life's challenges outside the school gates.

In this context, being a confident family of engaged learners is a big ask. It will not be fixed by more homework for children or more rules dictated to parents.

Child development doesn't hinge on academic credentials or expensive gadgets. It requires families that are confident as parents and carers and willing to engage in their children's learning.



Our Place strategies



Adult Engagement & Education

We provide opportunities for families to engage with adult learning, pathways to employment, and community participation

Our Place aims to empower families and improve children's life chances by building pathways into education for their parents and carers. Our Place provides parents and carers with the opportunity to participate in activities that fit the interests and needs of families, reduce social isolation and promote skill development. Examples include entry-level learning opportunities (pre-accredited) to build skills and knowledge and volunteering opportunities with the aim of building a skill or gaining experience.

Our Place staff develop partnerships with organisations to enable community participation and to ensure easy access to the Our Place community. For example, the Community



Facilitator works with community members to ensure they are linked to the appropriate employment services to meet their needs.

Our Place works with job agencies, employment programs and external training organisations and agencies to coordinate the delivery of activities such as onsite certificate and diploma-level courses, and work experience placements. Finding the right opportunities for parents involves working with families' own goals and aspirations, for themselves and for their children. It's not about expecting parents to just fill a gap in a program that doesn't match their needs. This is about providing choice, rather than the pressure to choose.

We provide family-friendly, safe places for participation

Taking the first step into adult education can be very challenging for parents who have had a negative experience of school or who have low confidence and self-esteem. Parents from countries with limited opportunities for education may also face barriers to engaging with adult learning, particularly those with only a basic knowledge of English.

A key element here is trusted relationships with work and learning coordinators. So too are tailored and flexible >

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By having parents involved in education and community programs, whether it's sewing or a Cert IV it doesn't matter, the children are seeing their parents engaged in learning. And that's where I really do think it lives up to its values. That's a real shining light. I can remember [one woman's] son turned around to her one night and said, if you can do it, I can do it. Just little things like that... If the children of the women who have never been to school see their mothers learning, that is very powerful.

MARIE, COMMUNITY FACILITATOR, DOVETON

› support, programs and courses delivered in ways that anticipate and reflect the needs of the community. To this end, it is also important that any promises of learning programs and training courses leading to employment are honest and realistic (Carpentieri, 2014, Taylor et al., 2005).

This is why Our Place provides family-friendly, safe places for community participation in learning and soft-entry engagement activities for parents and carers to learn about potential learning options and building their comfort levels to engage with learning. While there are barriers to getting and keeping a stable job, many can be overcome with support and careers counselling. Work-readiness programs offer training in job searching, resume writing and interview skills while access is provided to facilities such as computers, internet access and photocopiers so parents can research learning opportunities in their community.

Over time support networks are established building community cohesion that enables individuals to overcome barriers that would once have held them back.

For example, if a parent needs to go to a job interview, a friend created through this network can help with child-minding whereas in the past such opportunities might have seemed out of reach or impractical. •

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Relationship building underpins all the work. The importance of forming relationships and navigating partnerships – these are the fundamentals and philosophy behind it.

KERRIE, COMMUNITY FACILITATOR,
BRIDGEWOOD





EVIDENCE FROM DOVETON COLLEGE

Children achieving as learners

A key result of the Our Place approach is that children are better prepared for school and ready to learn. Analysis of 2017 data suggests children attending Doveton Early Learning Centre have achieved significantly higher performance on Preparatory School 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.

Importantly, students are spending more time in school and have a more positive view of school. 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. This is a major improvement from 2013 where they were below the state average.

Children having the chance to develop well

The Our Place approach at Doveton college has also 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%).

Children engaging in learning and social opportunities

Children are developing social skills and discovering broader opportunities such as art, music and technology through activities outside regular school hours.

For example, at Doveton College, more than 60% of children undertake at least one activity, while nearly half undertake at least two activities. This is up from 7% in 2015.

Educational attainment and meaningful work

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 now transitioned into sound employment; many for the first time.

Families learning together

At Doveton College, more than 100 parents volunteer each week in classroom and after-school. This significant participation level has arisen as result of a coordinated approach and open school philosophy.





The System

A FAMILY-CENTRED APPROACH

The need

Providing wrap around support to meet the unique health, wellbeing and learning needs of each family

We know that health, wellbeing and learning are interconnected – for children and their families. We also know that happier, healthier and more confident families are able to better engage in learning.

This requires a wrap-around approach that joins up and curates accessible and appropriate services to support each family's often complex health, wellbeing and learning needs. Such a family-centred approach has been shown to be much more effective than ad hoc access to fragmented services split across health, education and welfare sectors.

What works

Taking a comprehensive and family centred approach to service delivery improves educational and social outcomes for children

A comprehensive and family centred approach requires implementing a 'wrap-around' strategy whereby a range of services are able to respond to multiple complex challenges in a holistic way through a strengths-based lens. It also means establishing a foundation of empowering relationships, which are the key to achieving positive outcomes for families (Moore et al., 2017).

Likewise, working with local schools to host support and resources for health and wellbeing has been shown to be a powerful strategy for helping families get better access to higher quality services (Moore et al., 2014, Valentine and Hilferty, 2012). With opportunities to flourish – like education, employment and safe and affordable housing – families are able to escape the cycle of disadvantage (Yule, 2015).

Taking a place-based approach that enables collaboration to address community priorities

Place-based approaches are recognised as critical to the thriving of local communities and for the creation of greater equity. An effective place-based approach is a collaborative, long-term commitment to build thriving communities delivered in a defined geographic location.

It is a means of responding to complex, interrelated or challenging issues that influence disadvantage and is ideally characterised by partnering and shared design, shared stewardship, and shared accountability for outcomes and impacts (Dart, 2018). Place-based approaches:

- identify and work on community priorities;
- value local knowledge;
- build on and from social and cultural relationships;
- foster on collective and collaborative action;
- focus on prevention not just intervention; and
- partner with communities as active participants.

Place-based approaches typically involve a lot of different stakeholders playing different roles, more often than not with competing or different organisation objectives.

This is why convening, facilitation and building positive relationships aligned around a shared vision of the future state of the community is so critical.

The challenge

Parents and carers experiencing disadvantage are often experiencing challenging life circumstances

For most people and communities, Australia has a strong social support system that works. This is not the case for the most disadvantaged communities. For many families, disadvantage has become an inescapable cycle that passes from generation to generation.

Parents and carers experiencing disadvantage are often experiencing challenging life circumstances. These complexities make it harder for them to provide a positive home learning environment for their children. Social stigmas and low expectations become self-fulfilling prophecies and help is least available to those that need it most. This is not inevitable or insurmountable. >

› Disadvantage has not been ignored, but efforts to shift the dial are not working. The postcodes experiencing the highest levels of disadvantage have not shifted in the past 15 years. The billions of dollars Australia spends each year on health, education, social services and welfare are not improving the lives of the those who need it most. Residents in these communities are not dealing with just one form of disadvantage but many barriers to individual wellbeing and community participation.

Services do not meet the needs of vulnerable children and families experiencing complex life circumstances

Unfortunately, services are often not tailored to meet the health and wellbeing needs of vulnerable children and families experiencing complex life circumstances like intergenerational disadvantage, social isolation, crisis and long-term unemployment.

It is complex and fragmented with differing sectors and systems across health, education and welfare and with funding streams from multiple sources including government (federal, state and local), as well as private and charitable funds.

There is often poor communication or coordination among services, even within the same program or service setting and significant variations in the methods and quality of service responses across different sectors.

Navigating complex service systems can leave vulnerable families feeling humiliated, frustrated and disempowered. A system response of siloed and prescriptive 'service provision' that focuses on symptoms rather than root causes was never destined to work.

Children and families with the greatest need are the least likely to access services

The result is that the children and families with the greatest need are the least likely to access services and receive the comprehensive and coordinated support they need (Fox et al., 2015, Moore et al., 2014).

At least one in five children and young people with significant needs have no access to support services (Little, 2017). And a quarter of children with emotional or behavioural issues are unable to access support (Department of Education and Training 2015).

And families consistently report that services are hard to find out about, are not culturally safe or appropriate, involve long waiting lists, respond to issues in isolation, and/ or don't respond effectively to their particular needs (Cortis et al., 2009, Watson, 2005).

Our Place strategies



Wrap-around Health & Wellbeing

We ensure families have seamless access to the education and the support services that match their needs

Reducing the most severe deep-seated disadvantage requires new thinking and a new approach – one that takes into account the unique circumstances and hopes of each community. Because communities experiencing disadvantage do have aspirations and energy to change their own future, despite grappling with systems that perpetuate disempowerment. Above all, Our Place believes that all people should have opportunities to experience pride, self-worth and success. This means working 'with', not doing 'to'.

Our Place works with family's aspirations, building on their strengths, and creating the opportunities to for them to achieve their goals. This means bringing together service providers to work together in supporting a family's needs, preferences and perspectives when they make decisions, rather than merely duplicating what works best for the service system.

This requires developing flexible service delivery models in consultation and in partnership with local communities, reflecting local parent, child and community needs and expectations and the best available research evidence.

The use of individual and family case management can also improve service system coordination as can drawing on service delivery partnerships of the different government and professional groups, so that they are working together, rather than in silos, to deliver more effective services.

Importantly, to be sustainable in the long-term, Our Place seeks to strengthen the capacity of existing local services, rather than establishing new services. This means working with government, partners and the community to develop a shared vision, use resources more effectively, and reduce system-level barriers.

We ensure skilled people, resources and partnerships underpin the system

The school and the Our Place team are the glue that holds the whole approach together. Our Place provides a team



of skilled people, backed by knowledge and experience to and seek out and collaborate with like-minded partners who are committed to enabling families to access high quality services and opportunities that match their needs. This ranges from high quality early learning and adult education as well as access to a range of health services.

The school is the platform for delivery. Our Place supports Principals to create teaching and learning environments that ensure each child receives the support they need to achieve and thrive. At each site, core services that are being delivered through the school platform, including paediatricians, maternal and child health, playgroups, allied health and family wellbeing. And instead of having to retell their story every time they visit a new service, families only have to tell their story once.

Warm referral protocols in place across the site meaning that when a family is referred on to another service, there is an introduction and family has a definite contact point at the service they are being referred into. Families are supported to access and receive services in a coordinated, efficient and effective way. •

“

A new collaborative working relationship between the three partners resulted in pooling effort, expertise, knowledge and resources, as well as significant learning and capacity building throughout the process.

EVE, PARTNERSHIP MANAGER,
BRIDGEWOOD



Conclusion

Reducing the most severe deep-seated disadvantage requires new thinking and a new approach – one that takes into account the unique circumstances and hopes of each community.

Families experiencing disadvantage have aspirations and energy to change their own future, despite grappling with systems that perpetuate disempowerment.

Our Place works with these aspirations by putting families at the centre of its approach. This requires significant structural realignment of education and service delivery, including the delivery of wrap around services in a way that hadn't been done before.

It is a journey that can take several years of implementation and adaptation for each site. The five elements described above, when delivered together, can address many of the usual barriers and challenges and faced by children and families thereby providing an opportunity to overcome entrenched disadvantage.

With a track-record of success, Our Place is now sharing the approach, methods and evaluation data more widely.

This evidence-based approach is at the heart of the Our Place approach. To ensure that evidence continues to be accumulated, each site is undertaking data collection and evaluation, overseen by the Our Place team.

While the five elements are critical to implementation, they are not a recipe. They are key ingredients, but implementation will differ in each site, informed by evidence and the voices of the community.

The Our Place approach is multifaceted and complex and it takes time to make a difference. Relationships and trust are preconditions for impact.

This is why Our Place invests in people whose primary responsibility is building strong, respectful relationships.

The Our Place team is the glue that supports communities to:

- Build local collaboration and develop a shared vision for the community
- Develop an achievable implementation plan for the short, medium and long-term, and monitor achievement
- Equip local leaders to leverage or create the skills and resources they need to be effective leaders of place-based initiatives
- Engage with research and leading practitioners

**“
Children and families should be able to flourish no matter where in Australia they live. Education really is the key to the door.”**

The factors driving disadvantage are complex and have become entrenched over decades. Meaningful transformation can only be achieved by taking a long-term approach that is underpinned by flexibility, innovation and commitment.

This is why Our Place makes a decade-long commitment to supporting each school and community. •



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