



The Robinvale Journey

CONTENTS



Robinvale College
"Great Learning for a Thriving Community"



Education
and Training



Acknowledgement of Country

Our Place acknowledges the First Nations people of Australia and Traditional Custodians of the lands that we live and work on, and recognise their continuing connection to land, water and culture. We pay our respects to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, their Elders past, present and emerging. We are committed to working together for a brighter future.



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INTRODUCTION



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**You just need to empower people,
and on top of that, provide the
tools to help them achieve.**

Julius Colman, Chair, Colman Education Foundation

PURPOSE OF THE Journey Report

This report describes the journey of the origin of the Our Place initiative in Robinvale. It was written in 2020 and documents the story of Our Place so far having evolved in Robinvale over several years.

Robinvale is a close-knit Victorian Murray River border-town 500km north west of Melbourne. It is located 140km from Swan Hill and 90km from Mildura.

Robinvale Our Place is the most remote of the 10 Our Place sites across Victoria and the second to open since the establishment of the demonstration site at Doveton College. Robinvale's journey towards being an Our Place site commenced in mid-2017 however numerous passionate collaborations in Robinvale have been striving to achieve positive outcomes for children and families long before this.

The early conversations that led to the Robinvale Our Place Partnership (ROPP) started between the Department of Education and Training (DET) Mallee Region and the Colman Education Foundation in 2017. There was recognition of significant need in the community, an opportunity arising from the transformation of Robinvale P-12 school to a newly opened Robinvale College in 2016, and the groundwork that had been laid by previous and ongoing collaboration around early years services. The ROPP officially started in April 2019 with the signing of the Site Operating Agreement. The partnership will receive philanthropic support from the Dusseldorp Forum for the 10-year period.

The infrastructure of the Robinvale site is a combination of a new build and a refurbishment. A new early learning centre and administrative space was already under construction when the Our Place partnership was established, and a new community library was delivered through the refitting of a former multipurpose building. There is a single entrance to

the early learning and college administration building, and the library is adjacent to this.

This Journey Report describes the involvement and contribution of the key partners at Robinvale, the series of events leading to the establishment of the site and details the early progress of the implementation of the Our Place approach. Throughout the report, the key steps, learnings and partner aspirations for the Robinvale site are outlined. The report highlights the progress made towards supporting achievement of the Our Place outcomes in the long term.

CONTRIBUTORS AND SOURCES

A total of 21 key stakeholders involved in the establishment of Robinvale Our Place were consulted in the development of this report. Those consulted included representatives from the Robinvale Our Place Partnership Group (ROPP), including Department of Education and Training (DET) - Mallee Region, Robinvale College, Robinvale District Health Services (RDHS), Swan Hill Rural City Council (Council), YMCA, and the Office of the Victorian Skills Commissioner (Mallee), Murray Valley Aboriginal Cooperative, Mallee Family Care, Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) Mallee North Division, Our Place, and the Colman Education Foundation. Insights were also provided from the Dusseldorp Forum and Regional Development Victoria.

In addition to the consultations, information for this report was drawn from other sources, including meeting minutes, photos, consultation reports, demographic and early childhood development data.

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Evidence indicates that education is the key to lifting the aspirations and improving the lives of children and their families. Our Place facilitates partnerships that enable the school to be the central place for learning and support services that overcome barriers to educational achievement.

June McLoughlin, Executive
Director - Services, Our Place

UNDERSTANDING THE concept of Our Place

Our Place is a holistic 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.

The Our Place approach is built on the strong body of evidence from international research and experts, and the translation of learnings from our lighthouse site at Doveton College, which commenced operation in 2012.

The evidence indicates that education is the key to lifting the aspirations and improving the lives of children and their families. The approach seeks to overcome the barriers to educational achievement by focusing on:

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

WHY IS IT NEEDED?

In Australia, the benefits of economic growth are not shared as evenly as they once were, and the equity gap is widening between the wealthy and the poor. For example, in Victoria just 11 postcodes (1.6% of total) account for 13.7% of the most disadvantaged rank positions (Yule, 2015).

Our Place's approach is based on the premise that improved access to high-quality education for all is key to addressing the equity gap.

- Complex and entrenched disadvantage is concentrated in certain postcodes – where you are born shouldn't determine your opportunities in life

- Children need supportive environments to thrive, which is especially important for children facing challenges that arise from social and economic disadvantage
- While there is a wealth of resources and services available, often these are not of adequate quality to make a difference and/or are not accessed by the people that need it the most

When schools in disadvantaged communities act as community hubs they have the potential to create powerful change. Our Place facilitates partnerships that enable the school to be the central place for learning and support services that overcome barriers to educational achievement.

WHAT ARE THE DESIRED OUTCOMES?

Our vision is that all children and their families succeed in life. To reliably measure the impact of Our Place, our objective is to achieve positive change in the nine key areas that form the Outcomes Framework.

The nine Outcomes have been carefully chosen to enable the effective evaluation of clear conditions of wellbeing under the three major domains. The most critical domain focuses on outcomes for children, while the other two domains are outcomes for their families and the communities they live in.

There are a number of indicators across these nine outcome areas. The indicators provide a meaningful understanding to the extent that Outcomes are being achieved. They can be measured in a timely manner and reflect reliable, robust indicators of community level change. >



Children

- Happy, healthy and develop well
- Engage in learning and social opportunities
- Achieve as learners

Families

- Happy, healthy and well with strong self-worth
- Confident as parents/ carers and engage in their children's learning
- Engaged in learning, are skilled and are employed

Community

- Connected and feel socially included
- Having a sense of pride and belonging
- Actively contribute skills and knowledge to community productivity

› HOW ARE THESE OUTCOMES ACHIEVED?

Our holistic approach includes 5 core Elements that describe the evidence-based strategies that contribute to achieving Outcomes for children, families and communities. The Elements are:

High-quality early learning, health and development

Support early learning from birth as well as playgroups, child health and parenting support on site.

High-quality schooling

Support high-quality teaching and learning environments that ensure each child receives the support they need to achieve and thrive.

Wrap-around health and wellbeing services

Support access to effective health and wellbeing services.

Engagement and enrichment activities for children

Create affordable, on-site opportunities for children to develop an interest in sports, arts and hobbies with others.

Adult engagement, volunteering, learning and employment

Support opportunities for families to engage in volunteering, formal and informal learning, and link them into employment pathways.

HOW DOES IT ALL COME TOGETHER?

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. Our Place refers to this role as being 'The Glue'.

The Glue is made up of the people, partnerships, knowledge and infrastructure that are essential to successfully improving outcomes for children through a place-based approach. The key ingredients are:

1. Space and infrastructure

A single, shared entrance to early learning, school, health services and community facilities, with welcoming and appropriate space for families.



2. Facilitation, leadership and partnerships

People in place to build commitment, drive action and outcomes, connect people with other resources and encourage a culture of mutual respect and questioning.

3. Collaborative governance

Shared commitment to collaborative governance and innovation to develop solutions that achieve impact.

4. Data-informed decision-making

Skills and capacity to identify, collect, analyse, interpret and understand data from available sources.

Our Place does not deliver or fund any services or programs, rather we assist in reshaping the service system by providing essential resources to drive action, impact and innovation. Our expertise is building meaningful relationships and facilitating lasting partnerships with local leaders and the community to create opportunities for participation. The people resources Our Place provides are:

Community Facilitators

Front-line staff who implement evidence-based strategies, working on-site with the local community and service providers. This role leads and undertakes the bulk of the

work in the implementation process, with an emphasis on engaging with the school and key partners and connecting with the local community and understanding and responding to local community needs.

Partnership Managers

Lead and drive the partnership between the school, the early years provider, state government and local government at each Our Place site. This role is involved in overseeing and supporting the implementation process, with an emphasis on building relationships, creating a shared commitment and vision.

Research and Evaluation Team

Provide advice, resources and support to Our Place sites in initial planning, data collection and ongoing reporting. The team leads baseline data collection and works closely with those involved in implementation to support the collection and analysis of process and outcome data.

Subject matter experts

Our Place engages consultants with expertise in a number of areas to assist in designing and implementing strategies in each site, such as specialists in early learning, adult education, principal support, employment pathways, paediatric health and data and evaluation.

SECTION 2



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It is a shot in the arm that the Colman Education Foundation are investing over 10 years... this is much appreciated and acknowledges change doesn't happen over 2-3 years of the election cycle.

Director Community and Cultural Services, SHRCC

TRANSLATING THE concept to Robinvale

The original concept envisaged for an Our Place site at Robinvale was founded on the long-held commitment to championing early childhood development in the town, and the introduction of an early learning centre onto the College grounds.

THE ROBINVALE COMMUNITY

Robinvale is remotely located in regional Victoria, although it is close to the New South Wales town of Euston. As such the Robinvale and Euston communities are strongly connected. Robinvale and the surrounding areas have been long cared for by the Aboriginal People of the Latji Latji, Tati Tati and Wadi Wadi tribes. In post war years Robinvale was established as a solidier settlement, then migrant Italian and Greek families moved to the area. In subsequent decades migrants from over 44 different cultural groups settled. This has included origins from Pacific Islands, South East Asia, India, China, Philippines and Afghanistan. This unique diversity is a strength in such a remote rural location:

Robinvale is a significant economic centre within the broader Loddon Mallee Region. It has a strong agricultural industry, the largest almond farms in the southern hemisphere, with production of large concentrations of table grapes, fresh stone fruit and pistachios, large-scale exporting, and solar farming. Although there is wealth in the town and surrounding region, there is also vulnerability experienced by many, including itinerant workers.

Officially the Robinvale population reported in the 2016 census was 3,313, however for a long time it has been understood that the population is in fact much larger. It potentially climbs to over 10,000 during peak harvesting times with the static number believed to be more like 7,900¹. Numerous studies over the years, and most recently by Swan

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Robinvale is a vibrant multicultural community – children are capable and talented, and they can all learn.

Regional Director North-Western Victoria Region, DET

Hill Rural City Council², attribute this under representation in the census to a high number of transient, temporary or hidden visitor populations, and fluctuations throughout the growing season. This presents a challenge for the community because funding calculations for services and infrastructure by state and federal governments are often based directly on census population numbers.

Related to this issue is the higher than expected demand for housing. Robinvale has numerous and complex housing issues, which has a flow on effect of difficulty attracting workforce at all levels, including social services. There is insufficient housing for professionals and middle management, as well as a significant shortage of suitably located accommodation for seasonal horticultural workers and their families. Participants interviewed for this report also drew attention to a lack of affordable housing and a shortfall in public housing which has resulted in unmet emergency accommodation needs and overcrowding. >

Footnotes 1 & 2: <https://www.swanhill.vic.gov.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Robinvale-Population-Determination-Briefing-Paper-1-1.pdf>

SECTION 2



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Our data tells us people are working really hard, but the picture of welfare of our children and families is worsening. We are really excited about where Our Place is headed and the resources to make that happen – you can't do that without resources.

Family Youth and Children's Services Manager,
Swan Hill Rural City Council Officer

› A large proportion of the Robinvale population were born overseas, and a wide range of languages are spoken in the community. The 2016 ABS Census³ found that 58% of residents were born in Australia, and over a third of people had both parents born overseas. 30.9% of households spoke a language other than English at home. The most commonly spoken languages other than English in 2016 were Tongan, Vietnamese, Italian, Mandarin and Greek. 7.8% of the population identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander, which is much higher than the Victorian average of 0.8%.

Robinvale has lower than average higher education attainment (ABS 2016). Although the completion of year 12 education in Robinvale is slightly higher than the average for Victoria (16.1%), attainment of university level qualifications is lower than the state average. 6.7% of the Robinvale population have a bachelor's degree, compared to the rest of the state with 24.3%.

Most people were employed either full-time (59.5%) or part time (24.6%), and the Robinvale community experiences the state-wide average rate of unemployment at 6.6% (ABS 2016). Of the parents in couples in Robinvale, 19% are listed as both unemployed, which is also the same as the state average. There is significant income disparity in Robinvale with 24.5% of community earning less than \$650 gross weekly income, in contrast to 7.5% that earn more than \$3000 gross weekly income.

Robinvale has a higher than average proportion of children in the community (ABS 2016) compared to the rest of the state (18.2%), with children aged 0 - 14 years making up 20.7% of the population. Within that group the largest age group were primary school aged children between 5 and 9 years (7.7%).

The three most commonly raised social issues in the interviews for this report were about the disparity of high levels of wealth alongside poverty, the impact from the shortage of housing, and the implications of an underreported population on the service system. Alongside these observations about challenges was consistent recognition of community resilience, and the strength and opportunity that comes from the cultural diversity in the town. The town is described as vibrant and having a great sense of community.

ORIGINAL CONCEPT

The very early story starts with the long-term collaborations in Robinvale that championed early childhood development and education. Major milestones that have made a contribution to shifting the levels of disadvantage in the community were the attraction of Best Start (2003) and Communities for Children (2006) initiatives to Robinvale, both of which continue today. The advocacy for and attraction of investment for early childhood education on the College site provided the catalyst that aligned with the vision of Our Place. The re-opening of the previous school as Robinvale College in 2016, and the securing of funding for the new Early Learning Centre on the College site were important foundations.

In addition to this infrastructure, the College has had numerous upgrades in recent years to meet pedagogical needs, and the Department of Education (DET) Mallee Region strongly supported the opportunity to become an Our Place site. An important driver was the dedicated, established partnership between close-knit agencies operating in this remote town, and strong support and advocacy from Swan Hill Rural City Council. The strength of the organisations and networks in the area who have worked together over a long period meant that Robinvale was well placed to become an Our Place site.

“The pillars are the school, council, health service, Murray Valley Aboriginal Corporation, and Mallee Family Care that maintain social capital.” (Project Manager, Mallee Skills Task Force)

The Foundation to year 12 college came into its current form in 2016. Prior to that there had been a merger of the Robinvale Consolidated School and Robinvale Secondary College. In the mid-2000s the school experienced multiple challenges that ranged from attracting workforce, a dip in educational outcomes and a need for replenished buildings. This prompted a Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD)⁴ directed school review in 2014 that led to a subsequent decision by the School Council to close the school and re-open it in 2016. The re-opened school became Robinvale College, with a fresh focus and wider community engagement. The new college vision was “to be a learning hub for a thriving community which is inclusive of early childhood learning right through to adult education and community involvement”. A new principal commenced in 2017.

“The community are appreciative of it... appreciative that the College is leading, not just teaching and learning, looking at the community as a whole.” (Robinvale College Principal)
The commitment from DET and the College for reinvigoration was important in order to respond to the disadvantage that continues to be experienced by families in Robinvale. The presence of RDHS in Robinvale, and its commitment

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Diversity just brings so many different things, whether that is in a workplace, in a town, culture just brings different people, different skills, different stories, different foods, different solutions. And understanding.

General Manger Child and Family Services, Mallee Family Care

to partnerships, was central to bringing Our Place to Robinvale. RDHS has been serving the Robinvale, Euston and surrounding communities since 1957. In addition to acute and primary health services, and aged care, its early childhood services includes maternity services, and maternal and child health in partnership with Swan Hill Rural City Council (SHRCC). This includes supported playgroups funded by The Besen Foundation, a mobile visiting play program, speech pathology and occupational therapy (SPOT group), Home Interaction Program for Parents and Youngsters (HIPPPY) and out of school hours care that are delivered in different locations in Robinvale.

RDHS has a strong service integration focus, seeking to provide a seamless and holistic suite of early years services with minimal barriers, numerous ‘soft entry’ points, facilitated referrals, a ‘no wrong door’ approach with empathetic and skilled staff. This is also very much a strong focus on the Our Place approach. Bringing access to new mums to early years is possible through the RDHS connection to midwifery, so people can be introduced to MCH, and other initiatives such as the mobile visiting play program. RDHS enables continuity of care for the transition from pre-birth to early years services. This resonates with the emphasis that the Our Place approach has on continuity of children’s learning for the child from early years to primary school.

A strong early network has been in place in Robinvale for over a decade, and it formally became the Robinvale Early Years Network (REYN) in 2009, almost 10 years prior to the official partnership with Our Place. The vision for the REYN is for “An early years system in Robinvale where all services are easily accessible, culturally sensitive and work together with families to meet the changing needs of local children (0-12 years) and families.” RDHS has played a key role in driving this network and continues to do so today.

The network includes the Robinvale and Euston schools, Robinvale and Euston preschools, including Murray Valley Aboriginal Cooperative Early Learning Centre which has a preschool program and long day care, Robinvale District >

Footnote 4: The Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) preceded the current Department of Education and Training (DET).

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The school has a large population of families from a low socio-economic background, with generational poverty and unemployment, and many parents who have had negative experiences of school. Our students don't have the same access to services like GPs, allied health, the same things that metro people might take for granted.

Robinvale College Principal

› Health Services allied health staff, Mallee Family Care, Mallee Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault Unit (now part of Orange Door family violence service), SHRCC, DET Mallee Region and others in the community.

Many of the ROPP partners have been involved in REYN since its inception, including programs such as Best Start (2003–current) and Communities for Children (2006–current). RDHS and Swan Hill Rural City Council also played a significant role in two regionally focused initiatives: Sustainability of Government and Rural Enterprises Advancing Together (SO GREAT) (2006–2010), and Robinvale Advancing Country Towns (2011–2016).

This work has been foundational for the Robinvale Our Place Partnership, it enabled the planning for the site infrastructure, and attracted the government investment towards the Early Learning Centre and library.



SITE SELECTION

In March 2018 the then Education Minister officially announced a partnership with the Colman Education Foundation through the Our Place initiative. This would expand on the Colman Education Foundation's success at Doveton, and Robinvale was named as one of 10 Our Place sites.

Several timely meetings between the Our Place staff and community stakeholders took place during 2017 and early 2018 in the lead up to this announcement. Julius Colman, Chair of the Colman Education Foundation, also visited Robinvale in late 2017 to attend a housing forum and gain a sense of the fit with Our Place. This provided the opportunity to deliver a presentation to community leaders and businesses about Our Place, its ethos and how it worked.

The major factors contributing to site selection were the DET interest in Robinvale and how the Our Place approach could be beneficial there, the building of the Early Learning Centre on the College site, disadvantage within the community, and the existing commitment and support from Swan Hill Rural City Council and RDHS to form a partnership.

Robinvale was already a priority for DET when senior staff from the Mallee region visited Doveton College to learn about Colman Education Foundation's philosophy and

approach. This long-term commitment to Robinvale College was important for Robinvale to become an Our Place site. “DET has invested significant resources into the school, and the Colman philosophy fitted very well.” (Education Area Executive Director – Mallee, DET)

“When the opportunity came up, it was a natural fit. Some people advocated that Robinvale was too complex, my view was it was ideally suited because of the good progress with the school.... That model of using the school as a community hub could be really effective.” (Regional Director North-Western Victoria Region, DET)

The readiness to have early learning on the College site was an important factor in site selection. The aspirations to move Robinvale Preschool into a new early learning centre on the College site emerged as early as 2005 and were well-progressed and aligned with a pre-condition of the Our Place approach for early learning infrastructure to be located on the College site.

In 2013 the Early Years Coordinator at RDHS, and the Robinvale Advancing Country Towns Executive Officer worked with Swan Hill Rural City Council on a successful grant application from the DET Children’s Facilities Capital Program. This was intended to allow the existing early learning facility located nearby and managed by YMCA to be expanded and moved to the College site. This would be a new approach to early years delivery by SHRCC, with DET and council developing a joint use agreement. YMCA held the license with SHRCC to operate Robinvale Preschool in its original location and continues to do so now and is a partner on the ROPP.

In summary, this site readiness was a significant factor supporting the selection of Robinvale as an Our Place site. In addition to the necessary infrastructure, the readiness was reflected by Robinvale being a strong community, with visible support and engagement from stakeholders and committed partners who were already working closely together for Robinvale.

The decades of collaboration and successes in Robinvale make this a great example of implementing the Our Place approach in a small regional town. The stakeholders in Robinvale have always been proactive in attracting what is needed for the community and responding to opportunities. This provided an ideal setting for an Our Place site.

“There has been a long-standing community development approach in Robinvale that is quite impressive, and a strong commitment by the community for the community.” (Executive Director, Our Place)

Alongside the evident community strength in Robinvale, there remains significant disadvantage, which is central to its

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There was a positive indication of what could be achieved in Robinvale, and a demonstration of how the early years focus was ongoing and collaborative.

Education Area Executive Director – Mallee, DET

fit with the Our Place vision and mission. From the 2016 ABS census, the proportion of school leavers in Robinvale aged between 14 and 25 years not in the workforce or in education and training was double the state average. Anecdotes of community vulnerability were also articulated during the interviews for this report:

“We still have high levels of family violence and child protection substantiation and a high degree of vulnerability for families in that area, so anything we can do to promote education, this is important...” (Director Community and Cultural Services, SHRCC)

The College today reflects Robinvale’s diverse community. There is a large Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population, with 102 of 370 students in 2019, and 103 of 327 students in 2020. The College has an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Advisory committee, and on site is the Clontarf Academy for Aboriginal Boys. More recently, the College attracted support from the RE Ross Trust for a Koorie girls academy which started in 2019. There are also children from many diverse cultural backgrounds, with 12 languages spoken within the College community.

Dusseldorp Forum became a philanthropic partner with Robinvale in 2019, committing financial support for the 10-year agreement period. This came about through a philanthropic alliance with Our Place. With the invitation to partner with Robinvale, the Dusseldorp Forum Executive Director and the Our Place Executive Director visited in August 2019. The visit included introductions to the community through meetings with local leaders and a tour around Robinvale. Meetings were held with staff from the Murray Valley Aboriginal Cooperative, RDHS, the Skills Commission, the College Principal, and staff working within the College with the Koorie Girls Academy.

For the Dusseldorp Forum, one of the standout impressions from this visit was how committed local people were to the future of Robinvale, and how much they loved their town. It is common for people in small towns to take on multiple roles in serving the community, but in Robinvale the commitment was exceptional. It was clear that many people across many backgrounds were putting in the hard yards over many >



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It's an amazing story of all the strands that came together, the work that many people did around community development, the work on the school. Not just infrastructure but the quality early childhood piece. And to have Our Place come in - that can be a long-term way of holding that together.

Regional Director North-Western
Victoria Region, DET

› years. It was a place that was already 'happening', and it was felt that Our Place could help to embed this more and offer an opportunity to fully leverage this commitment and local engagement.

“The sheer number of really committed community people that are stepping up and taking on real leadership roles.... it felt a very promising foundation for the Our Place approach.”
(Executive Director, Dusseldorp Forum)

“In most towns you meet people that take on leadership roles over the years, and in lots of different capacities. In Robinvale there was not just one or two people like this, I met 20 people like that in Robinvale.” (Executive Director, Dusseldorp Forum)

PARTNERSHIP FORMATION

The Robinvale Our Place partners quickly came together as a governance group in April 2018 after the ministerial announcement in March 2018. Our Place introduced a new team to work with the group of community leaders who have been working together for a long time with pre-existing trust and history.

The appointment of the Robinvale Partnership Manager in May 2018 was a significant milestone. The Partnership Manager role is part time, and the person appointed also holds the part time position of the RDHS Early Years Coordinator.

This is a unique and beneficial arrangement, as the Partnership Manager has played a leading role with REYN since its establishment and has strong and collaborative relationships with community and service providers in the area. The combination of the two roles provides a seamless connection between the common goals of RDHS and Our Place.

The formal Our Place Robinvale Site Operating Agreement was signed in April 2019 and was the second of 10 new sites to be signed after Doveton College. It provides high-level guidance for the group for the implementation and strategic planning process for a plan of action with shared goals and

Robinvale Our Place Partnership

SITE IMPLEMENTATION GROUP PARTNERS



priority outcomes, that is informed by the community. In June 2018 the group determined it would be named the Robinvale Our Place Partnership (ROPP).

The Agreement is between RDHS, DET, SHRCC, Robinvale College, YMCA and Colman Education Foundation. In acknowledgement of broader close working relationships in the town, the governance group also includes

representatives from Murray Valley Aboriginal Cooperative who run the Early Learning Centre in the community, Mallee Family Care, Neighbourhood House/Learn Local, and Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS).

One of the immediate areas of focus for the ROPP was on the delivery of the Early Learning Centre and library building for which plans were already in place. >



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They were talking about the same things as us...how to help, wanting to make a difference, understanding that the difference comes from wrapping yourself around the community and empowering them to achieve and succeed.

Julius Colman, Chair, Colman Education Foundation

› There was a very short period of time between the ministerial announcement of Robinvale, and the formation of the ROPP. This was possible through the established nature of partner relationships. At the same time, it did take time to absorb what the implementation of Our Place would mean.

There have also been design challenges to be overcome in the building process, and the lead up to development of the site strategic plan has taken longer than expected.

Any challenges that have arisen have been navigated in collaboration with the partnership, as the aspirations of the partners are similar. The group has a strong collective vision about creating an Our Place 'community hub' to better support the children and families of Robinvale, and there was opportunity in influencing the design of repurposed buildings.

THE FIT WITH OUR PLACE

The decades of collaboration and successes in Robinvale make this a great example of implementing the Our Place approach in a small regional town. The stakeholders in Robinvale have always been proactive in attracting what is needed for the community and responding to opportunities. This provided an ideal setting for an Our Place site.

Timeline from concept to completion

2017	2017-2018	2018-2019	2019-2020
Concept evolution	Design & build phase	Partnership formation	1 st year of operation
<p>November 2017 The Colman Education Foundation signed a landmark agreement with the Department of Education to establish 10 Our Place sites across Victoria.</p>	<p>2017</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Early learning and new administration building become joint project. • Architects appointed, schematic designs. • VSBA takes on oversight of delivery. • Building contract out to tender with full building specifications. • Construction commences. 	<p>March 2018 Announcement that Robinvale will be one of the 10 Our Place sites.</p>	<p>April 2019 Robinvale Partnership Agreement between DET, Colman Education Foundation, RDHS, SHRCC, YMCA is signed.</p>
		<p>April 2018 Robinvale Our Place Partnership meets for the first time.</p>	<p>July 2019 Early Childhood Learning Centre commences operation on the College site.</p>
<p>December 2017</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • First meetings with Colman Education Foundation and DET to discuss possibility of Our Place in Robinvale. • Colman Education Foundation visits Robinvale. 	<p>June 2018 Early learning and administration building construction completed.</p>	<p>May 2018 Partnership Manager appointed. Our Place briefs the partnership on the intended outcomes for children family and community, and the evaluation structure.</p>	<p>August 2019 Consultants appointed to undertake service provider consultations.</p>
	<p>July 2018 New administration building opens at Robinvale College.</p>	<p>September 2019 Dusseldorp Forum commits financial support for 10 years.</p>	<p>October 2019 First Community Facilitator commences.</p>
		<p>November 2019 Building contract out to tender with full building specifications.</p>	<p>November 2019 Building contract out to tender with full building specifications.</p>
		<p>December 2019 Baby Steps endorsed by ROPP.</p>	<p>January 2020 Library build commences.</p>
		<p>February 2020</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community Facilitator commences. • Community Development Adviser commences. 	<p>August 2020 Baby Steps commences.</p>
		<p>October 2020 Library build completed.</p>	<p>October 2020 Library build completed.</p>



There were two key stages of the building: the Early Learning Centre and adjoining administration building, and the community library. The Early Learning Centre and administration building were completed in 2018 and the library was completed in October 2020.

THE DESIGN

Our Place has a keen desire to be involved in the design and build phase of all its sites, contributing to ideas and discussions to ensure evidence-based elements are incorporated, in particular a single entrance with a welcoming reception. There was a long lead up to the design and delivery of the Early Learning Centre and the library. Planning for both had started in the mid-2000s, and the allocation of state government funding took many years to realise.

Our Place became involved in Robinvale after the commencement of construction and did not have input in

the initial design. The location of the Early Learning Centre within the new college administration building enables the shared entrance to be partly achieved. While there is not a single, shared entrance to the whole site, there is a shared space between the College, the Early Learning Centre and MCH. When the ROPP was formed there was opportunity to improve the connection between the Early Learning Centre and the College administration building and to leverage the opportunities brought by the introduction of the community library on the College site which will provide community spaces for programs and activities. Additional workable solutions have been explored by members of the ROPP to improve overall connection within the site with an outdoor



BUILDING FROM the ground up

alfresco space and walkway planned to connect the two buildings in lieu of the capacity to have a single shared front entrance for families and communities.

The Victorian School Building Authority (VSBA) was engaged to deliver both the administration and early learning components of the build. At the time VSBA had not yet been responsible for delivery of early learning facilities and was not familiar with the critical kindergarten licencing component of an outside playground. A consequence of this was the removal of the play area from the scope of works. This was a challenge that the ROPP worked through and substantial advocacy efforts by ROPP members ensured that the requisite funding was sourced for the playground.

A key feature of an early learning centre on a school site, in line with the Our place approach is the inclusion of spaces where services can be provided, and activities to support health and wellbeing and adult education can take place.

The scope of the new Early Learning Centre only allows for maternal and child health services. While this will assist in helping to facilitate connection between new families, early learning and services, it was not the ideal infrastructure. However, the introduction of a refurbished community library onto the site provides other spaces for services and programs and outdoor space is expected to help welcome more community members onto the site.

Robinvale previously only had access to a mobile library service that visited once a week, however from early 2021 a partnership between Robinvale College and Swan Hill Rural City Council will see a new community library located on the College site. The securing of funds for this project came through Regional Development Victoria and was achieved after several years of effort initially led by SHRCC and achieved through collaboration facilitated by the Robinvale Advancing Country Towns initiative. The attraction of these funds was well received, however the reduced budget >

SECTION 3



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There's been a lot of lessons learned around having the right people around the table to make the right decisions, because previous builds from VSBA have been from school people running school projects who didn't really have a level of understanding that you need for an early childhood build. So, one of the requirements was left off - the outdoor space, and you can't have an early childhood building without a proper playground where children can access outdoor space.”

Manager Early Childhood Improvement Branch
North-Western Victoria Region - Mallee DET

› meant that the original scope was pared back to be a repurposing, rather than a new build. With a full-time library presence on the College site, there can be new possibilities to engage with a library for preschool and school children: “It could have an early literacy component in the programming...they could have excursions to the library to ensure children feel comfortable in that space.” (Manager Early Childhood Improvement Branch North-Western Victoria Region - Mallee, DET)

SHRCC and the College undertook community consultation to guide the planning for the facility, in recognition of the significant change for community with the library being located on the College grounds. Kneeler Design Architects were appointed in April 2019 as architects for the project, and the library designs were informed by the extensive consultation by SHRCC and Robinvale College.

THE BUILD

At the same time as plans were emerging for the Early Learning Centre, the State Government had separately committed to build a new administration block at the

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It means that the library and facilities that are part of the complex will be both utilised heavily by the school and the community. People will come in and use the internet, and computer facilities, meeting rooms – so truly a quality resource for the community.

Education Area Executive Director
– Mallee, DET

College, and a decision was made to locate this and the Early Learning Centre together. The project oversight and delivery responsibility was taken on by the newly formed Victorian School Building Authority (VSBA) in 2017.

The timing of the ROPP establishment in April 2018 allowed the group to have some involvement in addressing issues about the playground that were raised during the build.

Construction of the Early Learning Centre and administration building was undertaken as a single project. It started in 2017 and was completed June 2018, with the college administration building opening in term 3 of 2018. Although completed in mid-2018 the Early Learning Centre became operational in mid-2019, a result of the hold up in the playground construction.

A former multipurpose building on the College site was stripped out in preparation for the new library in late 2019. Construction commenced in January 2020 and was completed in October 2020.

A Joint Use Agreement between Robinvale College and SHRCC is in place for the library. This is a new management approach for SHRCC whereby a council service will now be situated on DET land. The library will be operational at the beginning of Term 1 of 2021.



SECTION 4



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Isolated MCHs nurses and preschool teachers located with other professionals are much more likely to communicate and to share and have all of the professional learnings that can happen. Just because you are co-located doesn't guarantee it. Having Our Place work really complements all of that and very much helps to drive it. The timing of Colman going in is awesome, anytime would be good - but the timing is really beneficial.

Family Youth and Children's Services Manager, Swan Hill Rural City Council



OPENING THE DOORS for operation

Many early years initiatives have been running prior to Our Place and are now aligned with the Our Place element of high-quality early learning by engaging and building confidence of parents, providing community connections, and links to the College.

The Partnership Manager's joint role at RDHS has helped embed this alignment. Current activities are delivered in different locations in Robinvale, and include supported playgroups and activity programs, the mobile visiting play program, toy library, HIPPY, after school care and vacation care. The Our Place approach in Robinvale has brought the opportunity to combine the suite of strategic Our Place Elements with the existing early years focus. The ROPP has also been involved in attracting funding for supported playgroups.

THE COLLEGE AS A COMMUNITY HUB

Robinvale College has seen many changes over the last 10 years, including the re-opening, a new principal, and new buildings. It is a central hub for the community, and that central focus continues to grow with the introduction of new people to the site through the Early Learning Centre, maternal and child health services, and the library. The Our Place team has been working closely with the College since the partnership was formed, and is building relationships >

SECTION 4



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The exciting bit about the library is it does start to give us more flexibility with Our Place in terms of what we can start to introduce. We have talked about mums and bubs groups, and even some adult education classes after school, or volunteer work. So far, we haven't really had the space to imagine a picture of that happening, now we have the opportunity to do that.

Robinvale College Principal

› with the college community, an important aspect of the Our Place approach which places strong emphasis on the voice of the community.

EARLY LEARNING CENTRE ESTABLISHMENT

The Early Learning Centre became operational in July 2019 when YMCA moved their Robinvale Preschool program from the previous site which was separate to the College. A shared use agreement between YMCA and SHRCC and the College was put in place, which includes provision for the maternal and child health room that is part of the early learning centre build. The first six months of operation on site gave families and children at the Centre the opportunity to see and experience the College up close. This is something partners see as valuable for generating confidence in becoming part

of the college community, including pre-school children who will be able to see the College up close.

“In an ideal world, when a family walks through the door for whatever reason, they can be connected to what they need. And they might come, go to playgroup, but then they realize that they need to be connected to the MCH or they need to enrol into Kindergarten next year. Whatever that family needs.” (Manager Early Childhood Improvement Branch, DET)

The location of the Early Learning Centre will help create a seamless experience for families. It will also provide opportunities for early childhood educators to have a relationship with the staff at the College.

“From the perspective of professional development, early childhood teachers generally have limited exposure to professional learning, so it was suggested it will be positive for them to join in with the P-12 staff in relevant learning opportunities.” (Education Area Executive Director – Mallee, DET)

COMMUNITY SERVICES

The COVID-19 pandemic impacted the commencement of the delivery of Maternal and Child Health (MCH) services

on site. From 2021 there will be a part-time MCH nurse in the Early Learning Centre. This provides the opportunity to introduce new mums to the site and to become familiar with the preschool and school environments. Negotiations have also been underway to run a playgroup on the College site in one of the preschool rooms when it is not being used.

The opening of the community library in early 2021 will bring additional infrastructure that further creates a community hub on the College site. The Early Learning Centre budget did not allow for additional community spaces, for programs and activities, however the provision of the community library will provide spaces. While a library component is outside the Our Place approach, it still aligns with the intention of creating a community hub on the College site. It demonstrates the multiple and strong connections Swan Hill Rural City Council has to Robinvale along with its long-term commitment to early childhood development.

During community consultations in 2020, it became apparent that some community members were not aware that the mobile library bus would be replaced with a permanent building and have much more to offer. On hearing about it, community members expressed enthusiasm about what will be possible. In addition to the lending of books and activities taking place, it was described by community as a safe place for their children and for people to spend time.

THE PARTNERSHIP'S ROLE IN ACTIVATION

The work of the ROPP in establishing the partnership and orienting to the Our Place approach, and the continuation of existing early years activities form the basis of activation. The remoteness of Robinvale with its small population has resulted in considerable challenges for recruitment of staff, and as a result some implementation activities were delayed.

The Our Place implementation process calls for engagement with families and community as well as services providers. It was initially challenging to attract staff for the Community Facilitator roles, and this delayed the engagement activity. To progress some of this work a consultant was appointed in August 2019 to undertake service provider consultations, a key piece of research to inform the ROPPs strategic planning in 2020. This has helped to gain insights about the experience of local and visiting service providers working in Robinvale and will contribute to the ROPP's effort to ensure the service system is community centred.

In 2019, the Our Place Research and Evaluation team conducted a partnership assessment to draw out some of the change that has occurred in Robinvale since becoming an Our Place site. One observation was that there has been a change in the breadth of interest in the opportunities for early years that Our Place will bring. In the survey there was an acknowledgement that the members of the ROPP are very motivated and committed to creating system change. As

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Being the front face – being a local of Robinvale – that's something that gives me a lot of confidence in working with services, and families and referring them. I think that gives them confidence in me, gives them a face that they know.

Community Facilitator, Our Place

noted in the consultations for this report – much of the work of the partnership so far has been focused on establishment as a group.

The current Community Facilitator joined in February 2020 and is a member of the local community who has strong networks with community and service providers.

In early 2020 Our Place also recruited a Community Development Advisor (CDA) to the Robinvale team. This is unique for this site, and the CDA role has a focus that extends beyond the Our Place implementation and originated through an agreement with the Victorian Department of Premier and Cabinet through their Working Together in Place (WTP) initiative. The CDA works with a wide range of stakeholders in Robinvale, as well as government, with a focus the broader systemic issues that have an impact on Our Place implementation.

The work of the partnership was significantly interrupted during the 2020 pandemic. Robinvale College, RDHS, community services, and SHRCC adjusted their operations to interact with community in alternative remote ways.

For the Our Place team this meant that the face to face interactions with community were not possible for most of the year, so it was necessary to find different approaches to site implementation work. Alternative means for face to face community consultations were created, and the Our Place team were able to re-orient their focus so they could provide supports to the college community while home schooling was taking place. This included delivery of computers and technical equipment for students, delivery of food relief, and advocacy to enable improved internet access for people in locations with limited internet connectivity.

The community engagement activity was completed in late 2020. The findings will assist the ROPP with their strategic planning in 2020, and this will guide the priority actions of the group in coming years.

LEARNINGS AFTER 18 months

The strong established connections in the Robinvale area are commonly recognised as critical for success in this partnership.

ROBINVALE AND EUSTON: TWO TOWNS, BUT ONE COMMUNITY

Given the small population of Robinvale and the existing strong connections across all schools, early childhood and community services in both Robinvale and Euston, the importance of connecting with other schools and kindergartens in surrounding areas was highlighted by partners. The town of Euston is located over the Victorian border in New South Wales, but the two towns still form the one community, regardless of the different jurisdictions and requirements that go with that.

For the Our Place objective of ensuring continuity of learning from early learning to schools, and tracking of child data, the patterns of movement to schools from feeder kindergartens will mean a broader approach than what is on site. "The fact that everyone knows each other, from either other engagement or that they are all from the community strengthens the partnership. And it builds trust across the different departments, I think it's really crucial." (Education Area Executive Director – Mallee, DET)

“This focus on the whole community is important as there has been a strong network in place already, and all of us are working for the same community.” (Partnership Manager, Our Place)

“You want the Early Learning Centre to be about the whole community, and that is about the relationship between the schools – the schools they feed into.” (Regional Director North-Western Victoria Region, DET)

CHALLENGES IN A REMOTE SETTING

In a remote area like Robinvale, many community members live a distance from town. This means that the frequency of parents coming together on the College site, during school hours is impacted. This has relevance as the Our Place model places emphasis on parental engagement on site and seeks to create a welcoming environment and create opportunities for volunteering or participation in programs and activities.

Parent engagement may not be the same as in metropolitan schools, as the majority of children come to the College by bus from outlying areas of Robinvale and nearby towns, and many parents are not dropping their children there in person.

There is also a high number of families where both parents are in the workforce, which may limit the number of available volunteers. Connections are often made through participation in playgroups, however the timing of when people return to work will influence the way they can connect. The housing shortage brings many challenges, one of which is workforce attraction.

These types of geographical implications are not new to Robinvale, and will certainly not deter from success, it was often described during interview that community in Robinvale will always do great work, regardless of external factors.

“I like this about a small community, we don’t let barriers and obstacles define us, and accept that’s the norm and give up – we are looking at barriers and overcoming them.” (Principal, Robinvale College)

“We hope that when locals choose early childhood as their profession, that they can stay in the community.” (Early Years Area Director, Sunraysia YMCA)

ESTABLISHMENT TAKES TIME

It was acknowledged by several partners that progression from establishment to strategic action takes time. Although the ROPP members first came together in 2018, the progress to set strategic actions has taken time.

This has also been influenced by delays in the opening of the Early Learning Centre, challenges with recruitment, and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. The introduction of a new initiative such as Our Place to a community that already

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Many challenges are those that are applicable to all of Robinvale. The housing issue is significant which has flow on effects to attracting workforce. We need to focus on building capacity of the people that we do have in our communities, as we have an ageing workforce, we need to carefully plan to build the capacity of the people we have.

Director Community and Cultural Services, SHRCC

has strong partnerships in the early years brought a need to allow time and dialogue to allow the ROPP to transition new partners and a new initiative into well-established ways of working. The strengthened connection with the College has helped to illustrate the benefit of the change:

“The Our Place program developed the bonds of that partnership and brings the school more into the focus on the connection to health and the partners. It shows how important an interconnected model of providing support and programs for the betterment of the kids and their families is.” (CEO, RDHS)

INFRASTRUCTURE DESIGN AND INVESTMENT

It can be challenging to attract funds to a remote area, and as such, work often involves having to persistently negotiate to find workable solutions for suboptimal conditions. When Our Place became involved in Robinvale, the infrastructure plans were already well progressed. This meant that some desired functional requirements were not possible, such as having a single shared entrance to the whole site.

Timing and stakeholder input into the design of community spaces is critical to ensure functional requirements are met, and in the case of Our Place, the provision of spaces for services and programs. Fortunately, for some aspects of the build, the ROPP was able to negotiate functional outcomes and attract funding for the Early Learning Centre playground that had been omitted from the construction budget.

This reflects how challenging it can be to attract funds to a remote area and the need to work collaboratively and persistently to find and negotiate workable solutions to community need. This ‘whatever it takes’ attitude is essential, and was exemplified in Robinvale.



NEXT STEPS IN

continuing the journey



The ROPP partnership focus in late 2020 is to work together on the initial three-year strategic plan. This will be informed by the consultations undertaken in 2020, along with site data, demographic analysis, and consideration of emerging and current social issues.

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has also highlighted areas for focus on response and recovery. The ROPP's implementation of the Our Place approach will deliver improved outcomes for children, families and community, and will further develop the numerous early years initiatives already in place.

BABY COLLEGE

In addition to the supported playgroups that have been funded through the Besen Foundation, the ROPP have agreed to introduce a targeted supported playgroup. Baby College provides specific support to families from the antenatal period and throughout the first year of their child's life. It is a program developed by Our Place to support the needs of vulnerable families where there are known gaps in the service system.

The rationale for such a targeted playgroup model was put forward by the Our Place team to the Robinvale Our Place Partnership in late 2019. The program was endorsed for approval in December 2019 and was due for >



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If we can design our services to meet the most vulnerable the others will have their needs met. If we only design for those who can meet their needs, we miss the vulnerable.

Family Youth and Children's Services
Manager, Swan Hill Rural City Council

› implementation from early 2020. This was based on the evidence of need including projected births, implications of geographic isolation, potential delay in first time mothers' groups occurring until children are several months old, and the willingness of key partners to respond to these issues collaboratively.

Due to COVID-19 pandemic restrictions, there have been some delays and an interim shift to online support. Staff were recruited in mid-2020 and Robinvale Baby College commenced with three mums in August 2020 via face to face, phone and zoom interactions as appropriate. In 2021 it

is expected to see a shift back to face to face interaction. The program is delivered by a local Baby College Facilitator with early years qualifications and experience. Additional supports will be provided from the Our Place Baby College Central Coordinator as needed.

EARLY LEARNING PRACTICE

The ROPP are in the early stages of planning for an initiative that will focus on early learning professionals' practice.

Our Place is trialing the implementation of evidence-based early learning assessment tools designed to monitor children's learning, development, and wellbeing, together with environmental scans of service quality and professional development across several Our Place sites.

Collectively, this project seeks to grow the professionalism and capacity of early learning educators, to support

continuous improvement in early learning service quality and of course to improve outcomes for children.

The Our Place team visited Robinvale in late 2019 to meet with key early learning staff to introduce the project, talk about what application of the tool might look like at their service. Commencement was intended in 2020, however due to the COVID-19 pandemic this will now occur in 2021.

FOCUS ON THE SERVICE SYSTEM

One of the issues Our Place is seeking to address across all sites, is the way the system for health and social services works. As is illustrated by the success of the REYN, there is established service provider collaboration in place in Robinvale, and access to a wide range of services. However, the remote location does bring some challenges, with numerous providers that are based in Mildura, Swan Hill, or other locations which can be over 90km away.

There is also significant complexity in the system, and some services gaps are evident, such as mental health services. Attraction of services, and outreach models will be a focus for the ROPP.

The service provider consultations undertaken in 2020 have provided recent insight into the system, which will inform the ROPP strategic planning.

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There are real issues with visiting services, to Robinvale, because if based in Mildura they don't have a presence - their time gets absorbed in Mildura quite easily, if they don't have appointments they might not even come to Robinvale.

Family Youth and Children's Services
Manager, Swan Hill Rural City Council





JOURNEY REPORT

conclusion

This report describes the Robinvale journey from original seeds in the early 2000s to the end of its first 18 months since the early learning infrastructure was completed. This is a long-term collaboration, just the start of a 10-year partnership.

The future work of the ROPP will focus on establishing a strategic plan based on the needs and wants of the community and will work towards addressing some of the systemic issues. The under-reporting of population and its flow on effect on the service system, and housing and social challenges are significant in the setting in which Our Place Robinvale operates. The ROPP will bring new strategies and forms of collaboration to support children and families, which will build on the strong foundation of decades of passion, commitment, and hard work of the Robinvale community.

There is also significant commitment to ensuring increased involvement from Aboriginal and culturally diverse communities in the work of the partnership. Throughout the consultations for this report, when asked about aspirations for the community, there was consistent expression of passionate views for the future of children and families in Robinvale:

“If we give these kids the opportunity to be proud of the town, and they go and get an education and they come back and give it back to the town, it’s a different sort of fulfilment feeling, coming back and having pride in your town. Hopefully these kids feel the same way about coming back.... being passionate about the work they do and where they do it.” (Community Facilitator, Our Place)

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I think it is brilliant and I wish there was more Our Place sites up here in the Mallee – I just think we need to provide less barriers, easier access for parents and families and children to be accessing the services , and the people they need to see, not having to tell their story several times. Just being connected into things without realising it’s a different organisation, or a different person. They are just connected.

Manager Early Childhood Improvement Branch
North-Western Victoria Region – Mallee, DET



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Our Place's vision is that all children and their families succeed in life.

ourplace
education is the key to the door

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