

Australian Government – Employment White Paper – Submission

November 2022

About Us

[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 government schools. Our Place is an initiative of the Colman Education Foundation, supported in partnership by the Paul Ramsay Foundation, Dusseldorp Forum, Ray & Margaret Wilson Foundation, Sabemo Foundation, RM Ansett Trust and the William Buckland Foundation.

Our vision is that all children and their families succeed in life. We facilitate partnerships that enable schools to be the central place for learning and support services to overcome barriers to educational achievement – including for parents and community.

Our Place was developed from the learnings and outcomes in our original lighthouse site at Doveton College which was founded in 2012. The College is a Victorian Government school, designed in partnership with Colman Education Foundation to holistically meet the needs of children and families. Outcomes from Doveton College show a significant reduction in the number of children identified as developmentally vulnerable (from 55% to 37%) as well as large improvements in parent and student engagement. From 2013–2019, approximately 1,000 adults participated in a range of education courses and social activities, and 878 foundational skills courses were completed – with more than 115 employment outcomes obtained by parents or community members through support services provided at the school (see **Attachment A**).

While these numbers are significant, behind each of them is a story of an individual whose life has taken a different course, and service agencies who have learnt to work in new ways and overcome barriers to support them (see **Attachment B**).

Following on from the success at Doveton College, in 2017 the Colman Education Foundation and Victorian Government signed a landmark agreement to implement the Our Place approach in schools at ten sites across Victoria over a ten-year period. Doveton was joined by schools in Officer, Carlton, Frankston North, Mooroopna, Morwell, Corio, Robinvale, Seymour and Clayton South.

This submission applies our experience and evidence of the Our Place approach to highlight important considerations for employment support in **collaborative and place-based approaches** – and particularly the value of providing client-centric employment services in integrated school settings.

For further information on the contents of this submission, please contact Sean Cory, CEO at sean@ourplace.org.au

Engagement, education and employment of parents, carers and others in the community is critical in supporting outcomes for children

As the Federal Government well understands, entrenched disadvantage is multi-layered, persistent and intergenerational and people living in more disadvantaged communities have poorer outcomes across almost every social indicatorⁱ.

Growing up in communities with low rates of education and employment, high rates of social isolation, anti-social behaviour and substance abuse, has negative impacts on children's wellbeing, social and emotional skills, and their achievement at school. These impacts are even greater when the child's home, community and school are all disadvantagedⁱⁱ. We also know that environments and relationships significantly influence child life outcomes, and that growing up in lower socio-economic communities, and in households without material basics, is associated with higher levels of developmental vulnerability and a "snowballing" of risk factorsⁱⁱⁱ. Engaging with, and investing in parents, carers, and other adults in a child's community can change a child's negative life trajectories given the level of influence these factors have.

For this reason, building the skills and capabilities of adults is central to breaking the cycle of intergenerational disadvantage. The evidence shows that higher levels of parent education and households with at least one parent or carer employed are associated with better outcomes for child development. Mothers' education is the strongest influence and a powerful lever for positive change in children's health, development and academic achievement. Each additional month of education for mothers is associated with improvements in children's academic achievement^{iv}.

Integrated school settings are an ideal environment for supporting parent and community engagement and learning

Our ten years of work at Doveton, and the emerging results from our other nine Our Place sites, has shown that integrated school settings can play a vital role in engaging parents, children, families and communities. However, enabling this requires a multifaceted approach and policy considerations. There are a several key points of influence and opportunities which the Federal Government should consider when looking to expand this way of working:

- **Supporting states to design schools as community hubs** which can leverage the school environment and school community relationships to draw families in, creating welcoming, safe, culturally appropriate spaces for adults; as well as access services, practical supports and learning opportunities^v. Employment services should be supported to co-locate in these hubs, with the expectation that they work in collaborative partnerships with other onsite providers.
- **Increased investment in services which create opportunities for parents and other adults to come together**, to make connections across the community in ways that reflect community interests and needs, and that foster belonging. Opportunities to spend time with others, in safe spaces, mitigates against the social distress of poverty and isolation, improves mental health and wellbeing, develops personal skills and confidence, and builds social capital^{vi}.
- **Enabling and encouraging volunteering as an important part of the pathway to employment**, including parent representative roles or volunteering at school to build parent confidence; give voice and agency to adults; provide personal and employability skills development; and lay foundations for entry into learning and employment pathways^{vii}.
- **Continuing to invest in support for families in the early years of a child's life** including by investing in universal supported playgroups as an important soft entry point which both assists families to learn

how best to support their children as well as building a non-stigmatising point of engagement with services for parents^{viii}.

New ways of working are required to build trust with communities through long term, place-based partnerships

Gaining skills and qualifications for employment that deliver stable, flexible and appropriately paid work can provide a pathway out of poverty. However, 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 report having had a tough time at school and when they do visit their child's school, they can face more judgement, or tokenistic, short-term programs that only reinforce that others do not understand where they are coming from or their needs – as highlighted in Patsy's story in Attachment B.

In this context, being a confident family of engaged learners is a big ask – and new ways of working are urgently needed to build trust with families so they can engage in their children's learning as well as their own needs. Building aspirations, developing confidence, creating opportunities to participate and experience success, making different types and levels of learning available, and providing support to address practical barriers like cost, transport, childcare and ill-health are all required to boost education and employment outcomes.

There is a strong body of evidence which shows that successful delivery of employment to people facing interrelated impacts of disadvantage include:

- Flexibility to respond to the varied and complex needs of clients
- Strong partnerships with community agencies that can provide necessary support services
- Use of community participation activities to increase work related skills and self esteem
- Ongoing support after employment is obtained
- Creating a positive context and using a strengths-based approach^{ix}.

However, while the best practice elements of job services support are well articulated, the implementation of services remains a challenge. Despite improvement in recent iterations of federal employment programs, the issues remain that services need to build rapport, trust and confidence and be tailored to the lived experience of participants. Importantly, these approaches cannot be provided in isolation by employment agencies alone – but instead can be most successful when delivered in collaborative, place-based settings.

Successful employment approaches also require marrying the needs and strengths of individual job seekers, with local labour market opportunities and supportive, engaged employers. Place-based solutions can also achieve higher employer and industry engagement, but require dedicated time to consult with communities, community organisations, businesses and other services^x.

The Our Place approach is a demonstration of how services, schools, government and philanthropy can collaborate to enable change in communities

Through collaborative, place-based partnerships, Our Place empowers families including by building pathways for parents and carers through opportunities to participate in activities that fit their interests and needs, reduce isolation, and promote skill development. Examples include entry-level, pre-accredited learning and volunteering opportunities with the aim of building skills or gaining experience. In addition, Our Place works with job agencies and local training organisations to coordinate the delivery of onsite activities such as certificate and diploma-level courses, and work experience placements.

This holistic approach has led to significant improvements in parent engagement and confidence in the school setting and, in turn, connection to training and employment opportunities. Examples of this work in action at a community and individual level include:

- In [Robinvale](#) (unemployment rate 6.4%*), the Victorian Government has recognised the value of the Our Place partnership not only in supporting school outcomes, but also for local employment pathways – which have unique requirements in this border community. This has enabled Our Place to establish the Robinvale Euston Workforce Network to identify community-led solutions to employment challenges in partnership with industry, local government, jobseekers and state government agencies.
- Adult English classes are in high demand among school parents in [Doveton](#) (unemployment rate 9.5%). Through connections made by Our Place staff, in early 2022 a local Afghani mother whose children have attended Doveton College was employed to run a child-minding service to enable parents to attend English classes. The potential for her to fill the role was possible through an understanding of her need to find employment that met the needs of her family and her skill base.
- In [Morwell](#) (unemployment rate: 6.2%), Our Place facilitates a weekly onsite craft group which is regularly attended by a group of parents and community members. Both Our Place and local TAFE staff attend the sessions to help participants develop their sewing and craft skills further, with many learning new techniques and some participants learning to use a sewing machine for the first time. The group also provides opportunities for adults to connect socially, enabling friendships to develop and reducing social isolation.
- A warm welcoming environment has seen increased engagement with parents in [Mooroopna](#) (unemployment rate: 5.8%). In conversation, a parent mentioned to Our Place staff that they were thinking about next steps as their youngest child had started kinder and that they were interested in studying early childhood education. Our Place gently supported the parent to identify local training organisations and linked them to early learning staff to discuss their experience in the sector. The parent has since enrolled in the Certificate III in Early Childhood Education and Care.
- The Our Place site in Clayton South, [Westall](#) (unemployment rate: 6.9%) will only officially open in January 2023, but onsite staff are already engaging daily with newly arrived local families who are seeking better understanding of and connection to local services. In particular, the team is developing warm referrals for parents who are accessing the onsite library and playgroup by connecting them to Jobs Victoria services on-site as well as peer groups to build social connection.
- [Northern Bay](#) in Corio (unemployment rate: 4.9%) is seeing a significant growth in newly arrived migrant families. Following a discussion with local agencies, the schools' multicultural education assistants approached Our Place staff about a group of mothers who were interested in practicing English. As a result, Our Place instigated a weekly English Conversation group with resources and advice from the onsite Geelong English Learning Centre. This has led to parents taking part in story time with their children and even involvement in filming local government healthy eating videos, demonstrating their own recipes.
- The Our Place [Carlton](#) site is based in the public housing precinct, where 58% of school parents are currently unemployed. Through building relationships at weekly 'Coffee and Chat' sessions with local mothers, Our Place staff identified a desire to learn small business skills and facilitated TAFE-run small business workshops on site. This has in turn led to an interest in developing micro-catering businesses, which are now being supported by on-site cooking classes. Participants are also being supported to sell their produce at community events and markets held at the school precinct.

Attachment A – Impacts at Doveton College



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.

Attachment B – Excerpts from *Success: Stories from Doveton College* (www.ourplace.org.au)

PATSY is a mother of three children, the youngest of whom started in Doveton College Early Learning Centre on the first day it opened. All her children are from a Koori background from their fathers' side. At to Doveton College, Patsy was supported to participate in a range of courses and programs, which led to a full-time role at the school as a Prep Educational Support (ES) staff member



"I thought it would be like some of the other schools that I had been at with some of my older kids. They get you in the door, get you to help a little bit, and then they don't want you no more, see you later. This one actually gave us opportunities to do more than just a volunteer, they gave us pathways to actually get employment and to better yourself.

The first one I did was First Steps which is a parenting course. That led to Creating Capable Leaders which I did the Paint Doveton REaD through, which also led me into helping out volunteering with the Healthy Little Rainbows.... From there I did a hospitality course so I had my food handlers, did a few cooking courses, and then did Cert III and Cert IV in Education Support. I did my first lot of placements here for the Cert III, and then the Cert IV I went to Dandenong Primary.

I've been on school council, I did two lots, I was president for the second lot for one year of that. I have been in the Parent Advisory Group. Last year I got my job. I came in as a temporary thing and then started full-time. I've been here ever since."

DEAN lives ten minutes from the school and first came to Doveton College when he enrolled his daughter when she was a pre-schooler. Since then, Dean became involved many of the adult learning courses



(both informal and formal), the 'Men of Doveton' initiative, and continues to be a consistent volunteer with the Doveton Engagement and Enrichment Program. He was invited to join School Council and went on to seek paid employment.

"I never, ever thought I'd be teaching kids sports, or being a sports assistant. Even doing cooking classes and stuff – it's changed my outlook and helped me in life in a big way. I really, really enjoy everything that this school does...

Only the start was the challenge, me getting adjusted, getting rid of my fears of been able to just get in there and have a go at it. Getting that and you feel you're not right, in the right spot, but when you find there's so many positive people in this school that make you feel welcome – that's a big part, getting the people and teachers and community"

ABAN came to Doveton College in mid-2016 looking for an opportunity to develop his leadership skills and build connections within his local community. Aban missed much of his primary schooling due to living in Sudan during the civil war. He came to Melbourne with just his younger sister in 2004 when he was only 12 years old. After moving to Melbourne he completed Grade 6 and went on to finish secondary school. At



Doveton College he took up a number of roles within the school, including as an education support (ES) worker with Grade 3 students

"After coming to Doveton in June 2016 I got a job here in September, three months after walking in. I really liked the passion that [the Community Engagement Coordinator] had; she was community related. It was exciting the community approach that Doveton had and it really got me wanting to work closely with them... [The Community Engagement Coordinator] was the person who actually got me the job here. She's the one who said: there is a job here, you are really fitted for it, you have the energy for it, kids connect with you very easily. We would like to see that here...

Doveton has provided a platform for me, and that's very important for me. When you have a platform you get to see the opportunities and get closer to them. "

Attachment C – References

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- ^{ix} Perkins, D, Nelms, L 2004, '[Assisting the most disadvantaged job seekers](#)' Daniel Perkins Social Action and Research Unit' Brotherhood of St Laurence, Melbourne
- ^x Mukherjee, D, Sayers, M, Nolan, K 2016 '[Communities taking power: Using Place Based Approaches to Deliver Local Solutions to Poverty and Disadvantage](#)' Victorian Council of Social Service, Melbourne
- ^{xi} Unemployment rates are sourced from the 2021 Census, noting the limitation that this does not include underemployment or those no longer participating in the workforce.