

Parliamentary Inquiry into the State Education System in Victoria

Submission - Colman Education Foundation - October 2023

About Us

[Our Place](#) is a holistic place-based approach 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, delivered in partnership with the Victorian Government.

Our work enables schools to become an integrated hub where children and families can access learning, health, wellbeing and support services to overcome barriers to educational achievement. We have adopted this approach this because evidence shows that education is the key to overcoming disadvantage.

Our Place was developed from the learnings and outcomes at 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. Following the stunning success at Doveton (see **Attachment A**), in 2017 the Colman Education Foundation and Victorian Government agreed to implement the Our Place approach in schools at ten sites across Victoria over a ten-year period in each location. Doveton has now been joined by schools in Officer, Carlton, Frankston North, Mooroopna, Morwell, Corio, Robinvale, Seymour and Clayton South.

This submission aims to draw the Committee's attention to an existing model of best practice that is already being demonstrated within Victoria. We welcome Committee members to visit our sites to see first-hand how the Victorian Government can maximise the value of its considerable investment in education, health and other services to improve education outcomes and life chances for children and families experiencing disadvantage.

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The impact of socio-economic disadvantage

For many families in Victoria, disadvantage and poverty are an inescapable reality. Despite massive expenditure by Government on services to support these familiesⁱ, these conditions can be deepened by institutional barriers and practices which discourage collaboration, long-term commitment and family-centred approaches. The impacts of these conditions are clear:

- In Victoria in 2021, 30.1% of children arrived at school developmentally vulnerable – but this figure is starker in many communities: 72.3% in Mooroopna, 72.8% in Corio and 85.8% at Morwellⁱⁱ. This inequality widens into major inequalities in school outcomes and employment prospectsⁱⁱⁱ.
- Long exposure to family unemployment and poverty is associated with poorer cognitive, emotional and physical development outcomes for children. For example, just 2% of Victoria's 647 postcodes represent 25% of prison admissions^{iv}.
- Access to early learning – a key detriment of education success- remains complex and expensive. In February 2021, almost 140,000 people in Australia who wanted employment cited childcare as the main reason they couldn't look for work^v.

And yet solutions that can potentially address disadvantage are being increasingly recognised:

“The programs that are reducing inequities are partnership based and focused on shared community ownership or engagement; engaging students across their whole self-identity; and providing a holistic approach that aims to deliver on both academic and extra-curricular outcomes”. ^{vii}

“To support families effectively, a multi-level approach is needed, providing direct services to children and support to families, as well as action to improve the conditions under which families are living, and the structural social determinants that shape those conditions.”^{vii}

Education and care in integrated, universal settings

Our Place is demonstrating the long term and day-to-day benefits of providing high quality, wrap around services for children and families in a school setting. This includes maternal and child health, playgroups, allied health, early learning, adult education and other services. This co-location creates a range of benefits, including greater access to services in a familiar environment, greater continuity for children and families, and improved utilisation of existing public investment in buildings and resources^{viii}.

However, co-location is not enough to change outcomes for children and their families^{ix}. A truly integrated approach is required to overcome the entrenched barriers that make access to services difficult, especially for vulnerable families. This is not a case of funding more programs and services for families who are often overwhelmed by navigating the existing siloed service system or heaping more expectations on school staff. Instead, integration efforts need to be resourced to ensure that existing investments are more coordinated, effective and accessible to the people who need them most.

To achieve integration, the Our Place approach enables collaboration between early learning, schools, local government, and other community services and the development of trusting relationships with families. As trust grows, our staff can then connect families with the support they need, which in turn increases uptake of existing services and makes better use of public investment.

We call this way of working **'The Glue'** and it includes:

- Place: creating welcoming, integrated infrastructure within primary schools, where children and families can access holistic services in a non-stigmatising setting.

- People: dedicated staff to foster collaboration between services, build trust with families and to ensure that the community's voice is heard in decision-making
- Purpose: establishment of a local leadership group to develop shared priorities, ensure high-quality services, and provide leadership for collaborative ways of working.
- Knowledge: building and sharing data to inform local decision making and policy makers.

In addition to the benefits for children and families, we also know that integrated settings have benefits for the staff who work within the site. Our Place site partners have reported staff staying in the roles longer due to the impactful local collaboration, that they have greater uptake of their services and a sense of achievement and pride from seeing holistic change in the communities they work with.

Changing outcomes requires long term, multi sectoral investment and commitment from partners at a state and local level. This is not a light touch venture. However, the costs of embedding the 'multiplier' effect of integrated centres are minimal compared to the costs of ongoing expenditure in the existing system. For example, the additional operating costs of the Our Place approach are estimated to be less than 2.5% of the average operating expenditure of the onsite school and early learning centre alone.

The Inquiry should consider how current and future investment in the education system can incentivise and enable a greater number of integrated service environments that replicate the Our Place approach, particularly in communities experiencing disadvantage. This should include both the infrastructure for co-location as well as the funding for staff, cross-portfolio governance and shared data systems which support services to work in collaborative ways, with a focus on shared outcomes for families and children.

Engagement of parents and carers is critical in supporting outcomes for children

Engaging with and investing in parents and carers can change a child's life trajectory. Parents are a child's first educators and the home environment that a child grows up in has direct impact on their educational outcomes as well as their wellbeing, social and emotional skills^x. For this reason, building the capability of adults in a community is key to changing family behaviours and breaking the cycle of intergenerational disadvantage^{xi}. Evidence shows that higher levels of parent education and employment are associated with better outcomes for children. Mothers' education is the strongest influence - each additional month of a mother's education is associated with improvements in their children's academic achievement^{xii}.

However, for many families, the feeling of confidence and self-agency in education 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 and stigmatisation as parents, and/or tokenistic, short-term programs^{xiii}. 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 develop the skills, confidence and capacity to engage in their children's learning as well as their own needs.

In the first instance, there is a need for schools to shift their perception of the role of parents and carers from outsiders to active partners in education and to proactively create spaces and ways of working which support parental engagement. The education system needs to consider how parents, as well as children, can be supported to build confidence and be provided with opportunities to participate and experience success. Creating welcoming environments and community space where parents are encouraged to spend time in the school is a key starting point.

However, supporting families facing complexity is often beyond the remit of already-stretched school staff. Cross-portfolio, proactive approaches are required to ensure parents and carers received accessible support before crises escalate so that they can provide safe home environments. An example of this approach has been the recent investment in the Department of Families, Fairness & Housing's Early Help Family Services Trial which has embedded family services in non-stigmatising universal services, including Our Place school sites. Initial evaluation results of the Trial indicate that this integration has boosted accessibility, making it simpler for a wider range of families to access support. Parents and caregivers have reported increased connection, empowerment, and better knowledge of available resources, resulting in improved family dynamics and support for children.

There is also clear evidence that investing in adult education and engagement in a school setting is an effective use of public funding. Analysis by Deloitte Access Economics in 2022 found that for every dollar spent on adult and community engagement at Doveton College, \$4.2 dollars of value were returned^{xiv}.

Investing in continuity from early learning and into school

As Victoria deepens its investment in early learning, attention is required to ensure that the gains achieved in kinder are not lost when children start school. There is clear evidence that children benefit from high-quality experiences that build on each other over time. However, when children move from one learning environment to another that is inconsistent, their emerging abilities may stagnate or slip backwards, with children from disadvantaged backgrounds most at risk^{xv}.

While most schools undertake time-limited transition programs, these transition frameworks tend to be heavily influenced by a focus on 'school readiness' and not on bridging system differences. This is not to say readiness is not important, but that it is limited in focus^{xvi}: It does not place enough value on the child's pre-existing experiences and learning strategies and does not focus how school environments could adapt to be ready for the child^{xvii}. This shift in mindset can deliver significant benefits, including education outcomes.

To achieve this change, there is a need for system-wide investment to increase the continuity of learning for children and their families as they move through stages of learning. This should include addressing differences across the early learning and school workforces. Despite their shared objectives, early learning and school system staff are typically disconnected from one another. This is fuelled by different qualifications and working conditions for educators across both systems^{xviii} and can lead to a reduction in outcomes for children, as well as inefficient use of government investment.

In the short to medium term, policy responses to improve continuity should include: shared assessment and pedagogical approaches; shared professional development between early learning and school staff; and local governance arrangements which encourage collaboration across sectors. In the long term, the Inquiry should recommend that all adults working with children aged 0-8 train together, settings recognising the same qualifications and ascribing equal professional value and status.

The value of engagement and enrichment activities for children

Organised sport, recreation and creative activities directly benefit children's development and wellbeing and help develop their capabilities to participate in class, in the workforce and in their community^{xix}. These changes were evident in Doveton College where extracurricular participation to grow from 5% in 2015 to 62% in 2019. The development of the extended day with extracurricular activities aligned to the interests of students became key to increasing school attendance.

A wide evidence base shows that engagement and enrichment activities help young people to:

- Attend school more regularly, build positive behaviour and stronger relationships with peers^{xx}.
- Develop non-cognitive skills such as perseverance, conscientiousness, self-control, trust, attentiveness, self-esteem, resilience, and empathy and confidence^{xxi}
- Lower student's anxiety; increase student's self-worth and school connectedness^{xxii} and in turn, increase student engagement and academic performance^{xxiii}.

While children from disadvantaged families have the most to gain from participation in extracurricular activities, they face the greatest barriers to participation and access, including limited low-cost, local options being available for activities as well as family stresses and dynamics. Australian data shows that at least half of the children living in the most disadvantaged communities participate in no after-school activities due to a lack of affordable, local activities where they feel they fit in^{xxiv}.

Our Place recognises that schools are central to better access to engagement and enrichment opportunities as barriers can be lessened when activities are provided in a familiar, education-focussed settings^{xxv}. However, Victorian schools have limited financial ability to support ongoing activities, instead becoming reliant on having to apply for time limited grant funding. While the Government has initiated some additional funding for once off activities, there remains a lack of funding for schools with a high number of children from low-income families to attend varied, structured activities on a regular basis.

Recommendations

In summary, Our Place recommends that the Inquiry's findings should:

- Acknowledge that underlying, systemic disadvantage continues to determine the education outcomes for children in many communities and that **multi-sectoral, long-term investments** and new ways of working are required to address this.
- Recommend an increase in the **fully integrated school environments**, replicating the quality and ambition of the Our Place approach for more communities: where wrap around support for children and families can be delivered in a collaborative and family-centric setting.
- Identify the role of parents as a child's first educators and the importance of **active support for and engagement of parents by the school system**. Ongoing resourcing for programs that enable this, such as the Early Help Trail, should also be recommended.
- Support increased **continuity of learning** between early learning and school including through aligning the training, pedagogy and career paths for educators.
- Recommend an increase in ongoing funding for schools in communities with high levels of disadvantage to provide **regular engagement and enrichment activities** as a mechanism to materially improve school attendance and build essential life skills.

Attachment A – Impacts at Doveton College

High-quality schooling

- Students made substantially above-average gains for reading and numeracy, compared to students from similar backgrounds with the same starting score (MySchool website, 2021).
- Rated in the Top-25 most-improved government schools for years 7–9 (2017 NAPLAN).
- One of only a few schools in Victoria where My School shows that the longer you're at the school, the better you do (MySchool website).
- Students consistently reported positive feelings of connectedness to school and are positive about their experience while at school.

High-quality early learning

- Reduced number of children identified as developmentally vulnerable in one or more domains by nearly one-third, from 55% in 2012 to 36% in 2021 (AEDC 2021).
- Reduced number of children identified as developmentally vulnerable on two or more domains dropped by nearly half, from 24% in 2018 to 13% in 2021 (AEDC 2021).
- The early learning centre obtained an excellent rating twice from the Australian Children's Education & Care Quality Authority (ACECQA) — in 2014 and 2017. At the time, there were only fifteen of 16,000 centres in Australia to have been rated excellent twice.
- 100% of students who attended the early learning centre in 2013 and continued at Doveton College into 2017 were at or above national minimum standards for reading and numeracy in Year 3 (NAPLAN).

Engagement and enrichment

- Participation in before and after-school activities increased eight-fold increase between 2015 and 2019 (engagement and enrichment program data collected by Doveton College).

Adult learning and engagement

- 115 employment outcomes obtained by parents or community members who either accessed employment support and/or attended educational opportunities offered at Doveton College.
- 300 attendees participated in English language courses offered at Doveton College since 2015. These courses provide English language proficiency for community members with a non-English speaking background, building the capability to support their children in their education.
- 300 adult attendees from the Doveton College community have completed life-skills and prevocational courses and a further 200 attendees at Certificate III, Certificate IV or Diploma level courses since 2013.
- More than 300 adult attendees from the Doveton College community have completed life-skills and pre-vocational courses (including some Certificate I courses) and a further 200 attendees at Certificate III, Certificate IV or Diploma level courses since 2013.

Wrap-around health and wellbeing

- Introduced a range of new services available at the school, including maternal child health nurse, speech pathology, occupational therapy, dietician, paediatrician, physiotherapy, counselling and GP clinic referrals and bulk-billing for allied health services and provision of Mental Health Care Plans.
- Introduced NDIS access onsite that allows children to spend far more time in class, compared to if they accessed this support away from the school, which would typically be the case.

Attachment B - References

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