

Mission Australia Response to Issues Paper for the Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools

Mission Australia is a national non-denominational Christian charity that delivers evidence-based, client-centred community services. Our goal is to reduce homelessness and strengthen communities across Australia. In the 2015-16 financial year we supported over 130,000 Australians through 452 programs and services. We work with families and children, young people and people experiencing homelessness and also provide specialist services for mental health, disability and alcohol and drug issues. We stand together with people in need until they can stand for themselves.

Mission Australia supports the Review's focus on effective ways for schools to encourage and facilitate increased parent and carer engagement. We have sought to share examples of successful practice that bring schools, communities, businesses, industry and non-government organisations together to improve outcomes for all students. We also have recommendations to improve the preparedness of school leavers to succeed in employment, further training or higher education and to improve outcomes for disadvantaged and vulnerable students.

Educational disengagement

We know that children and young people from disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to disengage from school and that students who leave school early are at greater risk of a range of negative outcomes including unemployment, low income, social exclusion, risky health behaviours and engaging in crime.¹ Programs that work to support young people to re-engage with education such as the Navigator program in Victoria and learning Unlimited in South Australia are essential for ensuring positive long-term outcomes for vulnerable young people and should be expanded.

Navigator

Navigator is a Victorian Government initiative that provides support for disengaged young people, aged 12-17 years, to re-engage with an education or training pathway. Navigator services seek out disengaged learners and actively work with them and their networks, providing the support required for a successful return to education. Mission Australia is the lead provider of this service in Victoria's Bayside Peninsula.

Navigator – Case Study

Lisa is a 13 year old girl who was referred to Navigator in May by Child Protection, as she had disengaged from education for some time. At the age of 9, Lisa had been in foster care, and it was only at the beginning of this year, she was reunified with her mother.

Prior to entering foster care, Lisa had been residing with her Grandma as her mother had been incarcerated for drug related charges. Lisa and her Grandma had an unstable relationship which eventually resulted in Lisa being placed into foster care. During this time, Lisa was often placed in temporary foster care accommodation which would often impact on her school attendance.

¹ CCYP WA (2017) *Children and young people at risk of disengaging from school*, accessed at: <https://www.ccyp.wa.gov.au/media/1422/report-education-children-at-risk-of-disengaging-from-school-literature-review.pdf>

In 2017, Lisa was expelled from her Secondary College as a result of bullying and violent behaviour. She was visibly upset as this increased her sense of failure. She was feeling sad, angry and confused. Through Navigator support, Lisa was linked in with a mental health care plan and expressed she felt worthless and would often find herself crying without “really knowing why”. Through Navigator support, she was able to engage in a session with Headspace to work on some of the underlying issues including past trauma, depression and anger management. Lisa was able to identify that she needed support with regulating her emotions and to develop strategies to be able to appropriately respond to people, rather than being violent.

It has become evident that she did not have any positive adult role model in her life, and lacked positive attachment to her mother. An extensive amount of time was committed to supporting and encouraging Lisa’s mother to enhance her parental capacity and capabilities empowering her to redevelop a positive relationship with Lisa. Through the support of Navigator, a holistic approach has enabled Lisa to successfully return to school.

Learning Unlimited (LU) - Flexible Learning Options (FLO)

Learning Unlimited provides individualised and tailored support to young Primary and High School students who are at risk of leaving or have left school. The program also works to strengthen the capacity of schools, families and communities to support young people to access education, accredited training or employment.

Independent Learning Centres (ILC) – St Mary’s, Seaford, Loxton and Victor Harbor

Working in partnership with Schools and the Department for Education and Child Development (DECD/ICAN) in the southern metropolitan Adelaide area, Victor Harbor and Riverland region, Mission Australia offers a central location for flexible learning options (FLO) case management with young people who are at risk of disengaging, or are disengaged from, education with the aim to assist them to stay connected with learning. FLO assists students aged 13-19, young parents and young people with disabilities up to 25 years who have disengaged with mainstream schooling to participate in an individualised and flexible learning program.

The purpose of the Independent Learning Centre is to support school engagement and completion, through a ‘whole of community approach’. The FLO program identifies students’ individual needs, focusing on literacy and numeracy, supporting them through to completion of their certificate of education and will be utilised by students who have difficulty in engaging and participating in mainstream schooling. The Centres also offer other programs including a Young Parents Program, Life Skills and a Job Club.

Flexible Learning Centres (FLC) – Aldinga beach

In partnership with Willunga High School (WHS) students receive case management support to enable access to a flexible learning curriculum available through WHS. With input from key community stakeholders, students have access to facilities including a kitchen, classroom training and confidential office and self-directed learning spaces. This brings a holistic approach to enable students to reach their full potential and ensuring increased post-school pathways.

Reconnect

Reconnect supports young people aged 12–18 years who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. The aim is to improve family relationships so the young person may be able to return to the family.

home. If this is not possible, the young person will be supported to obtain alternative housing. In addition the young person will be supported to remain engaged at school and to address their other needs, such as mental health, addiction issues and life skills. Mission Australia runs seven Reconnect services and demonstrated strong improvements in wellbeing for clients in a recent evaluation.² Assisting Students and Parents (ASAP) is a new initiative born out of the Reconnect Gold Coast service. ASAP is a free service for students aged 12 to 18 years who are experiencing family relationship difficulties and are at risk of becoming disengaged from school. It works closely with students, their parents/carers and school wellbeing teams to improve relationships and maintain participation in education. ASAP operates on school grounds and also provides outreach for those most at risk, outside schools through Reconnect. Currently, ASAP sits in four state high schools across the Gold Coast region.

Case Study - Reconnect

Michael* was referred to Reconnect by his school Guidance Officer, who noticed he was struggling to make positive friendships with other students. Michael's parents had separated some time ago and that was having an impact. The program introduced Michael to new strategies to help him communicate with his parents, teachers and fellow students. He also took part in individual and group activities outside of school, such as walks, bike riding and ten-pin bowling, to help build his confidence in social settings. His parents were also supported to build better relationships with Michael and with the school.

Michael's relationships with his parents have improved and he continues to live with both parents week on week off. Importantly, Michael's self-confidence improved dramatically. He established positive friendships and approached his youth worker in person to inform that he was happy and felt that he no longer required support. Support from the youth workers was reduced from weekly to fortnightly meetings, then ended when it was clear Michael was no longer in need of ongoing support.

Strengthening Communities

Children living in low socio-economic communities are more likely to be developmentally vulnerable than their advantaged peers when starting school, experience a range of social, emotional and behavioural problems, and be exposed to child maltreatment and abuse.^{3 4} By the time they reach adolescence, young people from low socio-economic areas have lower rates of educational attainment and school completion, lower rates of participation in tertiary education, and are more likely to be unemployed as adults.^{5 6}

² <https://www.missionaustralia.com.au/publications/research/homelessness/687-reconnect-evaluation-report/file>

³ Edwards, B., & Baxter, J. (2013) The tyrannies of distance and disadvantage: Factors related to children's development in regional and disadvantaged areas of Australia, Research Report No.25, Australian Institute of Family Studies, Melbourne.

⁴ Australian Early Development Census (2017) Findings from the Australian Early Development Census, AEDC, Canberra. Available at: <https://www.aedc.gov.au/early-childhood/findings-from-the-aedc>. Accessed on 13 October 2017.

⁵ Leventhal, T., & Brooks-Gunn, J. (2000) The neighborhoods they live in: The effects of neighborhood residence upon child and adolescent outcomes. *Psychological Bulletin*, 126, pp. 309–337.

⁶ Hérault, N., & Kalb, G. (2008) Intergenerational correlation of labour market outcomes, Melbourne Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research, Melbourne.

Over the last few decades, place-based approaches have emerged in Australia and internationally as a response to the concentrations of social disadvantage and complex issues that have persisted in many low socio-economic communities, often across multiple generations. Place-based approaches can be defined as collaboration between individuals, community organisations and governments which are designed to address agreed social issues within a specified geographic location.

The Community of Schools and Youth Services (COSYS)

The Community of Schools and Youth Services (COSYS) is an innovative and tested place-based model for reducing youth homelessness and addressing school disengagement. It is based on establishing and driving productive collaboration between local stakeholders and involves universal screening of all students from Years 7 through 12 within a Local Government Area.

The purpose of the COSYS model is to reduce homelessness in the long term by intervening early in the lives of young people at-risk and addressing school disengagement as a major risk factor. The model is premised on increasing the effectiveness of existing supports and services in a local area by driving collaboration and alignment of strategies and activities.

The COSYS model is based on the successful pilot, the Geelong Project (VIC). The Geelong Project proactively identified and intervened with 95 young people and 43 family members. Following this intervention:

- 100% of the young people have remained engaged in school, increased engagement or returned to school
- 100% of the young people supported have retained or obtained safe sustainable accommodation

Empower Youth (Southern Melbourne Empower Youth Partnership)

The SMEYP will create a 'Community of Support' – an environment where young people and youth workers come together via a pro-social drop-in space to engage with peers and positive role models; make connections with services and resources; and develop aspirational plans for community participation. The SMEYP model provides a platform for truly integrated service responses to vulnerable and at risk young people within the identified priority areas of Dandenong and Casey. The model will utilise the specialist programs of multiple local youth services to support young people to achieve strong outcomes in all of the Empower Youth service elements of Well-Being, Community Involvement, Career Pathways and Education & Training. This 'Community of Support' will enable disengaged young people to grow and develop in constructive ways and create pro-social pathways for young people to invest in a competent identity as a valuable social contributor.

Early Intervention

Communities with poor access to services, low community cohesion and high levels of crime and poverty can place children at risk, reducing their chance for the best start in life. Intervention studies suggest that a key component in achieving better outcomes for children is to work across multiple contexts to enhance all of the environments which influence development. Therefore parenting advice and education as well as links to an array of formal supports and other local services is important in addition to focusing on children's development. Early intervention and strengthening

the communities in which young people live and learn can also address disadvantage in early childhood development which has flow on effects to later academic outcomes.

Circles of Care – Yarrabah and Inala (QLD)

Circles of Care aims to give children in disadvantaged communities the best start in life and provide families with the support they need to lead them to more positive futures. In doing so, they assist families to better function, assist in the positive development of primary school aged children and help parents/carers to become engaged with their children's education. Circles of Care incorporate three distinctive elements to the program operations:

1. Tier 1: Targeted support aimed to establish support networks for children who have been identified as experiencing significant difficulties at school due to social, emotional or behavioural issues. Each child's network or Circle includes a Mission Australia worker, the child's parents, classroom teacher and other specialists as needed (e.g. speech therapist, counsellor, school guidance officer) who meet once a school term to ensure that a coordinated approach is taken to meet the needs of the identified child.
2. Tier 2: Universal supported programs aim to build partnerships and relationships between schools, families and community. The programs also build links between schools and support services in the community. This is achieved by bringing other community agencies to the school, both to conduct programs or workshops for parents and children, and to network with school staff. The Circles of Care program uses universal soft entry service approaches such as school Coffee Clubs and free community events to engage harder-to-reach families.
3. Tier 3: Intensive targeted short-term support. This is a new element of the program and was designed to capture the high number of families that were not eligible for the Tier 1 service. The workers main role is to link the children and/or parents/carers to more appropriate specialised services and maintain the connections until the new service referred is able to work with the family.

The Circles of Care model is organised around the following core elements:

1. Family participation: Working in partnership with the target child's family is regarded as the core aspect towards achieving positive outcomes for the child.
2. Participation of non-family members: Understanding that the responsibility for children's positive development is shared by the community.
3. Cross-agency collaboration: Understanding that working in partnerships with different community agencies will improve outcomes for target families.
4. Environmental and holistic approach to child development: Understanding that an effective way to support children's development is to strengthen linkages between the multiple contexts of their lives (e.g. home, school, community).
5. Enduring relationships: Understanding that by strengthening the relationships between schools and families as well as relationships within families, outcomes for children at school will improve both socially and academically.

Case Study – Circles of Care

The Circles of Care program first engaged with Family A and the only information provided was that there was 4 school aged children with low school attendance (0-30%). After an initial engagement the complexity and needs of the family became apparent.

- The Mother had lost her brother to suicide and hadn't received counselling.
- The 15 year old has withdrawn from the community and had serious dental health issues.
- The 13 year old boy rarely left the house, and was bullied at school.
- Daughters 10 & 11 often stayed home from school to avoid conflict and the 11 year old had been suspended for fighting and had a history extensive trauma.
- The father had mental health issues.
- The family were couch surfing and relying on extended family (18 family members living in a 3 bedroom home, 1 bathroom home).

The Circle of Care program developed and coordinated an intensive support plan which included:

- Grief & loss counselling for the entire family.
- Development of individual return to school plans for each child as well as implementation of a range of strategies and reward systems for good school attendance.
- Health checks for all children: hearing, vision and dental.
- Linking the children into various activities to build their self-confidence.
- Increasing parents' capacity through a range of programs and supports.
- Working alongside the mental health team to support the father with his mental health issues.

After 6 months of intervention all children have returned to school and there have been no unexplained absences or suspensions for all four children. One child has 100% school attendance.

The oldest child is enrolled in boarding school where he intends to finish year 12. All members of the family are confident and engaging in a number of community activities.

Second Step Shepparton

Second Step Shepparton, is an evidence based early intervention program proven to increase children's educational engagement and success, improve peer relationships, and decrease problem behaviours through promoting social, emotional competence and self-regulation. The program builds on cognitive behavioural intervention models integrated with social learning theory, empathy research, and social information-processing research. Second Step is delivered to children in Years 6 and 7 who are identified by their schools as being vulnerable to not making a successful transition from primary to secondary school and be at increased risk of school disengagement and early school leaving.

Participation in extra-curricular activities

It is important that young people from all socio-economic backgrounds are provided with the opportunity to participate in regular activities that are aligned with their interests, skills and preferred ways of engaging with their local community. Research has shown that young people who attended schools in low socio-economic areas and participated in extra-curricular activities were

more likely to experience positive feelings of self-worth, academic self-concept and social-concept than their peers from similar schools who were not involved in any social activities.⁷ Other studies have highlighted the positive links between extra-curricular activities and improved educational outcomes; enhanced mental health and wellbeing; and reduced anti-social behaviour.⁸ Policies and programs must be put in place to overcome barriers to participation for young people from low SES communities, including financial barriers.

Spin 180 Youth Sailing Program

Spin 180 is an 8 week program delivered in partnership with the Darwin Sailing Club for young people aged 12-21 years who are experiencing homelessness or are at risk of homelessness, drug and alcohol misuse, disengaged from education and/or engaged in antisocial behaviour. The program provides young people with the opportunity to participate in nationally accredited beginners 1 and 2 sailing course.

The program equips young people in the areas of critical thinking, problem solving and conflict resolution; builds resilience and self-esteem; builds and strengthens leadership skills, communication skills and teamwork capabilities; and engages young people in a positive and practical environment to learn new life skills to use in furthering their education or employment.

⁷ Blomfield C. and Barber B. (2011) Developmental experiences during extracurricular activities and Australian adolescents' self-concept: Particularly important for youth from disadvantaged schools. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 40(5) pp. 582-594.

⁸ Bungay H., & Vella-Burrows, T. (2013) The effects of participating in creative activities on the health and wellbeing of children and young people: A rapid review of the literature. *Perspectives in Public Health*, 33(1), pp. 44-52.