

Education and Early Childhood Development



*'Promoting the healthy development of children is both an ethical imperative and a critical economic and social investment. A decent and wise society protects and nurtures all its children [and young people], particularly those [who experience] disadvantage, so that they grow up to be productive adults and because it's the right thing to do.'*⁷²

High quality, accessible and affordable education and early childhood development services and supports are not only essential for individual's economic and social participation but also for the liveability of a community.

Early childhood education and care services, from the prenatal period to the first years of school, are now well-recognised as critical to supporting children's healthy development and for their development as well functioning adults.⁷³

The provision of quality, accessible and integrated education and early childhood education and care in communities promotes economic growth and breaks intergenerational cycles of disadvantage, as well as building community capacity.

VCOSS supports the view of Government that every child is important.⁷⁴ It is crucial that a range of supports and opportunities are provided to ensure all children and young people reach their optimum development. The Statewide Outcomes Framework does this by placing the child in the centre to ensure a 'child who is safe, healthy, and continuing to develop, learn and achieve wellbeing'.⁷⁵

To function effectively, the services that work with children, young people and their families need to work more closely together to ensure that vulnerable children don't fall through the cracks. There is a need for strengthened early intervention approaches and strategies to enable vulnerable children and young people to achieve the best possible health and education outcomes.

Integration within the early childhood education and care sector itself, as well as with the broader education system and the community is essential if we are committed to building a sustainable service system that supports all Victorian children and young people achieve their full potential.

⁷² D Phillips and J Schonkoff, From neurons to neighbourhoods: The science of early childhood development, National Academy of Sciences, Washington DC, 2000.

⁷³ Department of Premier and Cabinet, *Victoria's plan to improve outcomes in early childhood: National Reform Agenda*, State of Victoria, 2007; Office for Children, *Protecting children: The next steps*, State of Victoria, Department of Human Services, 2005.

⁷⁴ Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, *Blueprint for Education and Early Childhood Development*, Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, September 2008.

⁷⁵ Department of Human Services, *The state of Victoria's children report 2006*, October 2006, p.13.

An Integrated System of Service Delivery

*'Partnerships between different forms of early childhood provision, families and other services for young children (e.g., schools, health, special education) promote coherence for children and parents.'*⁷⁶

VCOSS supports the commitment of the Blueprint for Education and Early Childhood Development to build one of the 'world's finest school systems, integrated with the best performing early childhood system'.⁷⁷ Investment is required to develop an integrated system that works across the continuum of education and care that supports children and young people to achieve their full potential in the communities that they live.

Strong linkages across the range of universal and specialist services are required to support and promote the wellbeing, learning, health and development of children and young people. International evidence highlights that the good outcomes for children and families are achieved when communities are the focus area for service delivery.⁷⁸

The Centre for Community Child Health research highlights that when local communities, including schools, are the driver for improved outcomes, there is a great chance for service integration and coordination and the development of flexible services that meet the needs of the community.⁷⁹ Teachers and other professionals, however, cannot be expected to initiate, develop and sustain partnerships and service integration in addition to their core role, and nor do many of them have the relationship building, facilitation, mediation and brokering skills required.

One of the focus areas for the Blueprint for Education and Early Childhood Development is the development of community hubs, through integrated service delivery – whether that is through partnerships with community agencies or investment capital investment in multi-service facilities. To achieve an integrated system of service delivery, it is necessary to build platforms of relationships by creating spaces for meaningful collaboration, networks and partnering across and within both the community sector and government, including schools.⁸⁰

What is needed is a social outcomes broker to facilitate the shift in service integration. A social outcomes broker – a community development styled worker – would work at the local level to facilitate and build linkages and partnerships between parents, schools, early childhood services and other the services provided by community organisations (such as family support, housing assistance, mental health services, domestic violence services etc).

A role such as this has the potential to challenge power bases and break down historical

76 OECD, *Starting Strong II: Early Childhood Education and Care*, Paris, p.53.

77 DEECD, p.10.

78 Centre for Community Child Health, *Linking schools and early years services*, June 2006, p.7

79 ibid

80 J Barraket, *Community sector sustainability: Research evidence and public policy implications*, Paper prepared for the Sector Sustainability Task Group, VCOSS, August 2006

distinctions across the service system. The social outcomes broker could be based either in schools, early childhood services, or a within a local community sector organisation – all participants, however, have a role to play, the social outcomes broker cannot be controlled by a single entity. It is vital that social outcomes brokers are networked with each other, perhaps working together in teams, to provide support and resource sharing.

It is also essential that partnerships and networks between schools, early childhood services and community agencies are well resourced and do not duplicate existing networks. VCOSS supports the adoption of a model that is similar to that used in the Primary Care Partnerships, where funding is included for networking and linking.

Support for all Children and Young People to Achieve their Full Potential

Outcomes for Children and Young People with Additional Needs

'early intervention and support can help families remain intact and assist children with special needs to thrive'⁸¹

Timely access to services is critical for the wellbeing of children and young people with additional needs to ensure that they reach their full potential.

VCOSS has welcomed the additional resources for Early Childhood Intervention Services announced in the 2008-09 Budget and we look forward to the development of recommendations and subsequent investment as a result of the current review of Early Childhood Intervention Services.

There has, however, been historical under-resourcing of services for children with a disability and there is a need for systemic reform to ensure more streamlined and inclusive supports for children and young people with additional needs and their families.

Families of children with additional needs have to negotiate complex service systems, often on their own, where they are forced to repeat their stories multiple times to receive resources that now all come from the one department, the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development.

The move towards an integrated service system needs to ensure that the needs of children and young people with additional needs are adequately resourced and supported so that families have choice about the services that they use, whether they be in a mainstream, integrated or specialist service.

VCOSS has welcomed the announcement in the Blueprint of the development of a

⁸¹ Department of Premier and Cabinet, *Victoria's Plan to Improve Outcomes in Early Childhood*, Victorian Government, March 2007, p.32

comprehensive whole-of-government strategy for children and young people aged 0-18 with a disability or developmental delay. This strategy needs to be accompanied by adequate resources to ensure a lifetime planning approach, coupled with a network of services and transition supports, for children and young people with additional needs and their families.

Outcomes for Indigenous Children and Young People

Indigenous children not only continue to have poorer health and wellbeing than non-Indigenous children, educationally they are also substantially behind their non-Indigenous counterparts, with poor early primary literacy levels and many Indigenous students do not meet the expected levels for reading and mathematics as they progress through school.⁸²

Sixteen percent of Indigenous students leave school between Years 9 and 10, 22 per cent between Years 10 and 11, and 41 per cent between Years 11 and 12, compared with the respective rates for non-Indigenous students, which are at three per cent, five per cent and 18%.⁸³

VCOSS has welcomed the Government's *Wannik* strategy and the substantial investment of \$30.8 million to improve the outcomes of Indigenous students through *Wannik*.

VCOSS recommends the Government also support Indigenous parents, particularly during the early years. In the early years, a range of approaches and initiatives are required to better support the learning, wellbeing, health and development outcomes of Indigenous children and young people.

VCOSS has welcomed the investment in Indigenous children in the early years through the introduction of access to early childhood education and care to Indigenous three year-olds whose parents have a health care card.

In addition, the Koori Maternity Services have led to more Indigenous women accessing antenatal care earlier in pregnancy with increased confidence and active participation in pregnancy care, childbirth and early parenting.

Two valuable steps that would build on existing successful initiatives would be:

- building on the VAEAI in-home support program, which provides support to mothers with young babies in their homes; and
- extending the availability of Koori Maternity Services.

Outcomes for Refugee Children and Young People

VCOSS has welcomed the announcement of at least ten hours of free kindergarten for children from refugee and asylum seeker families.

82 Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, *Wannik: Learning Together – Journey to Our Future*, 2008, p.9.

83 ...p.10.

So often, due to visa constraints, refugees and asylum seekers miss out on accessing services and supports that the majority of Victorian families take for granted. Access to free and high quality early childhood education and care programs will not only benefit refugee and asylum seeker children, it will also benefit their families, enabling them to build community connections and supports.

Research undertaken by the Centre for Multicultural Youth highlights that young refugee and asylum seeker backgrounds are at a greater risk of disengaging from education than their peers.⁸⁴ VCOSS has welcomed the investment in the 2008-09 Budget to strengthen support for refugee students and we believe that the emphasis on engaging families and communities in learning is a valuable step.

VCOSS is anticipating the release of the Multicultural Education Policy, which is currently under development. It is vital that this policy deal with broader issues of cultural diversity, transitions and post-compulsory pathways, not just English as a Second Language programs.

Outcomes for Children and Young People in Out-of-Home Care

Recent research undertaken by the Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare with children in out-of-home care highlights that many young people who have been in care leave formal schooling at a relatively young age – with 47% of young people surveyed leaving school before the age of 16.⁸⁵ It is vital that the education of children and young people in out-of-home care is supported to ensure that they have every opportunity to achieve their full potential.

Early Childhood

*'Governments must recognise that effective investments in the early years are a cornerstone of human development and central to the successfulness of societies'*⁸⁶

The early years are the foundation blocks for lifelong learning, development, health and wellbeing. VCOSS has welcomed the significant emphasis that Government has placed on investing in early childhood, in particular the funding allocated in the 2008-09 State Budget.

VCOSS has welcomed the increased focus on the need for an integrated early childhood

84 Centre for Multicultural Youth, *Educational Support Issues for Refugee and Newly Arrived Young People*, Multicultural Youth Issues Paper 14, March 2003.

85 Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare, *Children in out-of-home care in Victoria: Numbers in care and educational outcomes achieved*, Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare, May 2008.

86 L Irwin, A Siddiqi & C Hertzman, *Early childhood development: a powerful equalizer*, Final report for the World Health Organisation's Commission on the Social Determinants of Health, Human Early Learning Partnership, June 2007, p.15.

service system both through the development of the Blueprint for Education and Early Childhood Development but also through the Children's Capital program, which included the funding of Children's Centres.

Further steps are required to ensure true integration across services provided at Children's Centres, as co-location in itself does not achieve integration. Governance support is vital to ensure the sustainability of an integrated service system. Children's Centres though are not the only model of integrated delivery and VCOSS urges Government to invest in the development of evidence-based models of integration.

There is also the need for additional resourcing to ensure that all existing early childhood services, whether they are long day care centres, kindergartens, cluster managers, maternal child health services, playgroups or early childhood intervention services, can develop and maintain their involvement in an integrated and collaborative service system.

'Addressing disadvantage in the early years can end generations of disengagement for individual families and whole communities, and provide children with the opportunity to break the cycle of disadvantage'⁸⁷

The OECD report, *Starting Strong II*, noted that too many Australian children aged three and four are being left behind at an age critical for brain development.⁸⁸ It is crucial that vulnerable children not miss out on accessing early childhood education and care.

While VCOSS has welcomed initiatives to encourage early childhood education and care attendance of 3 year-old children who are refugees, Indigenous or known to child protection, VCOSS analysis reveals that nearly twenty thousand Victorian three year-olds are not attending early childhood programs. Continued investment in three year-old early childhood programs is vital.

VCOSS has welcomed the kindergarten fee subsidy for 4 year-old children whose parents have a health care card, however, many low income and disadvantaged families are most likely to miss out because they can't afford the gap fee that some kindergartens charge. It is important that the kindergarten subsidy reflects the true cost of delivery.

Best Start partnerships have provided another avenue of support to meet the needs of, in particular, disadvantaged families. The evaluation of Best Start reinforced the value of Best Start and recommended its extension to other disadvantaged communities. Best Start currently operates in 30 locations and VCOSS recommends a roll-out across all Victorian municipalities, starting in communities with existing neighbourhood and community renewal sites.

It is critical that support for families to create the best possible home environment is provided in an integrated way, with seamless provision of supports along the prevention – early

⁸⁷ Department of Premier and Cabinet, *Victoria's Plan to Improve Outcomes in Early Childhood*, Victorian Government, March 2007, p.11.

⁸⁸ Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, *Starting strong II: Early childhood education and care*, OECD Publishing, Paris, 2006.

intervention – secondary – tertiary service continuum.

Maternal and Child Health plays an important role along this service continuum. In particular, the enhanced Maternal Child Health has provided improved outcomes, however, there is the need for increased investment in flexible funding for Maternal Child Health.

‘One of the key features of high quality early learning and care programs is that there are planned goals for children’s learning and development’⁸⁹

VCOSS has welcomed the development of development of *Early Years Learning and Development Framework* that describes common goals for all children aged 0-8 years. We also support the development of revised Children’s Services Regulations. It is important, however, that adequate resources are put in place to support services to comply with the new Regulations and implement the Framework.

Rural and regional children and families also require supports, however for many families, due to their location, there is a lack of services. Little Green Frog was developed by the East Gippsland Communities for Children project to provide child care for children and to enable parental participation in a range of programs and community events.

A purpose built mobile vehicle was created and appropriately fitted and resourced to provide children’s services, toy library, information and resources. The evaluation of the program recommended that Little Green Frog could be further developed to include a more integrated ‘virtual’ children’s/family hub that could travel to both remote communities and neighbourhoods in larger towns to offer flexible programs to families with limited access to early childhood services.

It is important that Government invest in the development of flexible and innovative early childhood programs for children and families in rural and regional areas.

Middle Years

The middle years encompass the period up until a child reaches adolescence and is a significant time for children’s development where children develop social skills, build their capacity to relate to the outside world and have a desire to ‘fit in’, which impacts on self-esteem.⁹⁰

VCOSS is concerned, however, that there is limited emphasis on the middle years in current government policy and program development. For example, the early years agenda encompasses 0-8, while the recently released Vulnerable Youth Framework goes from 10-25 – it appears that nine year-olds are seemingly trapped in a policy vacuum. The lack of

89 Centre for Community Child Health, *Towards an Early Years Learning Framework*, Policy Brief No. 12, 2008, p.1.

90 Raising Children Network, Child Development, 2006, [http://raisingchildren.net.au/articles/child_development_\(6-9\)_cyh.html/context/509](http://raisingchildren.net.au/articles/child_development_(6-9)_cyh.html/context/509)

emphasis on this age is alarming, particularly given the important transition from primary school to secondary. VCOSS has welcomed the commitment in the Blueprint to explore transition supports for this age group.

Outside school hours care services are key services to children in the middle years. Outside school hours care is about learning and development in an unstructured environment and VCOSS believes that outside school hours care is an untapped resource within schools and the community.

The OECD Starting Strong 11 report highlights that important role that outside school hours care services play in the provision of seamless and integrated service delivery across schools and how this promotes coherence in children's lives.⁹¹ VCOSS recommends the seamless integration of outside school hours care professions to ensure continuity of care for children in the middle years.

Education

For many children and young people, the financial barriers of education continue to reduce their participation and exacerbate their educational disadvantage.

VCOSS remains concerned at the ongoing impact of public school fees on the participation in education by students from low socio-economic backgrounds. Recent research undertaken by the Brotherhood of St Laurence revealed that children from families experiencing socio-economic disadvantage are missing out on education basics such as camps, participation in sport, school lunches and home computers.⁹² It is vital that the Education Maintenance Allowance increases due to increasing costs of living.

VCOSS members continue to report that students are excluded from core education activities and school resources because the school has not received payment of fees. VCOSS anticipates that the recently completed Department of Education and Early Childhood Development audit of fees will lead to the development of strategies to improve education affordability and fee charging policies.

The reliance by schools on fees indicates there are fundamental problems in current school resourcing levels, which have not been addressed through the School Resource Package or the recently released Blueprint for Education and Early Childhood Development.

The lack of any significant increase in the overall resourcing of public education leaves schools with little option but to seek additional resources from their school community. Schools then become reliant on the economic capacity of their community to contribute to school funding, directly undermining the education outcomes of those students who live in areas of socio-economic disadvantage.

91 OECD, *Starting Strong II: Early Childhood Education and Care*, Paris, p.53.

92 M Horn & S Bond, *Counting the Cost: Parental Experiences of Education Expenses*, Brotherhood of St Laurence, May 2008.

Many schools also devote significant time to seeking additional funding to enable them to continue delivering innovative programs so as to better support and promote the learning, wellbeing, health and development of children and young people. This is time that could be more effectively directed towards achieving the objectives of the school or service, including being better able to provide the additional supports to those children and young people who are vulnerable and/or who experience disadvantage.

In addition, the recent Victorian Auditor-General's report, *Improving our Schools: Monitoring and Support* highlighted, most schools that are performing below expected levels are faced with highly challenging circumstances, including a higher percentage of students from low socio-economic backgrounds and high numbers of children with special learning needs or challenging behaviours.⁹³

The Auditor-General's report also highlights particular challenges at the regional office level. These include a lack and uneven distribution of resourcing, further compounding the concentration of schools performing below expected levels in a number of regions. VCOSS recommends these disparities are addressed through the Government's targeting of poor performing schools.

All Government schools should be resourced to a level that enables them to provide a well-rounded learning program across the eight key learning areas for all students, regardless of the level of socio-economic disadvantage in an area.

Flexible learning environments to ensure young people remain engaged in education

VCOSS has welcomed the commitment of the Blueprint to strengthen the responsibility of schools for monitoring the pathways of young people until they complete Year 12 or its equivalent.⁹⁴ Participation and retention in secondary school education increases the level of participation in higher education, training or work. A person's level of engagement in study, training or work decreases in-line with their level of education attainment.⁹⁵

Attention needs to be given to enabling the provision of more flexible learning environments in the middle and later years of education for the 10–20 per cent of Victorian young people who are disengaged, or at risk of disengaging from the education system. Alternative education programs can provide these young people with literacy and numeracy development; employability skills; life skills; personal development; and, pathways into further education and employment.⁹⁶

93 Auditor-General, *Improving Our Schools: Monitoring and Support*

94 Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, *Blueprint for Education and Early Childhood Development*, Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, September 2008.

95 A Walstab & S Lamb, *On Track Longitudinal 2007 Results*, Office of Policy, Planning & Evaluation – Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, Melbourne, 2007.

96 T Luton, An alternative to mainstream learning, in *The Education Times*, July 17 2008, p.11.

Participation in VCAL and VET can also be linked to increased participation in higher education. For students who are at-risk of becoming disengaged from the education system school, VCAL and VET play a crucial role in retaining them within the education system through the provision of a broader curriculum and more flexible and adaptive learning environment. It is vital, however, that both VET in schools and Community VCAL be adequately funded.

While there are VCE, VET and VCAL opportunities at mainstream schools, there also needs to be increased attention in the later education years to provide more flexible learning environments for young people who are disengaged or at-risk of disengaging from the education system.

Opportunities are generally limited for marginalised and vulnerable young people to re-engage in education given the issues that they face and their need for high-level intensive educational and social support.

Vulnerable young people, such as those with mental health issues, who have become a young parent, who experience family violence or who are in state care, require intensive social and educational supports to enable them to continue their learning. For example, young people in residential care often experience upheaval in the final years of schools, with a high percentage changing schools and an increased rate of absenteeism⁹⁷, impacting on their ability to engage with higher education.⁹⁸

Both Berry Street Victoria and MacKillop Family Services operate independent schools to support young people in out-of-home care who have had difficulty engaging in mainstream education. It is important that government continues to work with both families and local communities to develop and support small community-based educational settings for children and young people at-risk of disengaging or already disengaged from education.

Recommendations

1. VCOSS recommends that the Victorian Government resource and support an integrated system of service delivery by:
 - funding the development of a network of 'social outcomes brokers' to work at the local level to build and facilitate linkages and partnerships between schools, early childhood services, parents and community organisations; and
 - providing funding to schools, early childhood services and community agencies to participate in partnerships and integration.

⁹⁷ Victorian Government Department of Human Services, *The state of Victoria's children report 2006*, Department of Human Services, Melbourne, 2006.

⁹⁸ MacKillop Family Services, Unpublished submission to the Parliamentary inquiry into geographical differences in the rate in which Victorian students participate in higher education, Melbourne, 2008.

2. VCOSS recommends that the Government better supports the learning and development needs of children with additional developmental needs by:
 - streamlining the process of accessing early childhood services and education supports, including the Program for Students with a Disability (PSD) to reduce duplication and improve transitions;
 - broadening the eligibility criteria for the Kindergarten Inclusion Support Services (KISS) to enable more children to access KISS and participate in kindergarten;
 - expanding KISS to 3 year-old kindergarten;
 - resourcing the development and implementation of a comprehensive whole-of-government strategy for children and young people with a disability or developmental delay;
 - resourcing the development and implementation of the Early Childhood Intervention Service Reform Strategy;
 - developing transition supports for children with additional needs that include release time for staff to facilitate successful transitions; and
 - investing in and reforming the Program for Students with a Disability to develop a more inclusive approach that provides for portability of funding.

3. VCOSS recommends that Government better support the educational outcomes of young refugee students by:
 - developing and adequately resourcing the Multicultural Education Policy; and
 - collecting system data annually to track refugee students' progress and to monitor how effectively schools are meeting the particular learning needs of refugee students.

4. VCOSS recommends that the Government better support the educational outcomes of children and young people in out-of-home care by providing funding for their education whether they are in Government or non-Government schools to provide appropriate supports, such as case management.

5. VCOSS recommends that the Government strengthen early childhood services and increase access to early childhood services by:
 - continuing investment in the Children's Capital program;
 - providing funding for governance supports to services participating in integrated children's services, such as Children's Centres or Cluster Management;
 - investing in research to explore models of integrated service delivery;
 - resourcing and investing in existing early childhood services to participate in integrated service delivery and partnerships;
 - funding access to ten hours of early childhood education and care for all three year-old children who have access to a health care card;

- Increasing the four year-old kindergarten subsidy to health care card holders to reflect the true cost of delivery, eliminating gap fees;
 - expanding Best Start across all municipalities with existing neighbourhood and community renewal projects;
 - increasing investment in flexible funding for Maternal Child Health;
 - investing in resources and professional development to support the implementation of the Early Years Learning Framework; and
 - funding compliance with the new Children's Services Regulations for not-for-profit services – this could include investing in training, capital, or improved qualifications.
6. VCOSS recommends that the Government strengthen services and supports for children in the middle years by:
- developing transition supports between primary and secondary school; and
 - developing and investing the creation of a new professional role for outside school hours care professionals within schools.
7. VCOSS recommends that the Government support the learning outcomes of students from disadvantaged socio-economic communities by:
- increasing the Education Maintenance Allowance to reflect rising costs;
 - increasing resources to schools to reflect the true cost of delivering the Victorian Essential Learning Standards;
 - implementing all the Auditor-General's Recommendations in the report *Improving our Schools: Monitoring and Support*; and
 - increasing the conveyance allowance and indexing it to the cost of petrol.
8. VCOSS recommends that the Government resource more flexible learning environments to better support the education outcomes of vulnerable young people by:
- evaluating existing flexible learning models and rolling-out successful models across Victoria;
 - providing recurrent funding to current alternative education models;
 - providing adequate funding models for Community VCAL and VET in schools that are appropriate to each community and/or student group; and
 - developing an alternative education strategy.