

Action to tackle educational disadvantage

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Victoria's next government must take action to tackle educational disadvantage.

We all have an interest in a world class education system that provides the opportunities Victorians need to get ahead in life. Education provides a foundation for healthy, happy and productive lives. It is linked to higher levels of employment, better earnings, improved health, and lower rates of involvement in crime. It can also play a powerful role in addressing the issues that vulnerable young people face. When left unresolved, these issues lead to costly consequences for individuals and our wider community including long-term unemployment, homelessness, imprisonment and social isolation.

Given the importance of education to our wellbeing and prosperity, it is alarming that so many Victorians experience educational disadvantage. There is clear evidence of this problem with:

- children from low socioeconomic backgrounds performing more poorly at every stage of schooling (Productivity Commission, 2013)
- more than 10,000 school aged students disengaging from education each year (Victorian Auditor-General, 2012) and the rate of 18-24 year olds fully engaged in education, work or training declining from 78.6 per cent to 73.5 per cent between 2008 and 2012
- nearly 375,000 Victorians aged 15-64 disengaged from learning and outside of the workforce (Davies, Lamb, & Doecke, 2011).

For Jesuit Social Services, we see the reality of these statistics in the people and communities we work with. For over 37 years we have accompanied people exiting prison, refugees, people with mental illness and alcohol and drug problems, young people leaving care, and Aboriginal people living in remote communities.

Too many of the people Jesuit Social Services works with haven't had the opportunity to get a decent education, with one in four not even completing year 8. This has flow on effects with only 13 per cent of people we work with completing year 12 and educational disadvantage being only one of a range of overlapping issues including mental illness (45 per cent), substance abuse (60 per cent), exposure to family violence (32 per cent), and homelessness (24 per cent).

Beyond these individual experiences of unrealised potential, missed opportunities, and diminished hopes and aspirations are wider costs that we all must pay for. The lifetime costs of crisis and criminal justice services for a sample of people who had experienced educational disadvantage ranged from around \$900,000 to \$4.5 million (Baldry, Dowse, McCausland, & Clarence, 2012).

Ultimately, costly educational disadvantage persists in Victoria due to misguided priorities and poor choices. This is most clear in the fact that spending on ineffective prisons has increased by over 50 per cent since the last state election, from \$492.6 million in 2009-10 to \$746.1 million in 2013-14. On top of this, the 2014-15 State Budget contained an extraordinary one year increase of \$196 million for prisons, while at the same time cuts were made to spending on early childhood development services (6.2 percent), student services (12.2 per cent), and higher education (8.8 per cent).

The people we work with who are experiencing educational disadvantage have hopes and aspirations to participate productively in our society. Their hopes can be realised, but this will require a renewed commitment from the Victorian Government to education and lifelong learning. A starting point must be to maximise learning opportunities for all Victorians through:

- investment in the earliest years in life to ensure that no children start schools 'behind the eight ball'
- support for the poorest families to meet the costs of schooling through the reinstatement of the Education Maintenance Allowance
- a high quality mainstream schooling system with the leadership, culture, curriculum, and resources required for every child to succeed, and
- funding our TAFE system to meet its community service obligations.

In addition to this, renewed efforts are required across all of parts of Victoria's education system to ensure that the most vulnerable and high needs learners also have opportunities to participate and succeed. Jesuit Social Services has identified five key initiatives that will realise this aim.

Initiative 1

Improve learning outcomes for vulnerable children through a system-wide strategy and additional resources for partnerships.

There are a significant number of vulnerable children in Victorian schools, with one in five children starting school being vulnerable on domains of the Australian Early Development Index (AEDI). Other issues that impact on these children can include exposure to family violence; experiences of trauma, abuse and neglect; health needs and disability; and parents with mental illness or drug and alcohol issues. Vulnerability has a significant impact on children's development and their involvement in learning (Freiberg, Homel, & Branch, 2010). Even though this vulnerability is often identified, responses to it remain ad hoc and uncoordinated. It is clear that participation and success at school is not possible without addressing these underlying issues and the persistent failure to do this in Victoria amounts to systematic exclusion of vulnerable children from learning.

Over the past decade, efforts have been made to improve the response of schools and the community to vulnerable children including School Focused Youth Services, the draft Framework for Re-engagement in Learning (KPMG, 2009), pilot Extended School Hubs, and the Youth Partnerships Initiative. These reforms have shown that good practice and new ways of working at a local level are possible. More recently, Victoria's Vulnerable Children Strategy has committed to improving educational outcomes for children in out-of-home care, while the new Children and Youth Area Partnerships offer a promising regional platform for identifying children at risk and systemic barriers for responding to vulnerable children. However, all initiatives have been limited and have not resulted in an accompanying increase in resources. As a result, system-wide improvements in learning outcomes for vulnerable children and young people have not been realised.

A state-wide strategy is needed to drive improvements in learning outcomes for vulnerable children. This strategy should build on the experience and utilise tools developed through previous initiatives, including

by utilising Children and Youth Area Partnerships to coordinate action in local communities. It must ensure that mainstream learning addresses vulnerabilities, including through teacher professional development, school community partnerships, a diverse curriculum, and by ensuring children have the tools for success such as uniforms, books, and computers. The strategy must also include a clear performance and accountability framework, with public reporting to ensure developmental vulnerability is systematically responded to and that children and young people do not disengage from education prematurely.

The state-wide strategy for improving learning outcomes will only be effective if additional resources are available so that local schools and communities can address unmet learning needs among vulnerable children. Resources must be directed to strengthening local partnerships including through the co-location of services at schools, formal partnerships between schools and community groups, and initiatives to involve parents and community members in children's learning activities. Existing examples of these partnership approaches in Victoria and elsewhere have led to better outcomes for children, their parents, schools and wider communities (Simons, 2011).

Initiative 2

Keep vulnerable children and young people engaged in learning by funding area-based workers to follow up with those who disengage and match them to learning opportunities.

More than 10,000 school aged students in Victoria disengage from education each year (Victorian Auditor-General, 2012). This can lead to longer-term disengagement with 26.5 per cent of 18 - 24 year olds not in education, training or work in 2012, up from 21.4 per cent in 2008.

There have been several initiatives focused on re-engaging vulnerable young Victorians in mainstream education. This includes the draft Framework for Re-engagement (KPMG, 2009) (never implemented), the development of requirements for schools to make plans for suspended or expelled students, the

Youth Partnerships initiative, and the Commonwealth funded Youth Connections program. Those that were implemented led to positive results, with Youth Connections supporting over 4,000 disengaged Victorians, and moving 94.2 per cent into education or work, and Youth Partnerships trialling successful interventions and reforms in several regions. Unfortunately there is now a significant gap in our ability to support vulnerable young people who disengage from learning, with Youth Partnerships coming to an end and Youth Connections de-funded in the 2014 federal budget.

Investment is needed to fund area based workers across Victoria tasked with identifying, engaging, and supporting children and young people to get back into mainstream education, or where this isn't possible, in some alternative form of learning. Previous initiatives and research have demonstrated that key factors for re-engaging young people in learning and work include a respectful and empowering approach (Youth Affairs Council Victoria, 2012), the use of partnerships, assertive outreach, and creating supportive environments (KPMG, 2009).

Resources should be provided to local communities to recruit area-based workers, again through Children and Youth Area Partnerships. Extra resources must be provided to support work with the most vulnerable children and young people, including Aboriginal children and those involved in the child protection and youth justice systems. Schools must play a key role in this approach by notifying when young people are at risk of or have disengaged. However, a collective community approach is required to re-engage young people in education and learning.

This means that in addition to recruiting area-based workers, joined-up planning for re-engagement strategies should take place between schools, Children and Youth Area Partnerships, School Focused Youth Services and Local Learning and Employment Networks. An example of this joined-up approach is the ReNew program, a partnership brokered by Gateway LLEN that supports long-term disengaged students in returning to education. Partners in ReNew include Jesuit Community College, the Salvation Army, Upper Yarra Community House, Youth Justice (DHS) and the City of Whitehorse.

Initiative 3

Provide additional resources so that alternative learning environments can support vulnerable young people on pathways back into mainstream learning and work.

Significant numbers of young Victorians disengage from mainstream education and are not provided with appropriate learning options to reengage. The research project *I Just Want to Go to School*, a partnership between Jesuit Social Services, Good Shepherd Youth and Family Service, and MacKillop Family Services, captured the mixed experiences of young people in mainstream and alternative learning settings. It documented how many fell through the cracks of mainstream learning and then had a mix of positive and negative experiences in alternative educational environments. At the same time alternative learning environments are under pressure with providers like the Pavillion School, Jesuit Community College and Community VCAL facing issues including high levels of demand, the need for more resources, and lack of flexibility across the education system.

These failures can lead to entrenched social exclusion. This includes involvement in the criminal justice system – we know that only 6 per cent of men and 14 per cent of women in prison in Victoria had completed school to year 12. This corresponds with findings from New South Wales where nearly half of men and one-third of women with complex needs in the criminal justice system had been expelled from school, the majority had only completed primary school or left without any qualification (Baldry, Dowse, & Clarence, 2011).

As a starting point, Victoria needs a mainstream education that is inclusive and has the capacity to meet the needs of all students. The recommendations outlined earlier in this paper aim to achieve this. However, the reality is that even in a high quality mainstream education system, a small number of students may not have their needs met. Here, a consistent approach to planning and resourcing alternative learning environments for these young people is required. These alternative environments should provide pathways back into mainstream learning, or where this is not feasible into further learning or work.

Currently, Victorian students can access a variety of re-engagement programs if they are enrolled in school and the school organises a re-engagement program. These programs are funded by schools out of the Student Resource Package. However, the amount allocated to re-engagement programs is often lower than the base level of funding for mainstream schooling. On top of this, there is inconsistency in practice and systemic barriers that prevent students accessing alternative learning.

Schools and community must work together to plan and provide alternative learning environments that meet the needs of students, and link them back into mainstream education, further learning, or work. Here, we can learn from existing models that link alternative learning with mainstream education including the NetSchool in Bendigo or Community VCAL. However, greater consistency is required so that these types of programs are available when needed. There are also problems accessing alternative learning programs for long-term disengaged students who are not attending school. While these students may be enrolled, the fact they do not regularly attend means schools often do not receive the Student Resource package for them. These systemic barriers need to be addressed.

In order to achieve this, there is a clear need for additional resources, with alternative learning environments often provided less resources while supporting young people with higher needs. Studies suggest that resources in the order of one and a half times the normal funding for learners (Davies, Lamb, & Doecke, 2011) are required for alternative learning approaches that meet the needs of learners can be implemented.

Initiative 4

Develop flexible learning packages for engaging high needs learners, building their foundational skills, and supporting them on pathways to participation.

Roughly 375,000 Victorians aged 15-24 are disengaged from learning and outside of the workforce. Many experience overlapping needs relating to mental health; disability; caring responsibilities; alcohol and drug use; homelessness; language and communication difficulties; poor past experiences in learning, low confidence and self-esteem; and experiences of institutionalisation.

The impact of barriers to learning can be seen in the people with whom Jesuit Social Services works - only 13 per cent having completed year 12 or equivalent and half of those aged 17 or older are not participating in education, training or work.

Despite an expansion in the number of learners in vocational education and training in Victoria over the past five years, our adult learning system still fails to adequately engage and support high needs learners. Over the past five years enrolments in pre-accredited learning programs delivered by Learn Local providers have dropped by 7 per cent and per hour funding for learners has not increased. While some of this has been offset by an increase in numbers enrolled in accredited programs, serious concerns about the quality of many of these programs and their misuse have resulted in cuts to funding and a decline in enrolments over the past year.

A new approach is needed to deliver learning success for people with high needs. Research and our experience at Jesuit Community College (Regina Hill Effective Consulting, 2013) have shown that keys to success include:

- intensive engagement: often through outreach in the community; efforts to tailor courses to the needs of learners; and ongoing personal, phone and SMS contact pre and post-class.
- support for the wider needs of learners: utilisation of a case management approach to each 'high need' student; assistance with referrals to third party support services (mental health, physical health, housing, Centrelink, Immigration); and utilising volunteers for each class.
- flexible and nurturing learning environments with smaller class sizes of between six and eight learners and one on one tutoring and mentoring.
- pathways into further learning and work through support to access volunteering, work experience, and other training opportunities.

Flexible learning packages should be developed so that this approach can be delivered to more people with high learning needs across the training system. This reform should build on existing work in developing needs based funding models in the ACFE and VET sectors, but provide more comprehensive resource packages of support than the narrow system of fees and loadings that currently exists. Different ways of identifying needs of learners and allocating packages, including person centred, area-based or funding supplements for providers, should be explored and the most effective models expanded across the Victorian learning and training system.

Initiative 5

Pilot new industry led pathways through learning and into work for people with high needs.

Significant numbers of people with high needs are being 'churned' through training and employment programs that do not provide meaningful pathways to participation. Over the past five years the availability of training in Victoria has been expanded through the Victorian Training Guarantee and federally funded employment programs have become universally available. However at the same time there has been a decline in resources available for supporting individual learners as well as issues with the quality of training and services that are provided (Hetherington & Rust, 2013). As a result, pathways to participation are not being provided for high needs learners. This is evident in the fact that the proportion of VET graduates reporting improved employment status after training fell by almost five points between 2008 and 2012 (COAG Reform Council, 2013).

Investment is needed to support the development of new models that provide integrated learning and employment pathways for people with high needs. These models should refine existing good practice and build an evidence base for what works. They should link in with existing initiatives and networks focused on education, training and employment including Local Learning and Employment Networks and State Government Business Development Managers.

At the heart of these models should be a line of sight to meaningful work opportunities. This requires the realisation in practice of the well recognised need to develop new ways of working with employers and industry. Jesuit Social Services and several organisations are exploring new approaches in this area through the recently launched Industry Employment Initiative. We are building on our experience delivering the Workplace Inclusion Program which has placed 18 people into work with 16 employers. Another part of the Workplace Inclusion Program is the African Australian Inclusion Program, a partnership with the National Australia Bank providing work experience and professional development for African Australians. To date, **118 participants have completed the program with 86 per cent** securing full time employment after completing the program, either with NAB or externally.

Investment is needed in developing different approaches across industries for integrating and coordinating learning and employment opportunities for different groups of people with high needs. This should include enhancing our understanding of the resources that are required to make these approaches most effective.

Jesuit Social Services: who we are and what we do

Jesuit Social Services works to build a just society by advocating for social change and promoting the health and wellbeing of disadvantaged people, families, and communities.

For over 37 years we have accompanied people who are disengaged from education, training and work. Today we work to tackle these problems through Jesuit Community College, our Ignite Cafe Social Enterprises and the Workplace Inclusion Program. Our approach values every person. We seek to engage with people in a respectful way, that acknowledges their experiences and skills and gives them the opportunity to harness their full potential.

Our vision, values and way of working are underpinned by principles of Catholic Social Teaching, the tradition of Ignatius of Loyola founder of the Jesuits, and human rights principles. This includes a belief in the inherent dignity of all people, a desire to seek the common good, and a commitment to stand in solidarity with those in need.

These values, combined with our experience and research inform our direct work and our efforts to influence hearts and minds for social change.