Inclusion through education

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**Introduction**

Education and early childhood development have a very important role to play in social inclusion. Studies show that education is one of the strongest guarantees of individual prosperity, social mobility and economic security.

It has been widely established that people with low skills experience higher rates of unemployment, (refer to Figure 1). This is a problem that will only increase with time as employers seek a more highly skilled workforce. Figure 1 also suggests that the disadvantage people with lower levels of education experience in the labour market will be exacerbated if unemployment levels rise.

![Figure 1. National Unemployment Rate by highest level of education.](image)

*(a) People aged 25-64 years.
(b) Includes people who are still at school.*


The connections are simple: higher levels of education lead to rising levels of workforce participation, which in turn lead to rising productivity and rising prosperity.

This said, research shows that certain groups of students typically record lower than average levels of educational achievement. In particular, Koorie students, students from poorer families, and to a lesser extent, students from non-English speaking backgrounds are more likely to have lower levels of achievement, (Collins et al, 2000).

That is why addressing disadvantage in order to ensure equitable education in Victoria is a number one priority for the Victorian Government. To put it simply, equity in education means greater success for Victoria, socially and economically.
Why do young people leave education early?
Addressing the problem of disengagement and early leaving presents a major test for schools and school systems. The key challenge to encouraging more young people to remain at school is finding ways to address the needs of the critical groups of young people who remain at risk of early leaving.

The On-Track 2007 data showed a strong correlation between socioeconomic status (SES) and achievement. Almost two-thirds of all low achievers came from low to very low SES backgrounds. Post-Year 12 students from high SES backgrounds were more likely to continue to build on their Year 12 achievement through further education and training, while those from lower SES backgrounds were more likely than their peers to enter the workforce.

Financial pressures played a greater role in decisions to not continue with study for young people from low SES backgrounds (see Figure 2).

![Reasons for not studying: highest achievement group (GAT quartile), by quartiles of SES.](source)


Addressing Disadvantage
The Victorian Government has made addressing disadvantage central to its approach to education and early childhood development, as articulated in the recently released Blueprint for Education and Early Childhood Development.
The *Blueprint* builds on the creation of the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. Compelling international evidence tells us that unless children receive a good grounding in their early years, their educational progress will be held back. This means our approach to equity must start in the early years.

The Government’s decision to integrate children and education services across Victoria into the new Department of Education and Early Childhood Development ensures there is a focused responsibility for the learning and development of children and young people from birth to adulthood in the new department. The creation of the new department recognises that effort and investment in the period from birth through to eight years of age establishes the foundation for children’s future social, physical, emotional and cognitive attainment, and also increases opportunities for parents to participate in work or study.

Improving outcomes for disadvantaged young Victorians is one of the four guiding priorities of the *Blueprint*. These reflect the commitments of all Australian governments through the COAG process, which makes explicit reference to disadvantage and social inclusion.

The Blueprint articulates specific actions to achieve our goals, organised under three major strategies:

- System improvement
- Partnerships with parents and communities, and
- Workforce reform.

**Strategy Two: Partnerships with parents and communities**

Although it is reflected throughout the *Blueprint*, the theme of social inclusion is picked up most explicitly under strategy 2 – partnerships with parents and communities. The actions under this strategy are summarised in Figure 3.

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**Partnerships with parents and communities**

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**Figure 3 – Partnership strategies**
Specific actions of relevance include:

- Programs to assist vulnerable families to develop their homes as positive learning environments.
- Guidance to schools and early childhood services on engaging with parents.
- Improved partnerships with business, including areas such as mentoring and work placement that can provide access to some of the opportunities that more advantaged young people take for granted.
- Developing a strategy to increase participation and outcomes in areas of socio-economic disadvantage.
- Continuing implementation of *Wannik* the government’s education strategy for Koorie students, and developing a similar strategy for early childhood.
- Developing a strategy to improve educational outcomes for students who are homeless.

There are also promising developments at the national level, as the Commonwealth Government pursues its social inclusion agenda alongside its plans for an ‘education revolution’. As part of the new Commonwealth-State financial arrangements currently being developed, governments are negotiating on a National Partnership on Low Socioeconomic Status School Communities.

The National Partnership on Low Socioeconomic Status School Communities is an approach to overcoming disadvantage in schools in areas with low socioeconomic status (SES). Under this proposal, governments would target postcodes with disadvantaged schools, rather than funding individual schools. Each area would develop a plan, which would outline the type of intervention required and the performance benchmarks for schools in the area. Significant additional funding would be available to participating schools.

**Youth Transitions and Social Inclusion**

Victoria has set a policy target that states that by 2010, 90% of young Victorians will have completed year 12 or equivalent. This has been reflected by the Commonwealth setting a similar target (differently measured) for a 90% completion rate by 2020.

The Victorian target was set at a challenging level. At the time it was set, the completion rate in Victoria stood at 81.8%, already placing Victoria ahead of all other states in terms of Year 12 or equivalent completion, (refer to figure 4). The 90% target reflects the growing importance of completing an initial qualification for all young people, regardless of their postcode or background.

The path towards non-completion can begin early in a young person’s experiences of school, even in early childhood. Continued attention to improving school performance at all levels, and improving the availability of quality early childhood services as outlined in the *Blueprint*, will be the major strategy leading to long-term improvements.
At the same time, where young people have disengaged or are at risk of disengagement, every effort must be made to engage them with a productive combination of education, training and/or employment.

Figure 4. Year 12 or equivalent completion rates, 20-24 year olds.
Source: ABS Survey of Education and Work

4.8% increase under the current reform agenda

Figure 5. Reasons which would have motivated early leavers to stay on at school.
Source: On-Track 2007
One way of targeting these interventions is to examine the views of young people on what would have assisted them to stay engaged with education. Figure 5 summarises the answers given by early leavers to this question in the On Track survey.

As well as a lack of success at school, the major reasons for not continuing with formal education relate to the school environment and access to a greater range of programs, especially those linked to employment.

To address some of these reasons for early leaving, there are an extensive range of education and training options available to students in the senior secondary years of schooling. This is a direct acknowledgement that students learn in different ways, benefit from a variety of delivery styles and are more likely to stay engaged in school when given these pathway choices.

There are now more pathways and options available to students than there ever have been, including:

- School Based Apprenticeships and Traineeships - distinct pathways within Vocational Education and Training (VET) in Schools that combines part time employment, school and training.
- Flexible VCE - All government secondary schools in Victoria deliver the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE). The VCE provides a great deal of flexibility to include units that will meet the needs of students at a particular school.
- Pre-apprenticeship programs - provide a pathway to full time apprenticeships in selected industries available to senior secondary school students. They offer reduction in nominal duration of the apprenticeship training contract.
- The Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL) - a hands-on option for students in Years 11 and 12. The VCAL provides practical work-related experience, as well as literacy and numeracy skills and the opportunity to build personal skills that are important for life and work.

Managed Individual Pathways
The Managed Individual Pathways (MIP’s) initiative ensures that all students 15 years and over in government schools are provided with individual pathway plans, with associated support as a means to continued education, training or full-time employment. This aims to provide each student with a more meaningful and engaging educational program, and also addresses some of the concerns about the school environment, by ensuring each student has at least one adult in the school who understands and assists with that student’s individual aspirations.

Additional support is provided to students at risk of disengaging or not making a successful transition to further education, training or secure employment. Students
The initiative also includes the Student Mapping Tool that provides authorised school staff with a systemic process to assist in identifying students at risk of leaving school early and to track, monitor and evaluate the efficacy of interventions targeted at these students.

**Effective Strategies to Assist School Completion**
The Department recently commissioned research by the Centre for Post Compulsory Education and Life Long Learning at the University of Melbourne into successful strategies to assist at risk students to complete school.

The Department, in conjunction with Melbourne University, is also developing a guide to provide practical advice to schools on implementing the identified effective strategies to assist school completion.

**On Track**
The *On Track* initiative collects and publishes destination data of school leavers, strengthens the support available for young people as they transition from school to further education, training or work. *On Track* Destinations of School Leavers provides a comprehensive analysis of the destinations of Victorian students shortly after they leave school from years 10, 11 & 12. This analysis includes destinations by gender, year level, socio-economic status and regional areas; reasons for not continuing in education and training; and details on the occupations and hours worked of employed school leavers.

In providing effective pathways and transitions, schools should be working closely and collaboratively with other organisations to improve transitions for all young people in their local area.

The Local Learning and Employment Networks (LLENs) are key players in this. They are able to create and broker sustainable relationships between local education providers, industry and the community to improve outcomes for young people, particularly those at risk of leaving school early.

**Youth Transition Support Initiative**
The Youth Transition Support Initiative (YTSI) assists disengaged young people aged 15 to 19 to obtain a sustainable education, training or employment option.

Twenty-four transition support workers are employed by funded organisations across twelve Local Learning and Employment Network areas within Victoria. These areas
were selected based on rates of Year 12 or equivalent completion and numbers of young people who are not in education, training or full time employment.

Transition support workers provide disengaged young people with tailored assistance to access support services and to re-engage in sustainable education, training or employment options.

**Conclusion**

Levels of education are a major predictor of a range of later social and economic outcomes. Schools and, as children get older, other education and training providers, have great potential in promoting social inclusion. This means not only providing excellent educational outcomes, but also acting as hubs where children and young people come into contact with the wider community, a broader range of supports, and begin to develop their pathways into the world of work.

Governments at the State and Commonwealth level are now paying more explicit attention to these issues, and more actively seeking to develop the education system as a driver of social inclusion. Although the nature of a more inclusive education system is not entirely clear, and the challenges are many, there is great potential to address one of our most persistent social challenges.

**References**


On-Track reports are available from www.education.vic.edu.au.