



Brotherhood
of St Laurence

Working for an Australia free of poverty

Growing up in an inclusive Victoria

Submission to the Victorian Government
on the Blueprint for Early Childhood Development
and School Reform

Brotherhood of St Laurence

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Summary

The Brotherhood of St Laurence welcomes the Government's commitment to better integration of policies across early childhood and education as signalled by the newly established Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. This integration opens up opportunities for targeted and sustained assistance to significantly improve the participation and development of children from disadvantaged backgrounds, especially Indigenous children.

The Brotherhood also welcomes the continuing priority on strengthening educational achievement over the next five years through the proposed reform agenda. We strongly support the Government's commitment to building the learning, skills and productivity of Victoria's children and young adults. We therefore welcome the broad thrust of measures and investment announced in the 2008–09 State Budget.

We support the three areas in the Blueprint on which the next phase of reform will focus: system development and reform, workforce reform and parent and community partnerships.

We can see some acknowledgement of the important role that a child's environment exerts on his or her development but there is not enough recognition of the impact of multiple disadvantage on children and the subsequent need for resources. We also have strong concerns regarding the lack of acknowledgment of the vital influence that social circumstances and more specifically social disadvantage exert on educational participation, commitment to learning and achievement. The social context of children and young people may include, for example, parents' poor physical or mental health or learning disabilities, material deprivation, Indigenous or refugee background, homelessness, domestic violence and substance abuse.

Furthermore, there are other barriers that children and young people face in addition to those addressed in the discussion papers. These include learning difficulties and behavioural problems which impact strongly on educational participation and outcomes for individual students, as well as on the ability of teachers and schools to ameliorate the effects of disadvantage.

Despite the commitment in principle to free education, research shows the exclusionary impact of education costs on children and young people from low-income families. Research undertaken by the Brotherhood for the Department of Human Services (DHS) identified costs as one of the key barriers to preschool attendance for disadvantaged children (Hydon et al. 2005). The current level of financial support through the Education Maintenance Allowance is clearly inadequate to cover the basic costs associated with school attendance and full participation in all learning activities.

Findings from a survey on education costs conducted by the Brotherhood in December 2007 show that direct and indirect education costs (such as for excursions, sporting events, transport and lunch) contribute to absenteeism (Bond & Horn forthcoming). Children in such circumstances are often struggling to maintain meaningful participation in schooling. Exclusion from school activities can cause feelings of depression and anger and exacerbate disengagement from learning. This clearly has longer term consequences for educational outcomes, and in turn, on social and economic participation in adult life.

An estimated 15% of children and young people in Victoria are at risk of not fully participating in education due to one or more of these factors. Retention rates have been improving in Victoria, yet they are consistently and significantly lower in government schools (80% from years 7 to 12 in 2007) than in non-government schools (91%). This difference is even more marked for young males (72% in government schools). **This data shows that one in four young men in government schools does not go through to year 12.**

Absenteeism is another indicator of young people's poor engagement with learning which often correlates to low socioeconomic status. Weak attachment to schooling relates also to poor literacy, poor English proficiency for children of CALD or Indigenous backgrounds, learning or developmental delays and experiences of bullying, teasing or violence at school. Absenteeism peaks in years 8 to 10: the *average* number of days of absence per full time equivalent student in 2006 in Victoria amounted to 18 days (year 8), 20 days (year 9) and 18 days (year 10). Schools in low socioeconomic status areas have higher levels of unexplained absenteeism.

In addition, the significant level of suspensions and expulsions from schools also shows the need for targeted initiatives and alternative approaches to maintain the engagement of students poorly attached to learning.

Despite the substantial improvements made to education and learning in Victoria over the past decade, these figures are evidence of families struggling to maximise their children's participation in and completion of formal education. **To break the cycle of intergenerational disadvantage requires a commitment to provide consistent and continuing parental support programs from the early years through to completion of Year 12 or its equivalent.**

While the Blueprint states 'reduced effects of disadvantage on children and young people's learning and development' as one of its objectives for this phase of reform, this objective does not translate into specific policies or reforms. **The proposed suite of measures and aggregate targets focus on academic excellence and performance at the upper end of student achievement. A more comprehensive set of targets is required to drive reform and practice to address those students at risk of early school leaving.**

Based on our analysis we urge the new Department for Education and Early Childhood Development to seize the opportunity to set a more challenging reform agenda, that builds on the commitments already made, to further lift school performance and the quality of facilities to ensure that all children, no matter what their social or financial backgrounds, have equitable access to learning.

We strongly encourage that the new reform measures:

- are assessed through a social inclusion lens to ensure equitable access to learning and education for all children
- provide additional assistance for low-income families and preschool services to remove barriers to preschool attendance.
- ensure that financial barriers that impact on participation in any school learning activities are eliminated
- place the highest priority on targeted strategies to ensure the active participation and retention of the 10–15% of students poorly engaged or disengaged from formal education;
- engage with and support parents in disadvantaged circumstances to actively support their children's learning and transition through school and into work, training or further education
- further develop and resource alternative flexible learning approaches better suited to children and students disengaging from formal schooling
- review the eligibility criteria for integration aides and expand access to school-based support for teachers to enhance the educational inclusion of students with significant ongoing learning difficulties
- implement individual learning and support plans for students at risk of early school leaving or non-completion of key learning levels through the school years

- strengthen the capacities of teachers to respond to students with learning difficulties or at risk of social exclusion
- are supported by outcome measures beyond VCE success that appropriately acknowledge the efforts of schools to provide meaningful, quality learning opportunities for all their students
- increase resourcing of learning support (including community-based learning support) for all school students in need of catch-up tutoring

Background on the Brotherhood of St Laurence

The Brotherhood of St Laurence is an independent non-government organisation with strong community links that has been working to reduce poverty in Australia since the 1930s. Based in Melbourne, but with a national profile, the BSL continues to fight for an Australia free of poverty. We undertake research, service development and delivery, and advocacy with the objective of addressing unmet needs and translating the understandings gained into new policies, new programs and practices for implementation by government and others. Our work is based on an understanding that the remedy to poverty lies in integrating social and economic policy as a basis to strengthening the capacities of individuals and communities.

Our research and services focuses on those people at greatest risk at key life transition stages considered critical to their future well being. Two of these are:

- the early years – both at home and into school
- the years through school to work and further education

The Brotherhood has a long history of research and service delivery (see table below) relevant to early childhood, to young people, and to the youth transition. Our research record encompasses longitudinal research on children from low-income families (Taylor & Nelms 2008, 2006), location-based research on child poverty (Stanley, Eadie & Baker 2005) and family services (Davies & Oke 2008; Oke, Stanley & Theobald 2007), antenatal and universal early childhood services (Hydon et al. 2005), studies on young people's transition to work (MacDonald 1999) and their position and disadvantages in the labour market (McClelland & Macdonald 1999; Tresize-Brown 2004; Marsh & Perkins 2006) as well as evaluations of Brotherhood's own services such as PACTS, the transition support service addressed at parents (Bedson & Perkins 2006). Furthermore, two issues of the Brotherhood's Social Barometer, *Monitoring children's chances* (Scutella & Smyth 2005) and *Challenges facing Australian youth* (Boese & Scutella 2006), present indicators of capabilities and disadvantage that examine how well equipped Australian children and young people are (or are not) to negotiate successfully the transition from early childhood to school and from school to work.

Our current services in the early years and the youth transition include:

- HIPPY – (Home Interaction Program for Parents and Youngsters) an early childhood enrichment program for 4 and 5-year-olds and their parents
- Communities for Children – federal initiative to engage disadvantaged children and families in universal early childhood services
- Napier Street Child and Family Service and Craigieburn Family Day Care Services, which both provide early childhood education
- Homework Program, Fitzroy – tutoring support
- Transition Program – an early intervention program to assist young people to engage with school or make a smooth transition to other training or employment options.
- Parents as Career Transitions Supports (PACTS) – empowering parents to help their children making career and transition choices
- Youth Pathways – a federally-funded program providing holistic advice and referrals to young people identified as at risk of disengaging with education and entering long-term unemployment
- The Community Services Leadership Program – working within education settings to support disadvantaged young people to plan and deliver youth-led projects in their community

- The Education Development Project – providing case-managed assistance to families of children in Years 8 and 9 who are at risk of homelessness
- JPET – case management of young people aged 15 to 21, who are homeless, at risk of homelessness, leaving the juvenile justice system, wards of state or refugees, to assist gaining access to education, training and employment.
- Vocational training –as a Registered Training Organisation, the BSL delivers accredited training through pre-employment programs, providing people with a nationally recognised qualification and the opportunity to continue learning through a traineeship or other educational options. Programs include: Furniture Works Frankston, Green Corps Frankston, Job Network, STEP group training, Transition to Work
- an Education Coordinator, who works to build the understanding of poverty and exclusion among students, student teachers, teachers and teacher educators, through workshops and lectures, including work on curriculum design.

We welcome this opportunity to contribute to the Victorian Government’s Early Childhood Development and School Reform Blueprint.

Suggested areas of reform

OVERVIEW

I. What should be integrated into the new approach to learning, wellbeing, health and development?

The Overview on the suggested Early Childhood Development and School reform identifies several opportunities for cross-sectoral action under the headings of partnerships with parents and communities, system development and reform and workforce reform. Given the Brotherhood's long recognition of the importance of holistic approaches to learning that include families, communities and that foster systemic change in forging an inclusive education system, we welcome the attention to these three key areas.

Early childhood development

The Brotherhood applauds the Victorian Government's desire to promote positive changes for early childhood development. We endorse the blueprint's reframing of the child using an ecological view that focuses on the child within the family and the family within the community. This framing facilitates a systemic understanding of disadvantage and invites multiple intervention strategies that pave the way to broadening community capacity. Childhood is a crucial period in human development and the work of Shonkoff & Phillips (2001) has reinvigorated already well documented agency and practitioner observations and research that negative environmental influences during this period (such as poverty, family discord and abuse) can disrupt development, often with long-term adverse consequences. **It is vital that children are both protected against risk factors and experience environments that promote their wellbeing.**

We therefore strongly endorse the Government's focus on supporting parents and families in the care of their children, creating social environments necessary for promoting health development and supporting professional development.

Characterised as they are by greater collaboration and a socially inclusive agenda, the strategic agenda and actions outlined in the blueprint promise equity, but the Brotherhood cautions that vigilance is required to:

- ensure that the services and approaches are indeed as inclusive as possible
- avoid the assumption that engaging disadvantaged families within a social inclusion agenda will be cost-neutral.

Emphasising working together and developing solutions based on community capacity building and intersectoral partnerships will require resources.

School

In regard to schooling, the Brotherhood recognises that the Victorian Government has led the way in Australia in educational innovation and reform. This provides a sound foundation for significant new developments that will make the Victorian education system among the best in the world (Long 2005).

However, despite the investment in educational change, this has not benefited *all* young people in Victoria. For instance, while the performance of Victorian students is, on average, strong, many young people finish their compulsory education with inadequate skills in literacy and numeracy and too many young people leave formal education without a recognised qualification. The

geographic polarisation of literacy and numeracy results, as well as of VCE outcomes, points to pockets of disadvantage.

An estimated 15% of children and young people in Victoria are at risk of not fully participating in education due to one or more of these factors. The apparent retention rates have been improving in Victoria, yet they are consistently and significantly lower in government schools (79.9% from years 7 to 12 and 81.3% from years 10 to 12 in 2007) than in non-government schools (91.1 and 91.7%). This difference is even more marked for young males (72 and 74.2% in government, 85.9 and 87.5% in non-government schools). **This data shows that one in four young males in government schools does not go through to year 12.** Retention rates also show a marked gap between metropolitan (86.2% in years 7 to 12 in 2007) and non-metropolitan regions (68.6% (DEECD 2007).

ABS data indicates the following rates of key year cohorts not participating in formal school education in 2007: 3.8 per cent of 15-year-olds, 9.7 per cent of 16-year-olds and 10.4 per cent of 17-year-olds (ABS 2008, table 20). Admittedly, some of these young people would have taken up vocational or work opportunities. However, in March 2008, 37,300 Victorians aged 15 to 19 (10.7% of this age cohort) were neither attending full-time education nor full-time employment, while 6,300 (1.8%) were neither in full time education nor in the labour force (ABS 2008b, table 16).

Absenteeism is another indicator of young people's poor engagement with learning which often correlates to low socioeconomic status. Weak attachment to schooling relates also to poor literacy, poor English proficiency for children of CALD or Indigenous backgrounds, learning or developmental delays and experiences of bullying, teasing or violence at school. Absenteeism peaks in years 8 to 10: the average number of days of absence per full time equivalent student in 2006 in Victoria amounted to 18 days (year 8), 20 days (year 9) and 18 days (year 10).. Analysis by socioeconomic status shows consistently more days absent for students at the least wealthy schools than those at the wealthiest schools (data provided by Data and Evaluation, DEECD).

Over one-quarter of student absences are categorised as 'unexplained' with a significantly higher rate of 46% at the secondary level. Where reasons are given for absences – such as health related or parental choice, a percentage of these may be condoned absenteeism by parents or guardians. While reported levels of truancy or refusal to attend school are low (1%), clearly a significant proportion of children are missing out on participation (VAGO 2004). The Brotherhood's latest research suggests that cost-induced absenteeism is a significant barrier for many low income families (Bond and Horn forthcoming).

Another important indicator of the performance of the education system is the level of suspensions and expulsions from school. From 2005 to mid 2007, 882 students were expelled from government schools in Victoria, with more than 500 expelled on the grounds of violence, substance abuse, racism or sex discrimination (Metlikovec, *Herald Sun*, 14 January 2008). It is disappointing that this data can only be obtained under Freedom of Information and is not readily available to the community despite the government's commitment to performance reporting.

We consider that too much reliance is made of aggregate high achievement measures of performance. **A stronger focus on disaggregated targets is needed to ensure that students' diverse needs are being met. Such targets would also encourage and monitor alternative, flexible approaches that will support the retention of students from disadvantaged backgrounds in meaningful learning and skills development within a more collaborative environment.**

Evidence of the need for greater investment in such approaches is offered by the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL). VCAL has created a force, only now being fully realized, for new forms of pedagogy, curriculum and assessment that bridge the academic/vocational divide and depart from the discipline based approaches. The latter have in general constrained the ability

of schools, other education providers and industry to work collaboratively to maximise outcomes for those not going onto tertiary studies (Henry and Grundy 2004).

While the introduction of VCAL is to be applauded and the growth in its uptake is encouraging, there has been insufficient investment in securing its profile as a high quality senior school qualification that should be valued by students, parents, teachers, employers and the wider community.

Focus question

1. What other opportunities might exist as a result of the creation of the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development?

Across the three areas of reform, we urge the government to adopt a social inclusion lens which demands recognising the number of socially disadvantaged children, young people and families in Victoria who are struggling to achieve equitable developmental and educational outcomes.

- In relation to partnerships with parents and communities, a focus on social inclusion requires addressing the barriers that parents face in supporting their children due to financial difficulties, cultural diversity or an Indigenous background, refugee experience, disability, mental illness, substance abuse, homelessness or housing instability, domestic violence.
- In the context of system development and reform we suggest improving the coordination and consistency of support for children and young people aged 0–18 who face such social circumstances. Emphasis on provider performance and parental choice signals a focus on middle or high-income families and a neglect of those children who are ‘at risk’ of exclusion and educational disengagement. Marginalised families do not have a genuine choice. The choices made by families who can afford them generally lead to a withdrawal of resources from those who are in dire need of them.
- In relation to workforce reform, we suggest increased resources to adequately respond to the difficulties children and young people of disadvantaged backgrounds face from the early years right through to the transition out of school. In the early years this means improved staff: child ratios, a set maximum group/room size, bilingual staff to ensure participation of disadvantaged CALD families, mandatory qualifications and training, and mandatory minimum staff time allocation for developmentally and culturally appropriate planning. In schools, it means additional staff as well as support and funding to enable partnership approaches in providing holistic, integrated in-school services for all students who require them.

2. What should be integrated into the suggested improvement targets and progress measures?

As explained above, we urge the government to recognise and respond to the needs of the 15% of children in Victoria whose successful education is severely impeded by the barriers they and their families are facing. This recognition should be reflected in the improvement targets and performance indicators developed to measure progress over the next five years. We therefore suggest the following changes and additions to the improvement targets and progress measures listed in the overview discussion paper:

With regard to early years, the blueprint overview states:

- Increase the proportion of infants fully breastfed in the first six months of life

Our suggestion:

- Deliver at least six sessions of high quality antenatal care to all expectant mothers.
- Provide all at risk mothers with postnatal care through enhanced home visiting
- Locate at least one full-time lactation consultants in all public hospital maternity wards.

The blueprint overview states:

- Increase the proportion of children attending Maternal and Child Health Service developmental checks, particularly at three and a half years.

Our additional suggestion:

- Increase the number of Maternal and Child Health nurses making home visits and undertaking outreach work.
- Support local governments to employ at least one bilingual paraprofessional (including mothercraft nurses, qualified childcare workers) per municipality to support Maternal and Child Health nurses, targeting disadvantaged communities.

The blueprint overview states:

- Increase to at least 95 per cent in all local government areas, the proportion of children participating in four-year-old kindergarten.

Research demonstrates that high investment in three-year-old kindergarten leads to increased participation in four-year-old kindergarten.

Our suggestion:

- Increase administration, outreach and bilingual support to implement socially inclusive bridging programs at kindergartens in areas where there are hard to reach families.
- Provide low-cost three-year-old programs in targeted areas of disadvantage.

The blueprint overview states:

- Increase the proportion of children entering school with basic skills for life and learning.

Our suggestion:

- Implement socially inclusive socio-cultural curriculum to engage children and families using an early years framework.
- Offer early childhood professionals access to additional support staff in areas of identified disadvantage to ensure that basic skills for life and learning are promoted.

The blueprint overview states:

- Decrease the proportion of children entering school with emotional and behavioural problems.

Our suggestion:

- Increase number of preschool field officers by a third to offer support for families of children with emotional and behavioural problems in the preschool years.
- Increase the capacity of ECEC to deliver social inclusion projects for their learning communities (children/families/staff) through increased access to professional development

The blueprint overview states:

- Increase the proportion of the early childhood education and care workforce with a recognised qualification.

Our suggestion:

- Minimum Certificate III in Children's Services for all people working with Children (Certificate III should be regarded as a minimum training requirement, *not* as a qualification) within 5 years.
- At least one staff member with a 3-year degree in early (LDC)/middle childhood (OSHC) in every service within 5 years.
- Every group of children should have at least one fully qualified staff member included in staffing (Diploma level or higher) within 5 years.

Research has clearly documented the relationship between skills and qualifications of staff in children's services and improved outcomes for children. Therefore the regulations should set mandatory qualifications and training for all staff/carers in children's services, despite the impact on costs: all levels of government must share responsibility for ensuring families can afford the cost of high quality care. Poor quality care and the consequences for young children must not be tolerated in order to minimise cost.

The blueprint overview states:

- Increase community confidence in public schooling.

Our suggestion:

- Increase the percentage of people for whom public schooling is their first choice. The indicator for this should measure the proportion of children living within a school region enrolled in government schools.

The blueprint overview states:

- Reduce the proportion of children entering school with emotional and behavioural problems

Our suggestion:

- Increase the proportion of children with emotional and behavioural problems receiving assessments and specialist support on entering school.

Achieving substantial reductions in the proposed indicator would largely depend on factors beyond the control of the education system. Current policy directions that focus on education performance at the upper level risk creaming of high-achieving students by schools and increased exclusion of students with learning difficulties or behavioural problems.

The objective of this indicator should be to ensure the inclusion of children with learning difficulties or behavioural problems in the local school of their choice, the effective and timely assessment of their special needs, and school support that maximises their participation.

The blueprint overview states:

- Increase the proportion of government school principals accredited as high-performing.

Our suggestion:

- This target could be specified 'particularly in schools in low SES status areas'.

We believe that the strongest gains in overall performance of the education system are to be made by targeted policy reforms aimed at the 10–15% of students most at risk of dropping out of formal learning. We encourage the development of a broad range of criteria for assessing and accrediting principals, to include skills and understandings of flexible approaches that maximise retention and achievement of students at risk of exclusion and poor attainment.

The blueprint overview states:

- Further lift the Year 12 or equivalent completion rate

Our suggested additions:

- Reduce the number of early school leavers by 50%
- Reduce the proportion of young people not in employment, education or training by 50%
- Reduce the level of unexplained absenteeism by 50%
- Reduce the number of inter-school transfers, suspensions and expulsions by 50%.

The blueprint list of indicators includes only one measure of educational outcomes. We believe this is inadequate. While the completion rate should be retained, additional measures and targets are

needed to focus policy reform on lifting the retention and attainment rates for the bottom 10–15% of student at risk of poor achievement.

Additionally, we suggest the following improvement targets and progress measures:

- Increase accessibility to specialist support services and integration aides for all students with assessed learning difficulties or behavioural problems
- Increase community awareness of the benefits of VCAL.

EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT DISCUSSION PAPER

I. Partnerships with parent and communities – children thriving in supportive home and local environments

We strongly support the blueprint’s argument that ‘services within the local community are the key supports for families to create a positive, healthy and stimulating home environment for their children, and that every community needs to be inclusive and supportive of children and families’. Through our early years program, the Brotherhood intensively assists some of the most disadvantaged children and families in the community. We know from this work that it is not only financial poverty, but also lack of opportunity and capacity in many areas, that affects the life chances of these children. We also know that in most cases parents are the best placed to help improve their children’s life chances, and so our core philosophy is to work with parents and build their capacity.

With the right type of investment, parents can help their children to get the best start in life and ensure that they reach their full potential. The Brotherhood’s findings in the (unpublished) research completed for the Department of Human Services’ Breaking Cycles, Building Futures project (Hydon et al. 2005) are that engaging vulnerable children and families in universal services is most successful when four key principles are practised:

- overcome practical and structural barriers
- build positive relationships
- practise cultural sensitivity and value for effort
- provide effective service coordination and linkages.

Significantly, the report finds that while overcoming practical and structural barriers is commonly seen as straightforward to implement, building positive reciprocal relationships is crucial and needs to accompany most interventions. This has particular efficacy for vulnerable culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) children and families. Our work with these children and families demonstrates that any support provided must be responsive, inclusive and appropriate.

In addition, vulnerable children and families are, by definition, those experiencing multiple and complex issues; and this reinforces the importance of having a suite of strategies in place.

Focus question

1. Is the focus of the reform proposals to support parents to create the best possible home environment right? Are there other reform proposals we should consider?

We strongly support the blueprint's reform proposals to support parents to create the best possible home environment through better and more tailored information and supported playgroups to provide peer support and foster effective parenting techniques through positive modelling.

It must be noted that many newly arrived refugees are literate neither in their first language nor in English. Providing reliable information to them requires more than translating a tip sheet.

Moreover, simply imposing the values and practices of a middle-class Western-centric home environment (with the assumption that it is the best model and the only way children and families learn) is unlikely to succeed. All parents must be supported within their cultural context; and should be able to learn about mainstream Australian education while having their views, values and practices valued.

Supported playgroups provide opportunities for parents and children who would not normally access a playgroup to enhance their relationship in a supportive environment, increase their skills and confidence, and develop valuable social and family support networks. However, expecting that a supported playgroup coordinator will enable disadvantaged families to acquire the skills to run their playgroup independently within three to twelve months is flawed.

In endorsing these two proposals, the Brotherhood argues that for children and families living in disadvantage:

- Providing information will require a multi-pronged approach that is not solely print-based.
- Early childhood professionals should facilitate supported playgroups.
- Funding to supported playgroups should be coordinated and consistent.
- Home support should be resourced, and should be informed by knowledge of families, cultures and learning practices.

Focus question

2. Is the focus of the reform proposals to provide outcomes-focused information right?

Within the reform proposals to provide outcomes-focused information, the Brotherhood endorses in principle the development of **birth to eight years of age framework** and **transition plans for children** as they move from kindergarten into school. With regard to **rating measures for childcare services**, we strongly encourage a whole-of-government approach, whereby the State Government supports the Federal Government's initiative to strengthen the quality assurance system for childcare. **We argue that for disadvantaged families, the development of web-based information about childcare services will worsen the digital divide unless funds are also provided to increase families' access to information technology.**

In developing the birth to eight years of age framework, we caution against the adoption of a deficit-based outcomes model whereby children enter primary school with a deficit scorecard and the assessment of learning is reduced to simplistic easily measured outcomes. It is also imperative to question what the 'commonly understood developmental goals for children' are and to consider their cultural bias. For example, a child may be assessed as below par on independence skills because they do not play alone or independently feed themselves or complete other self-help skills considered 'normal' for that age; however, within the cultural constructs of that child's life, they might have very well developed *interdependence* skills and be able to undertake tasks alone if required.

Transition plans from kindergartens to schools must be resourced to create formal opportunities for early childhood educators to get together with primary school teachers to discuss the needs of children and families. In addition these plans must be understandable for all families regardless of language and literacy.

Providing web-based information ratings for service providers will not support parent choice for vulnerable families, if they do not have access, cannot use it or do not have time to access it. Moreover, if early childhood places are limited, then families have to go where a place is, even if they have concerns about quality. In addition, unless the measures for services include flexibility, inclusiveness and staff who speak community languages, the rating system is meaningless for vulnerable families.

We therefore propose the following reform proposals:

- Develop a socially inclusive framework, with culturally responsive goals, not centred on literacy in one language that enables all children to participate equally in early years curriculum.
- Resource, through funds and time allocation, transition plans that support early childhood services to communicate and respond to issues in emerging communities via support and maintenance of home languages through, for example bilingual staff.
- State government support of the federal government initiatives to strengthen the quality assurance system for child care services including family day care.
- Develop a quality assurance system for kindergartens.
- Ensure access to computers for families who do not have home access to internet or provide web-based information in other formats.

Focus question

3. Do you agree with our reform proposals to support the coordination and delivery of early childhood services?

The Brotherhood strongly endorses the blueprint's reform proposals to support the coordination and delivery of early childhood services. International research overwhelmingly demonstrates that an integrated approach to service provision achieves better outcomes for disadvantaged children and families. We strongly endorse the proposal that **services need to reflect the unique needs of families making up each local community and be coordinated around these needs**, and point out that since vulnerable children and families have complex needs, they require very flexible early childhood services and more face to face staff. This is resource-intensive.

We also endorse the proposal to **strengthen partnerships with local government to ensure early childhood services meet community needs** but caution that this must not be an exercise in cost shifting to poor municipalities and communities. In addition, if community needs are to be met, all planning must involve the families and communities who utilise (or would like to utilise) these early childhood services and reflects what these families need to make the early years system easier to navigate. There also needs to be a mechanism for those services managed by committees of management and other bodies independent of local government and to be included in planning and resourcing processes.

We endorse investment in developing schools as children's and community hubs, through co-location of services and increased community use of school facilities with the proviso that a measured and responsive approach will be required to ensure that it is right for particular communities and that the schools' amenity is not compromised. To better link existing services in established areas (without losing their focus or facilities) requires additional resources, increased staffing and the development of the 'new professional' for whom working collaboratively is a key function (Tayler et al 2005).

We suggest these additional reform proposals:

- Ensure that an equitable allocation of resources is available for early years services across the state, while the identification of specific needs and priorities should occur at local government level.
- Encourage local governments to adopt the findings from *Breaking Cycles, Building Futures* in service planning for vulnerable families, including CALD families
- Resource professional development to equip new and current early childhood professionals to work collaboratively.

2. System development and reform – families accessing connected services

4. Do you agree with our reform proposals to improve the integration of 0–8 learning, care and health services? Are there other reform proposals we should consider?

The Brotherhood applauds the Government’s commitment to improve the integration of 0–8 learning, care and health services—starting with antenatal services—where the approach is inclusive, responsive and in the best interests of the child. The focus of the transition reports must be a dual one: to share information with parents as well as to share information between teachers at school and in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC). Without reciprocity driven by inclusive practices, the collecting, maintaining and sharing of information by DEECD will not better support vulnerable children and families. Information that reflects the child’s growth and learning will be most meaningful for families when it is situated in a socio-cultural framework that does not place them in an immediate deficit position.

We suggest these additional reform proposals:

- Finance local networks of antenatal and early childhood services as well as related services such as housing to support ECEC and school staff, as well as service users. They need to be able to elicit responses and expertise from all participants, especially those who are traditionally sidelined—CALD families, Indigenous people, people on low income and with poor educational backgrounds, as well as practitioners and actual service providers.
- Situate developmentally appropriate learning opportunities within a socio-cultural knowledge and learning.
- Develop a learning and development framework that uses the principles of the HIPPY and PACTS programs to develop a real sense of agency for parents.

Focus question

5. Do you agree with our reform proposal to increase access, quality and the level of participation in services? Are there other reform proposals we should consider?

The Brotherhood supports driving innovation in service delivery through support for more flexible and accessible models that meet the needs of disadvantaged communities. Family Day Care (FDC), for example, is currently the only affordable option for disadvantaged families employed in shift, weekend, evening and permanent casual work.

Our suggestions for reform proposals include:

- Increase funding for flexible and accessible models of service delivery including:
 - a) a whole-of-government approach to increasing Family Day Care flexibility by addressing the issues of in-venue FDC (currently classified as childcare when there are more than eight children) and affordability (currently FDC costs a similar amount to the gap fee for centre-based child care).

- b) flexible arrangements for families who need to participate in classes e.g. AMEP English classes for refugee parents
- c) occasional care integrated in centre-based care.
- Provide resources to facilitate integration and shared values of co-located services (otherwise they remain simply co-located).
- Resource services in disadvantaged communities to employ community development and outreach workers to encourage and support participation. The current funding per capita for kindergartens allows only for minimum staffing and there is little time available for encouraging participation.
- Consider extending the criteria (beyond Health Care Card eligibility) for support to access 3 and 4-year-old kindergarten to include working families who are just over the threshold.

Focus question

6. Is the focus of the reform proposals to enhance early interventions for children from disadvantaged backgrounds or with additional needs, such as a disability or developmental delay right? Are there other reform proposals we should consider?

Our suggestions for reform include:

- provide settlement support for newly arrived refugee children and their families recovering from trauma using family therapy in an intense playgroup setting
- fully funded group oriented therapeutic interventions using intense playgroup model e.g. an intense language focussed playgroup.

3. Workforce reforms (early childhood)

Focus question

7. Is the focus of the proposals to establish a high quality workforce right? Are there other reform proposals we should consider?

Affordable, accessible, high quality childcare disproportionately improves wellbeing, social and educational outcomes for disadvantaged children. The Brotherhood supports and encourages all endeavours to facilitate workplace reforms that include:

- minimum Certificate III in Children's Services for all people currently working with children (Certificate III should be regarded as a minimum training requirement, *not* as a qualification)
- at least one staff member with a 3-year degree in early (LDC)/middle childhood (OSHC) in every service
- at least one fully qualified staff member (diploma level or higher) for every group of children
- improving staff ratios in all ECEC settings, not just long day care
- facilitating bilingual staff to access training to complete at least the Certificate III in Children's Services

SCHOOL REFORM DISCUSSION PAPER

I. System development and reform (schools)

Focus question

1. Is the focus of the reform proposals to ensure every child makes good progress right? Are there other reform proposals we should consider?

The Brotherhood strongly supports the government's commitment to 'ensure every child makes good progress' and we support the need for continual improvement in the curriculum, the emphasis on literacy and numeracy and increased focus on individual student progress.

However, we question whether the proposed focus on accountability, regional network support and enhanced information for parents alone will make substantive improvements in the retention and meaningful participation of students at risk of disengagement from formal education.

The starting point for system reform to address the poor attainment of students from disadvantaged circumstances should be a full understanding of the social context that limits this cohort's commitment to learning throughout their developmental years. The barriers to full participation include financial hardship, housing crisis, parental chronic health problems and disabilities, family conflict and violence, as well as child learning difficulties, disabilities and behavioural problems.

We believe a reform package should include a higher weighting on timely assessment of students at risk of disengagement at any year level, together with adequate support both within the school and off-site. This requires both sufficient resourcing of student support services and a better coordinated approach to integrate specialist support from external community and health services.

A more flexible, more outward-looking education system is required, to ensure an integrated case plan for families and their children to resolve their barriers to participation in learning. More adaptable learning approaches need to be encouraged within the formal school environment to respond to the individual's capacities for learning. Setting targets for reduced levels of early school leaving, absenteeism, suspensions and expulsions is essential to drive cultural change and learning practices that maximise retention of 'at risk' students.

This emphasis is encapsulated by our suggestion to amend the objective to 'Strengthen the capacity of schools to measure and improve progress of individuals and cohorts of students' by adding 'with a specific focus on students at risk of early leaving'.

Further reform is required to ensure that the commitment to free education is a reality for all children in Victoria. If we are to maximise participation from those at most risk of dropping out, then it is vital that we work towards eliminating financial hardship as a barrier. Thus, applying the lens of social inclusion to the education environment would require that public transport costs which are a barrier to attendance for some students are addressed through whole of government policies. DEECD should advocate within the government for free public transport for all children of school age.

We urge a rethink of the Education Maintenance Allowance and of school budgets to take into consideration the impact of financial hardship on student attendance and participation. Schools in low SES regions are seriously disadvantaged through the lack of human capital and resources to support local fund-raising initiatives that enable important facility improvements, school-based resources or covering the costs of excursions and other activities from the total school budget.

Increasingly important is student access to computers and the internet to fully participate in learning activities. Financial hardship restricts access to information technology for children in

disadvantaged circumstances: the Brotherhood's recent survey of low-income families found that two-thirds did not have a home computer with internet access (Bond and Horn *forthcoming*). Whilst the provision of computers during school hours to year 9–12 students proposed by the Commonwealth Government is welcomed, computer access for younger students needs to be secured. This is especially important for those students without a computer and internet at home. For these children, targeted measures are also needed to enable out-of-hours use.

We therefore propose the following reform proposals:

- Increase school budgets to enable all enrolled students eligible for EMA to participate in excursions, camps, sporting activities, swimming, activity days and school speakers/artists.
- Increase the EMA to cover the basic costs of school books, materials and associated learning costs to an agreed minimum level.
- Encourage and support schools to implement strategies to maximise the exchange of uniforms and minimise the costs of new uniforms.
- Include in school budgets a component to cover low-cost, healthy lunches for children eligible for the EMA who come to school without lunch. Schools should develop a policy for the distribution of this food and canteens could be assigned the role of preparation.
- Develop strategies to stimulate access to and use of computers and the internet out of school hours, including:
 - a) resourcing larger schools to open IT centres for use by students of other local schools out of hours, possibly as part of a community hub with cross-subsidy of operational costs by fees paid by the customers
 - b) resourcing local public libraries to offer IT access and support for school students.
- Resource and support community based learning support programs in disadvantaged communities to enable catch-up learning for students who cannot afford tutors.
- Increase funding for school integration aides and expand eligibility criteria to include students with learning difficulties.
- DEECD advocates within the Victorian Government to make public transport free for children of school age.

Focus question

2. Is the focus of the reform proposals to improve transition to and from schools right? Are there other reform proposals we should consider?

We welcome the development of transition plans for all children starting school and a more consistent approach to assessment through the early primary years. However, the Brotherhood's research and service experience suggests that attention must be focused on students at risk of poor participation in learning throughout the formal education years as well as those who are moving between schools, either because of exclusion or because of family relocation.

We advocate holistic, individual learning and support plans for *all* children at risk of non-completion, to accompany the student throughout school and across different sites. These plans might include support such as integration aides and they would follow the students who are moving school, guaranteeing continuity of care and for those who most need it. Furthermore, the accumulated history of school attendance, performance, use of specialist support services and learning difficulties would greatly assist the new school's staff to put in place the best possible learning environment for the new student.

While there has been substantial recent development of vocational pathways for older students within the formal education system, we encourage further reforms to strengthen opportunities for

15–18 year olds to undertake non-conventional programs that combine work-based modules, off-site training courses and practical experiences that are responsive to students. Schools must be supported to facilitate the transition for those students unlikely to pursue an academic direction or who aspire to move straight into employment.

We therefore suggest the following reforms:

- Implement individual learning and support plans for students at risk of early school leaving or non-completion of key learning levels through the school years
- Treat community education providers as part of the school, albeit outside its walls. This means the young person remains enrolled and the responsibility for the student's education continues while the learning is provided off site.
- Provide more community-based VCAL and provide funding to disadvantaged youth who are completely disengaged from school to access alternative education programs.
- Increase funding to enable young people to access a wide range of VET options from at least Year 10 without budgetary disadvantage to schools, especially small schools and those serving socioeconomically disadvantaged populations.

Focus question

3. Do you agree with our reform proposals to increase expectations and provide greater support for government schools? Are there other reform proposals we should consider?

The Brotherhood strongly endorses this aim, but the reform proposals appear to respond to the underperformance of government schools mainly through accountability rather than acknowledging their complex role in supporting all their students and providing appropriate resourcing and support. This implies both a reconceptualising of the measures of success in government schools as well as interventions that have sufficient resourcing to provide a sustained and holistic approach to education and training for the families those schools serve. While we applaud the concept of placing support where it is most needed, the proposals imply that only adequately performing and high performing schools will receive changed resources in the form of 'incentives' while underperforming schools will receive 'stronger interventions and more intensive monitoring'. This suggests that the burden to improve performance lies solely with the schools, which we find problematic.

As such the proposals should be expanded to include strategies that will:

- Reduce the effects of student and family disadvantage on learning and educational achievement
- Increase the numbers of young people who recognise themselves as lifelong learners and who have the skills to build on that identity, for example through enhancing the ability of teachers to adopt and work with applied learning methodologies
- Enhance interaction between teachers and the school community, for example through providing leadership and incentives to schools in being proactive in reaching out to their communities
- Promote achievement in both VCAL and VCE equally
- Adopt a departmental responsibility for ensuring the barriers to school improvement are addressed and school initiatives aimed at retention of students with learning difficulties or behavioural problems receive sustained, high-level support.

Focus question

4. Do you agree with our reform proposals to establish clearer expectations and provide greater support for non-government schools? Are there other reform proposals we should consider?

We applaud the Government's recognition of opportunities for collaboration between government and non-government school sectors 'to improve student outcomes, particularly in areas of high need and low performance'.

We acknowledge the contribution that the Catholic sector in particular makes in working with students from disadvantaged backgrounds and the proposal to provide better access to government resources and to provide parents and students with better information. In this regard, we argue for the following reform proposal:

- Extend the transition programs that incorporate the current MIPS and other funding, to the non-government sector.

2. Workforce reform (schools)

Focus question

5. Is the focus of the reform proposals to further develop teachers and school leaders right? Are there other reform proposals we should consider?

The Brotherhood welcomes the endorsement of the need for the further development of teachers and school leaders. We particularly endorse the need to improve teacher training programs through not only a focus on pedagogies for literacy and numeracy but also a focus on understanding poverty, its implications and how educationalists have a particular ability to intervene in the cycle of disadvantage. While the proposals have merit, they do not create the conditions for whole-of-school responses that will enable schools to enhance the success of *all* their students, not only those whose background equips them to succeed.

We suggest the inclusion of additional measures for strengthening and resourcing the range of auxiliary roles within the school system with stronger linkages to family, health and community services. We therefore recommend these additional reform proposals:

- Skill teachers to meet the particular demands of socially disadvantaged young people (children of low-income families, refugees and migrant students, Indigenous students etc.) through
 - a) Reviewing and strengthening focus on social exclusion in pre-service teacher training
 - b) Placements for pre-service teachers in community based Learning Support Programs
 - c) Online learning packages on social exclusion for teachers
- Expand, and if necessary lengthen, pre-service teacher training to ensure all new teachers are fully equipped in applied pedagogies, transition processes and the impact of prior disadvantage on educational achievement
- Provide schools with extra resources (including outreach support) to adequately respond to students with behavioural difficulties, without taking teachers away from their principal tasks.
- Resource learning support programs (including community based learning support) to enable catch-up of students who fall behind with their learning.
- Replace the range of careers/transition roles in schools into a fully funded, integrated transition service system for all young people

- Realign the roles in schools to resource full-time continuing school support officers who are strongly connected to their school's community and whose position description and supervision best meets the needs of the students.

Focus question

6. Do you agree with our reform proposals to attract and reward the best people? Are there other reform proposals we should consider?

The Brotherhood endorses this proposal and in particular the focus on providing incentives for the best teachers and leaders to work in schools where they are most needed. We strongly support this action in relation to schools with high shares of socially disadvantaged students and suggest that this is specified.

We endorse the focus on encouraging high performing graduates from other fields to enter teaching and encourage a close consideration of the achievements of the local programs that already offer such new models of pre-service teacher training. However, the Brotherhood would strongly argue that any such scheme should meet the same requirements of training in applied pedagogies, transition processes and the relationship between disadvantage and educational achievement that we would endorse for other pre-service teacher trainees.

3. Partnerships with parents and communities – partnerships for learning

Focus question

7. Is the focus of the reform proposals to better partner with parents and families right? Are there other reform proposals we should consider?

We strongly support the reform proposal to better partner with parents and families. The Brotherhood's innovative work with parents has been predicated on the critical role they play in their children's development and learning, but has also accepted that there are substantial barriers for some parents to providing the optimal level of support to ensure their children attend and participate fully in schooling. In addition to our HIPPY program aimed at parents with pre-school children, we have developed, tested and evaluated the *Parents as Career Transition Supports* (PACTS) Program which strengthens the capabilities of parents to support their children in the critical transition period from formal schooling (Bedson & Perkins 2006).

As noted earlier, the discussion paper shows a lack of recognition that a certain proportion of families and parents in Victoria face one or more dimensions of social disadvantage (material deprivation, poor mental health, learning disabilities etc) which impact on their children's school retention and performance.

For example, our research has found that some children do not attend school because their parents cannot afford to pay for their transport or lunches (Bond & Horn forthcoming).

Another example is of parents with intellectual disabilities who are unable to read to their young children. Clearly, specific initiatives are needed to effectively engage with parents in such circumstances.

We endorse the proposal to ensure schools are welcoming, but this proposal needs to be much sharper. Our experience suggests that, given the imbalance of power between schools and their communities, the onus is on schools to do far more than be 'welcoming.' Schools need to proactively move out into their communities, build networks with community groups and, on that basis, begin the process of creating an environment in which parents of all backgrounds and circumstances are able to be more involved. **Those families whose children are most at risk of early school leaving and poor attendance are those least likely to cross the school perimeter.**

The Brotherhood's recent research with low-income families show that a significant number of parents are reluctant to raise concerns with their school staff - 44% felt unable to talk to staff about financial difficulties that impacted on their children's education (Bond and Horn forthcoming).

Whilst the Brotherhood supports the principle of improved information about student progress for parents, we are concerned that once again the focus of initiatives such as the proposed Ultranet is on aspirational families who are already well connected to the school and teachers. Parents and children in low-income families, who cannot afford computers, phone connections or internet access at home, will miss out on the benefits of this approach. Equally, parents with ongoing health issues or other barriers will require a different strategy for improving their engagement with the school on their child's progress.

Partnerships with parents must go beyond the transmittal of information on student and school performance: schools must be encouraged to proactively engage with parents in disadvantaged circumstances.

Our proposals are therefore:

- Develop innovative approaches for engaging parents with financial, health or other barriers to become better informed of their children's progress and more active in their learning
- Assist parents with learning difficulties and low literacy and numeracy levels to strengthen their capabilities to support their children throughout their schooling
- Implement strategies (such as access to school or library-based IT facilities) to ensure the proposed Ultranet is accessible to low-income families without home internet access, (see below)

Focus question

8. Do you agree with our reform proposals to utilise and mobilise community resources? Are there other reform proposals we should consider?

In principle, we support the mobilisation of community resources to promote schools and thereby students' improved access to existing education, training and employment opportunities. The Brotherhood is an advocate of better integrated and more flexible models of learning, linked with appropriate levels of community support services. We also embrace the suggested co-location of services and increased community use of services. In this context we recommend a comprehensive transition support service system for all young people and one that enables a case management model of individualised, holistic assistance to those young people with multiple barriers to transition, who are at risk of dropping out.

The Brotherhood has recently advocated improved access to careers information and counselling for early school leavers through proactive outreach, e.g. through facilitating discussions between youth services, employment service providers, schools and training providers to improve information sharing and develop agreed local referral mechanisms. As such we endorse the reference to an ongoing role for Local Learning and Employment Networks as well as the proposal to forge closer links between them and Regional Offices. In many instances, the potential of LLENs has failed to be taken up by the department and, even where links have been good, the accountability requirements on LLEN have hampered their ability to act as agents for structural reform.

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