

Cost shifting in education

Implications for government,
the community sector
and low-income families

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for the

Equity in Education Alliance



Esther's Voice
collaboration, enquiry, social action

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The staff of Good Shepherd Youth and Family Service provided the inspiration for this research, by identifying the issue of cost shifting and its largely unmeasured impact on community organisations and providers of emergency relief.

The rapid distribution of the Emergency Education Relief Survey was made possible by staff from a number of organisations who kindly advertised it via a range of networks. Thank you to Emergency Relief Victoria, the Victorian Council of Social Service, the Council for Homeless Persons, the Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare, Community Information Victoria, Melbourne Citymission, the St Vincent de Paul Society and UnitingCare.

Finally thanks go to the survey respondents who generously gave their time to complete this survey.

Summary

Community organisations provide vast amounts of material assistance to disadvantaged Australians each year. This includes the provision of what is referred to in this report as ‘emergency education relief’ which includes assistance to cover the costs of fees, books, camps, uniforms and other education-related expenses. The irony of this situation is that public education is a state responsibility and thus technically free.

This report, commissioned by the Equity in Education Alliance, presents research supporting the argument that the cost of education has been shifted from the state to the individual, and that these costs are then shifted a second time, when disadvantaged families seek help from the community sector.

This research report seeks to quantify in dollars the extent to which the Victorian community service organisations, including emergency relief providers, assist disadvantaged families to meet school education expenses. Costs data from 49 community organisations indicated emergency education relief amounting to \$1,015,816 in the 2008–09 financial year. Given there are an estimated 700 non-government organisations providing emergency relief in Victoria this represents just a fraction of the likely total annual cost. And given only a portion of families seek emergency relief, with many children missing out on aspects of their education, this represents just a fraction of the total need. While community organisations receive some government funding to cover these expenses, the vast majority of those surveyed relied to a greater extent on financial support from trusts or philanthropic organisations, and donations. While half saw the provision of emergency education relief as part of their organisational mission, the other half indicated that this occurred naturally due to the needs of clients.

The findings from this research have implications for government, the community sector and disadvantaged families. Cost shifting suggests that state responsibility for the provision of public goods such as universal education is not being taken seriously enough. While the community sector has a clear role in addressing needs and advocating on behalf of disadvantaged Australians, to keep providing emergency education relief in the absence of a strong advocacy position is to passively accept the transfer of state responsibilities onto vulnerable individuals, the community and private sectors. Failure to address educational inequity and ensure that cost is not a barrier to participation shows a lack of regard for human dignity and potential, and impedes the future economic and social inclusion of children. From a public policy perspective, both educational inequity and cost shifting are inefficient, and threaten the success of the national productivity agenda.

The Equity in Education Alliance welcomes the commitment of the Victorian and federal governments to improving educational outcomes. However, to increase youth participation and reach the 90 per cent Year 12 attainment goal, cost shifting must be eliminated and adequate policy measures introduced to address financial barriers to full participation in education. On this basis the Alliance makes the following joint recommendations:

Recommendations

Reducing cost barriers

The Victorian government should introduce new initiatives to reduce cost barriers.

- Return the full amount of the Education Maintenance Allowance to help disadvantaged parents cover the cost of extras such as uniforms and school shoes.
- Introduce free public transport for all school-aged children and young people to address cost-induced non-attendance (with the added benefit of reducing the carbon footprint of education).
- Resource schools to operate a second-hand uniform shop.
- Increase the use of class sets of books; pilot a textbook library scheme in which students borrow their books for the year and pay for the books if they are lost or are damaged beyond reasonable wear-and-tear; and work with curriculum developers and publishers to reduce the number of revisions and new textbook editions.

Promoting educational equity and inclusion

- Develop a social inclusion checklist for public schools, with financial equity targets, and require that schools report back on achievement. Federal and state governments should jointly establish targets, effectively adding a triple bottom line to their current quality- and performance-focussed reporting.
- Raise awareness among parents of state policy on education costs, their rights and how to object to unfair charges.
- Create an Education Ombudsman role to promote excellence, equity and inclusion in education.

Knowledge management in emergency relief

- Undertake state-funded research of the community sector with systems for tracking the dollar-value of its contribution across service areas, for example, total community sector expenditure on emergency education relief.
- Build into the emergency relief funding acquittal process more detailed categories such as 'education expenses' to track how funding is spent. This information should be made publicly available by the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs.

National social inclusion agenda

- Increase income support payments so they are consistent with policies of social inclusion and do not jeopardise the government's productivity agenda.
- Ensure that community agency emergency relief initiatives are incorporated into their strategic plans so that service to low income groups is accompanied by strong advocacy seeking a more inclusive Australia.

Progressive introduction of a free public education

- Both the federal and Victorian governments should increase funding to public schools to ensure that the instruction and resources required to teach the standard curriculum are free and fees are not charged by schools. To ensure that financial hardship is not a barrier to participation:
 - increase the Student Resource Package and, in particular, its equity funding component
 - provide free of charge for all students, camps, excursions and incursions that are recognised as part of the curriculum
 - remove subject contributions, levies and charges for consumables provided by the school for all students to ensure that cost is not a factor in subject choice.
 - increase regulations and impose penalties on schools that are in breach of the Victorian Parent Payment Policy, to ensure that ‘voluntary’ payments are genuinely voluntary.

1 Introduction

While public school education is supposed to be free, in Victoria this is narrowly defined to include only resources, administration and facilities associated with the standard curriculum. Consequently, parents pay for a range of items such as equipment levies, stationery, books, uniforms, excursions and camps. Previous research has identified such costs as a barrier to participation in school and explored some of the implications of this (Anglicare Victoria 2008; Bond & Horn 2008; Bond & Horn 2009; SPRC et al. 2007; Taylor & Fraser 2003).

That families cannot afford to cover the costs associated with their children's education is evidenced in the rising demand for breakfast clubs: a Red Cross program operating such clubs in four states reports there are 200 schools on a waiting list (Nader & Tomazin 2008). It is also evidenced in the rapid growth in the number of learning support programs, e.g. homework clubs (Horn & Fewster 2007) used by disadvantaged students whose families cannot afford private tutors.

The impact of general financial hardship may be seen in the number of people seeking help from the community sector. ACOSS's 725 member agencies indicated they had collectively provided services to nearly 2 million people in 2006–07, an increase of 6.3 per cent from the previous year. However, due to lack of capacity, 77,083 people were turned away in this period, *before* the onset of the global financial crisis (ACOSS 2008, p.5). In relation to the crisis, UnitingCare's national director observed that its 400 agencies experienced 'a spike in demand between 50 and 100 per cent in the second half of 2008' (Head 2008).

These figures are pertinent because they support anecdotal evidence suggesting that disadvantaged families prioritise education and consequently go without, or seek community sector assistance for their other material needs. Interviews and surveys by the Brotherhood of St Laurence similarly chronicle parents' descriptions of weekly budgeting so their children 'don't miss out on anything school-related', 'finding the money' and paying when they 'can't afford it' (Bond & Horn 2008; Taylor & Fraser 2003). A survey of 2,269 people who approached Victorian emergency relief agencies during 2007 also supports this thesis (Engels et al. 2009). While child-related expenses including school costs were not one of the *main* reasons people sought help from relief agencies, this supports anecdotal reports that people are less likely to ask for help with these expenses. Only four per cent of all survey respondents believed that school expenses *contributed to their financial hardship* in January–February 2008. However, as only 44 per cent of total survey respondents had children, the actual percentage is likely to be much higher. Supporting this, numerous comments provided by parents described their struggle to meet education costs in the context of rent and other bills (Engels et al. 2009).

In fiscal terms, the community sector makes an enormous contribution to the overall material needs, including the education, of disadvantaged Australians. In Victoria, over 700 non government organisations provide emergency relief and 'the total value of emergency relief support provided to the Victorian community sector each year is estimated at \$25–30 million' (in Engels et al. 2009, p.11). A portion of these funds comes from government: for instance, 22.3 per cent of federal emergency relief is directed to Victoria, amounting to \$6,950,000 in 2006–07 (Department of Family & Community Services 2007). However, a large burden of the cost falls on community organisations, and the philanthropic organisations, trusts and private donors which support them.

Surprisingly given the millions at stake, little data is available on specific community sector assistance for education costs. In the remainder of this report, this assistance will be referred to as ‘emergency education relief’ (EER).

When contacted in August 2009, the Victorian office of the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA) reported that they do not collect education-specific expenditure data in emergency relief providers’ acquittal reports. However, two recent studies of the financial impact of education costs shed light on this subject.

One study by UnitingCare Geelong indicated that in 2007–08, the agency provided financial support of \$84,974 to 301 families – or 443 students – struggling with education costs. An average \$192 was provided per student for books, uniforms, school shoes, fees and school camps. Moreover, the study indicated that it had more than doubled the financial support provided between 2004 and 2008 (Osburn 2008).

A further study of the implementation of the Victorian Youth Employment, Education and Training Initiative for homeless young people found that of the \$366,064 brokerage funding, over \$220,000 was paid for TAFE and secondary school fees and costs, including voluntary levies. It was found that without financial assistance, young people risked ‘disconnecting from education altogether’ because this vulnerable group was left to fund the ‘vehicle’ to their own employment (Broadbent 2008). Jade, a young participant in a recent focus group conducted by WAYSS and the Council to Homeless Persons, summed up the situation succinctly: ‘Of course you’re gonna drop out of school. You’re not gonna have all the kids laugh at you cos you can’t afford the uniform or the books’ (Lezzari 2009, personal communication, 7 September).

While these studies highlight educational inequity, the absence of sector-wide research quantifying EER costs indicates a knowledge gap in the sector. The broad aim of this research is to fill this gap, and to quantify in dollars the extent to which Victorian community service organisations, including emergency relief providers, assist disadvantaged families to meet school education expenses. A further aim is to examine organisational views about the use of these resources and how best to ensure that cost is not a barrier to participation in school.

On the broader issue of education equity in Australia’s post-Whitlam government era, Rosalyn Black asserts:

Three decades on and as noted in the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) statement on the future of Australian schooling (Dawkins, 2007), there has been no gain in the level of equity in Australian schooling. This may be due to widening economic inequity and especially to a growing concentration of poverty among families with school-age students in Australia over this period (Senate Community Affairs Reference Group, 2004). However, at the same time there has been a relative decline in the level of policy and program activity in the area of educational equity. The amount of extra resources provided to schools with high concentrations of students from low income households is minimal and the policy approach to addressing the issue of poor outcomes of schools located in poor neighbourhoods has mostly been restricted to discussions about the quality of teachers and school leaders (Black, 2008, p.82).

Correspondingly, a further objective of this research report is to encourage an increase in policy and programs focussing on educational equity. The implications of research findings for government, the community sector and disadvantaged families are explored, and the report concludes with the joint recommendations of the Equity in Education Alliance.

2 Method

In preparation for this research, 11 community organisations were contacted to discuss the availability of EER expense data. One indicated that expense data was not collected at this level of detail, while two large community organisations indicated that there was no central agency collection of this data, but that it may be collected at a program level. Given variance in data collection methods, it also became clear that the most appropriate person to provide the information varied from organisation to organisation.

A survey comprising both qualitative and quantitative measures was developed using online 'Survey Monkey' software to collect data on the dollar value of school-related EER during the 2008–09 financial year, as well as organisational information and views on the best way to ensure that cost is not a barrier to full participation in school.

The survey was piloted to check the appropriateness of questions before full distribution commenced in August 2009 when a broad sample of community organisations was invited to respond based on available contact and network lists, i.e. a sample of convenience. Invitee subsets, as defined by various program or network mailing lists, included members of Emergency Relief Victoria (N = 50), members of the Victorian Council of Social Service (N = 350), the Victorian School Focused Youth Service (N = 72), providers of the program 'Creating Connections' for youth at risk of homelessness (N = 35), members and associate members of Community Information Victoria (N = 67), all UnitingCare Victoria branch agencies (N = 37) and community organisations on a St Vincent de Paul network list (N = 150). In addition, the survey was sent to kinship care agencies on the Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare's mailing list, and all participants were invited to forward the survey to other agencies as appropriate.

One reminder was sent via email before the survey was closed on 15 September. A basic statistical analysis of quantitative data was undertaken using Excel and SPSS software, and qualitative items were analysed thematically.

Limitations

It is acknowledged that this research will not show the full extent of education cost pressures for a number of reasons. Many families prioritise education and are less likely to seek help with these costs from community and emergency relief providers. In addition, community organisations, their branches and programs are fragmented and sometimes lack the capacity to collect EER costs data. For example, branches of community organisations (e.g. Op Shops) may deliver EER but are reliant on volunteers and do not have the capacity to respond to surveys. The large number of community organisations makes a complete audit of EER expenditure problematic. Finally, this research does not seek to measure school fundraising efforts aimed at ensuring all children fully participate in the curriculum, which might be considered another form of cost shifting.

3 The Emergency Education Relief Survey

Participants

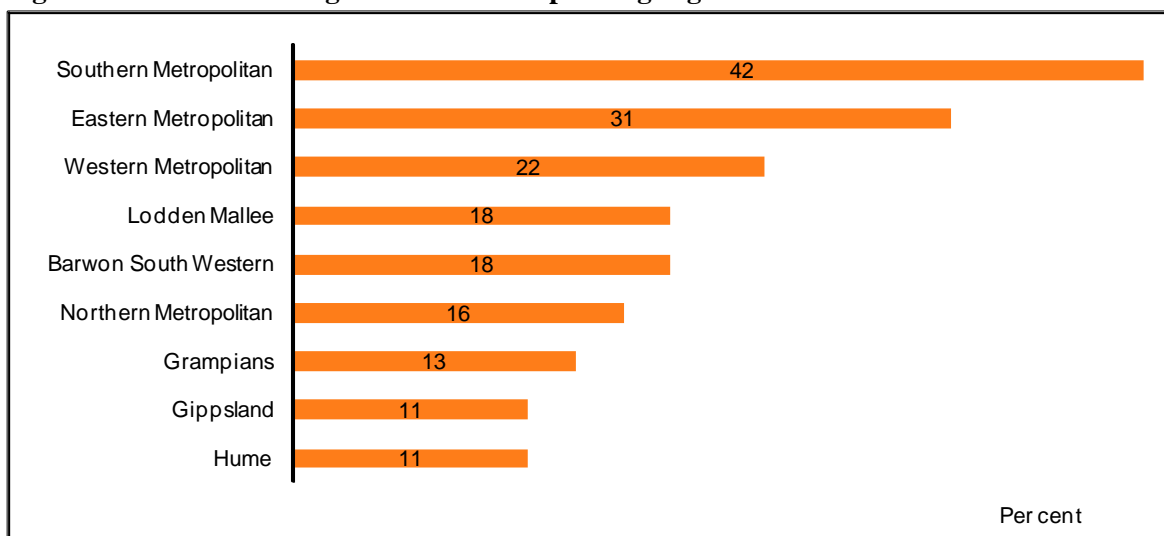
Some 53 people responded to the Emergency Education Relief (EER) Survey on behalf of their organisation, branch or division, with a total 43 organisations participating overall. Respondents represented a range of position titles. Program managers or coordinators were most likely to complete the survey (51%), followed by department, branch or unit managers (15%), finance managers (6%) and volunteers (6%). The remainder identified with some ‘other’ position title.

Organisations

Organisations¹ included a range of community organisations including welfare/service delivery/charitable organisations, regional church initiatives, local information services, community houses, health centres and one council.

The Victorian education department regions in which respondent organisations deliver EER varied (see Fig 3.1). Some 42 per cent provided EER in the Southern Metropolitan Region, 31 per cent in the east and around 22 per cent in the west. Outside Melbourne, the Loddon Mallee and Barwon South Western Regions were the next most represented.

Figure 3.1 Victorian regions in which responding organisations deliver EER



More than half of the respondents indicated that their organisation had only one branch (57%). Some 21 per cent had two to four branches, 16 per cent had five to nine branches and seven per cent had ten or more.

Just under half indicated their organisation’s total staff (full, part time and casual) was 20 or less (45%) with a further 21 per cent having a staff of 21–49 and 14 per cent having a staff of 50–99. Relatively few organisations had a staff of 100–150 but 17 per cent had 150 plus.

¹ Note: In the section; ‘Organisations’, to avoid over-representation / multiple responses, branch office responses have been omitted where head office data was available. The section is based on a database of 45 respondents.

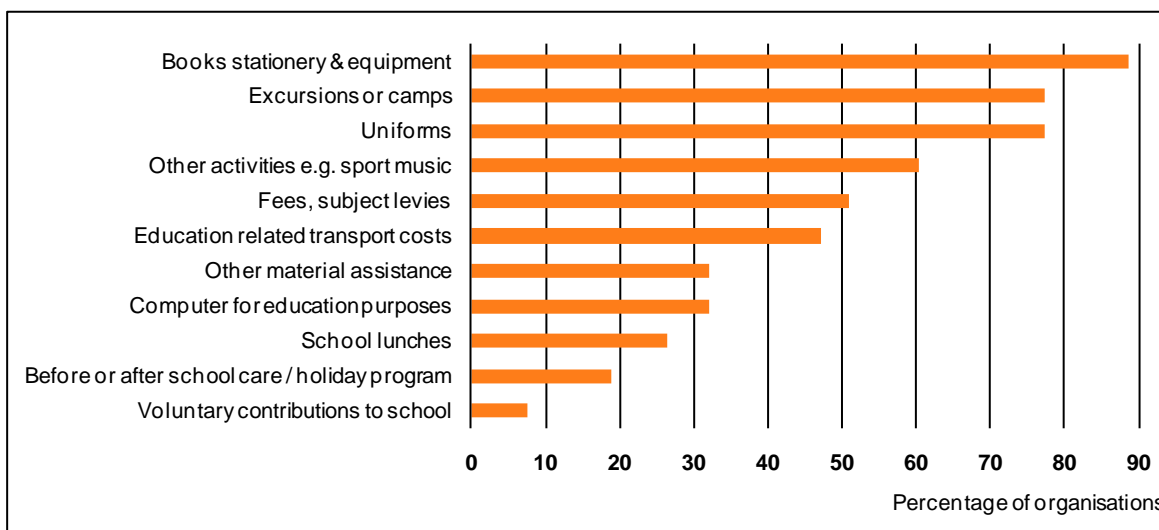
Some 62 per cent of respondents indicated organisation / branch budgets of less than one million. Over one fifth reported a budget of one to four million (21%) while 17 per cent reported budgets over five million.

Types of emergency education relief provided

Organisations provided many types of emergency education relief.² Almost 90 per cent of respondents said their agencies provided EER in the form of books, stationery and equipment with just under 80 per cent providing help with the cost of excursions, camps and uniforms. Some 61 per cent helped with the cost of other activities such as sport or music. Between one third and half of respondents assisted with the cost of education related transport costs, computers for education purposes and other material assistance.

Help with the cost of school lunches, before/after school care and holiday programs was provided by fewer agencies. This may be owing to parents feeling less able to ask for this kind of help; the contribution of breakfast clubs, learning support programs and community-operated holiday programs; or the contribution of the Commonwealth Childcare Benefit. That eight per cent of agencies assisted low income families make ‘voluntary’ contributions raises the question of the extent to which these contributions are, in reality, voluntary. The longstanding nature of the issue is evident given more than a decade has passed since the publication of the report, ‘Voluntary Smoluntary’ (VCOSS 1998).

Figure 3.2 Percentages of organisations offering different types of emergency education relief



² Note: The section; ‘Types of Emergency education relief provided’, is based on data from 51 respondents. In the two instances where both head offices and branches responded from the same organisation, head offices were excluded from the analysis to prevent over-representation and because head office responses provided a less complete picture of the types of branch expenditure.

Total emergency education relief expenditure

Source of capital

Organisations were asked to specify the sources of capital used to fund EER and the percentage of total funding that came from each source. Data was obtained for 26 organisations, most relying on a variety of sources.

- 96 per cent used capital from trusts or philanthropic organisations. Of these organisations, trusts/philanthropic contributions typically comprised 65 per cent of their total capital.
- 92 per cent used capital from donations. Of these organisations, donations typically made up 56 per cent of their total capital.

The proportions using government funding were lower although still considerable:

- 70 per cent said at least some of their capital came from federal emergency relief funding. Of these organisations, emergency relief funding typically comprised 20 per cent of their total capital.
- 79 per cent used capital from other government funding. Of these organisations, other government funding typically made up 45 per cent of their total capital.

Note: Percentages do not add to 100 because the types of capital used and their proportional contribution to overall capital, varied considerably across organisations. The proportional contribution of each type is based on the 'typical' or median response from 26 organisations.

Total expenditure

Just over half of the branch offices and organisations³ (53%) reported actual total expense figures while the remainder reported estimates.

The minimum expenditure by any one organisation was \$300, the median was \$8000 and the maximum \$200,000.

Based on expense data from 49 branch offices and organisations, the total reported expenditure was \$1,015,816.

Given that the state has an estimated 700 emergency relief providers, and some major community organisations (e.g. The Smith Family, Salvation Army) did not participate in the survey, these figures are likely to represent only a modest fraction of total emergency education relief expenditure.

Expenditure by type of relief

Twenty-five respondents provided totals by type of EER (See Figure 3.3). Based on the median or middle respondent, the greatest expenses overall were school lunches (\$1500) and uniforms (\$1350). However some individual organisations/branches spent considerable sums on: education related transport costs (\$33,008), books, stationery and equipment (\$26,397), excursions or camps

³ Note: This section, 'Total expenditure', is based on a database of 50 respondents (provider database). This is because in two instances both the branches/divisions and the head office of an organisation responded to the survey. Responses were therefore omitted to prevent double accounting and provide the most complete expense data to be obtained from the survey.

(\$10,000) and uniforms (\$10,000). This variation is likely to be a result of the different programs and foci of organisations.

Figure 3.3 Emergency education expenses by type for 2008–09, in dollars

Type of expense	Number of responses	Median	Lowest	Highest
School lunches	4	\$1,500	\$300	\$4,500
Uniforms	16	\$1,350	\$55	\$10,000
Books, stationery & equipment	19	\$1,000	\$100	\$26,397
Education related transport costs	6	\$1,000	\$100	\$33,008
Computer for education purposes	5	\$1,000	\$200	\$6,523
Excursions or camps	10	\$900	\$300	\$10,000
Fees, subject levies	12	\$868	\$200	\$3,479
Other activities e.g. sport music	9	\$600	\$200	\$3,300

Note: Information for voluntary contributions (\$200) and before or after school care / holiday programs (\$400) was provided by only one respondent so these items are omitted from the table.

Organisational views about emergency education relief

While half the respondents affirmed that the provision of EER was part of their organisational mission, the other half said that it occurred organically or naturally due to the needs of clients presenting for assistance. Written comments indicated that EER arose as part of family and youth assistance services brokerage. One respondent wrote:

We began delivering the education assistance program in response to the increasing numbers of families requesting assistance (particularly between December and February). Interestingly, about 75% of people accessing assistance with education support, do not require other emergency relief assistance throughout the year (Community Information Centre).

Another provider of government-funded emergency relief indicated that people seeking help with education costs were put into their food program for three months to, ‘enable them to meet the financial demands, i.e. the money saved on food bills goes towards the expenses.’

Some 40 people provided a written response to the question: What is the best way of ensuring cost is not a barrier to full participation in school? Analysis indicated nine common themes.

- providing financial assistance for low income families (this was to occur through programs assessing the education-related cost pressures faced by parents, and by offering assistance so these were not barriers to participation). The provider and source of funding for these programs was not discussed except by one respondent who suggested it could be sought via community and corporate donations and sponsorship.
- increased financial support through the government welfare payment system and through an allowance to cover uniforms, excursions and other costs.
- resourcing schools to address the needs of low income families and or providing free education for low income students.
- ensuring that school ‘voluntary’ payments are genuinely ‘voluntary’.
- creating schemes to reduce costs, for example, by providing free public transport for disadvantaged students; reducing the number of textbook editions; and schools having either class sets of textbooks or a hire program.

- increasing awareness of other barriers to participation such as homelessness and family instability.
- making education free.
- increasing the services provided by schools and or taking a more holistic approach with schools, parents and community organisations working in collaboration on issues such as costs.
- Statewide advocacy on the issue of equity in education.

Sample responses appear in Box 3.1.

Box 3.1 Sample responses to question: What is the best way of ensuring that cost is not a barrier to participation in school?

Reviewing with the child and parents what will need to possibly be covered financially for the school year and providing this financial support.

ER agencies should not be involved to this extent. Clearly if Centrelink benefits were set at a reasonable level then many of the demands for education funding made on emergency relief would be reduced to only assisting in real emergencies. At the moment emergency relief in a whole range of areas is providing supplementary income support.

Schools to have funds to cover the costs of items and activities for children who are unable to pay for them.

Ensuring that people on low income do not have to cover compulsory educational expenses.

A limit on what is excluded from the educational experience if the 'voluntary' fees are not paid.

Voluntary contributions should be 'voluntary' as opposed to being voluntary in name only but compulsory in practice.

Disadvantaged young persons have to be provided with free public transport.

Students should be able to use second hand books which would be less expensive. At present text books are re-written or just a small part is changed too frequently thus making it harder for parents as they have to buy new textbooks. On the other hand schools should have textbooks for students to borrow, this way the parents would only pay the nominal hire fee.

By raising awareness of the effects of homelessness and not attending school on children and retaining funding from government sources so that no child misses out on education and social inclusion type activities.

In a democratic society, true democracy thrives on the ability of people to participate. Education is ... key in development of critical thought. In a highly literate culture, education is also key to participation generally. If we value participation in a democracy, and we value equality of participation, it is a no brainer that we provide educative systems to facilitate those things, and that these activities...are freely provided.

No fees for government education.

Through schools becoming more accountable to provide for their students in an inclusive manner, possibly through the provision of a 'one stop shop' provided at the schools where students & families can access books, uniforms, equipment, plus budget for camps etc. on a payment plan based on individual income and ability to pay.

A holistic approach, where a community organisation, parents and the school work together in supporting families in need.

4 Discussion

The EER survey provides some indication of cost shifting in the education sector. Education is a common good that is supposed to be free, but as previous research indicates, a considerable amount is paid from the private purse (Bond & Horn 2009). Thus responsibility for these costs is being shifted from the government to the individual.

This is problematic for low-income families and there is evidence that many children miss out on basic aspects of their education due to cost. For those parents that seek help these costs are then shifted a *second time* from the individual to the community sector. As this research also indicates, further cost shifting occurs as the community sector EER funding comes in small part from government and in large part from trusts, philanthropic organisations and private donations. This raises the issue of whether securing a basic education should rely on the capacity of the community sector and the benevolence of private donors.

In this small survey, EER costs from 49 community organisations (branch offices and or headquarters, as available) amounted to \$1,015,816 in the 2008–09 financial year. This is only a small portion of the total EER provided in Victoria, which is home to some 700 emergency relief providers. While not all emergency relief providers give out payments specifically for the education-related costs of children and young people, the level of cost shifting would run to several million dollars annually. Furthermore, as many disadvantaged parents do not seek assistance from community organisations, these figures are an even smaller indication of overall need.

These findings and evidence of cost shifting have larger implications for government, the community sector and the people they serve.

Firstly, the government has a responsibility to provide public goods such as universal access to education. As a signatory to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights the federal government commits to ensuring children have access to a ‘free’ education (UN 1966, Article 14). The Melbourne Declaration firmly sets the community and governmental expectations of promoting ‘equity and excellence’ for Australian schooling and seeks to ensure that ‘socioeconomic disadvantage ceases to be a significant determinant of educational outcomes’ (MCEETYA 2008). However, cost shifting suggests that these responsibilities are not being taken seriously enough. Providing a genuinely free education for all, or at the least, the targeted provision of free education for disadvantaged students, is the best way of ensuring that costs do not present a barrier to participation.

Secondly, while the community sector has a clear role in addressing the needs and advocating on behalf of disadvantaged Australians, this must be intentional and well-integrated within organisations’ strategic plans. Half of all respondents said that EER provision was not a part of their organisational mission but occurred naturally due to the needs of clients. This suggests the sector is being reactive and or responding outside its mandate, to ensure children do not miss out on education due to shortcomings of the state. That the other half of the sector accepts EER provision as part of its mission and is seeking to meet growing demand, should also be reviewed, and sector-wide accounting of EER expenditure should be considered. Providing EER on an ongoing basis, in the absence of strong advocacy, reduces the visibility of educational inequities and accepts the transfer of responsibility away from the state and onto individuals and the community sector.

As suggested by some respondents, the sector should collaborate with government, schools and parents to provide holistic services to those at risk of educational exclusion. However, it is essential

that the roles of the state and the community sector are clearly defined, and action is in the strategic interests of the organisation, its private and philanthropic donors, and most importantly, disadvantaged Australians.

Thirdly, cost shifting and failure to effectively address educational inequity suggest a lack of concern for the vulnerable members of our society, and are in clear contradiction to the social inclusion agenda's focus on 'children at risk of long-term disadvantage' (Australian Social Inclusion Board 2008). As suggested by respondents, current welfare support is inadequate to meet basics needs. This economic and social exclusion prevents low income Australians from leading lives of dignity. Parents are being forced to choose which basic items can be afforded, and which of their children they can afford to buy them for. This reduces their children's ability to participate fully in school, which in turn, has implications for their ability to be productive adult members of society.

Finally, from a public policy perspective, cost shifting is inefficient. Costs are handballed from government to private individuals then to the community sector, then to private donors and trusts, and back to government via limited EER funding. As many disadvantaged families do not seek assistance, it seems likely that many children fall through the cracks during this 'transfer process'. The inefficiency of cost shifting also undermines the COAG Productivity Agenda and jeopardises the national target of 90 per cent Year 12 attainment by 2015 (COAG 2009). Children cannot attain Year 12 at school if costs act as a barrier to their participation.

The Equity in Education Alliance welcomes the commitment of the Victorian and federal governments to improving educational outcomes. However, to achieve the goal of increased educational participation and attainment, cost shifting must be eliminated and adequate policy measures introduced to address financial barriers to full participation in education.

5 Recommendations

The Equity in Education Alliance makes the following joint recommendations:

Reducing cost barriers

The Victorian government should introduce new initiatives to reduce cost barriers.

- Return the full amount of the Education Maintenance Allowance to help disadvantaged parents cover the cost of extras such as uniforms and school shoes.
- Introduce free public transport for all school-aged children and young people to address cost-induced non-attendance (with the added benefit of reducing the carbon footprint of education).
- Resource schools to operate a second-hand uniform shop.
- Increase the use of class sets of books; pilot a textbook library scheme in which students borrow their books for the year and pay for the books if they are lost or are damaged beyond reasonable wear-and-tear; and work with curriculum developers and publishers to reduce the number of revisions and new textbook editions.

Promoting educational equity and inclusion

- Develop a social inclusion checklist for public schools, with financial equity targets, and require that schools report back on achievement. Federal and state governments should jointly establish targets, effectively adding a triple bottom line to their current quality- and performance-focussed reporting.
- Raise awareness among parents of state policy on education costs, their rights and how to object to unfair charges.
- Create an Education Ombudsman role to promote excellence, equity and inclusion in education.

Knowledge management in emergency relief

- Undertake state-funded research of the community sector with systems for tracking the dollar-value of its contribution across service areas, for example, total community sector expenditure on emergency education relief.
- Build into the emergency relief funding acquittal process more detailed categories such as 'education expenses' to track how funding is spent. This information should be made publicly available by the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs.

National social inclusion agenda

- Increase income support payments so they are consistent with policies of social inclusion and do not jeopardise the government's productivity agenda.
- Ensure that community agency emergency relief initiatives are incorporated into their strategic plans so that service to low income groups is accompanied by strong advocacy seeking a more inclusive Australia.

Progressive introduction of a free public education

- Both the federal and Victorian governments should increase funding to public schools to ensure that the instruction and resources required to teach the standard curriculum are free and fees are not charged by schools. To ensure that financial hardship is not a barrier to participation:
 - increase the Student Resource Package and, in particular, its equity funding component
 - provide free of charge for all students, camps, excursions and incursions that are recognised as part of the curriculum
 - remove subject contributions, levies and charges for consumables provided by the school for all students to ensure that cost is not a factor in subject choice.
 - increase regulations and impose penalties on schools that are in breach of the Victorian Parent Payment Policy to ensure that 'voluntary' payments are genuinely voluntary.

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