Partnering to learn: the role of community organisations in supporting disadvantaged students

Summary of the Partnering to Learn Forum

- hosted by Melbourne Citymission and the Brotherhood of St Laurence on November 12th 2009

Attachments:

Key themes from group discussions at the Forum

Discussion Paper released for the Forum

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Working for an Australia free of poverty

Melbourne Citymission
Building Inclusive Communities

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Our call

Education is an important route out of disadvantage and exclusion. However, many of the children and young people with whom Melbourne Citymission and the Brotherhood of St Laurence work face significant disadvantage within the education system. Community organisations are playing an increasingly important role in assisting these students to reengage with learning, overcome personal, family and environmental barriers to participation, and strengthen their achievement.

Homework clubs and tutoring programs (also known as Learning Support Programs) are a promising example of school-community partnership at the local level. Despite this, they are largely unfunded and remain peripheral to education reform policy.

Melbourne Citymission and the Brotherhood of St Laurence call on governments to recognize Learning Support Programs as a complementary social and learning support strategy for disadvantaged students who are at risk of disengaging from school. [1] This recognition could be achieved through resourcing, and infrastructure support to develop the sector and enhance program quality.

[1] Anne Pate, *Learning Support Programs – 'A chance to experience success'. An evaluation of four Melbourne Citymission Learning Support Programs for children and young people*, Research & Social Policy Unit, Melbourne Citymission, September 2008, and Sharon Bond, *Learning support programs. Education reform beyond the school*, Brotherhood of St Laurence, May 2009

Summary of the Partnering to Learn Forum

The forum ***Partnering to learn: The role of community organisations in supporting disadvantaged students*** was hosted in Melbourne on 12th November 2009 by Melbourne Citymission and the Brotherhood of St Laurence.

Over one hundred participants representing Federal, State and Local Government, schools, the community sector and parents engaged in lively debate about the role of Learning Support Programs in overcoming educational disadvantage, and how they can best be supported.

This breadth of representation demonstrates the concern amongst stakeholders about the impacts of disadvantage on the educational experience and outcomes of some children and young people. It also suggests that Learning Support Programs are a promising opportunity for partnership between schools, community, government, and business.

The following **papers** were presented at the forum:

- Keynote address by Rosalyn Black, Foundation for Young Australians: *Overcoming the barriers to engagement and equity for all students*
- Kim Ryan, DEECD: *School-community partnerships: policy and practice*
- Robyn Tribe: *Profile of Learning Support Programs in Victoria*
- Michael Horn, Brotherhood of St Laurence: *Policy frameworks for learning support*

All the **papers** along with previous **reports** by Melbourne Citymission and the Brotherhood of St Laurence can be accessed at www.mcm.org.au or www.bsl.org.au

A key purpose of the day was to engage participants in discussion about how the learning support sector can be developed and sustained. The **group discussions** considered the following questions (see Appendix 1 for a summary of key themes):

Financial

How can LSPs be supported to ensure their financial stability?

Quality

What is the role of governments in ensuring high quality delivery of LSPs over the next decade to enhance educational outcomes for disadvantaged students?

Sector development

How can the following issues be adequately addressed into the future:

a) recruitment / retention of tutors

b) sharing good practice

c) stronger links with schools

d) responding to needs across communities (coverage).

Presenters and participants at the forum highlighted that: [2]

- The **links between disadvantage and poor educational experiences and outcomes** are well-known. Real change will not occur without innovative responses which go beyond a focus on teacher quality and school performance.

- To address the needs of students from disadvantaged backgrounds in particular requires a **cultural change** in how education is provided. This should include greater cross-sector involvement particularly from community organisations.

- **Government leadership and resourcing** is needed for this change to occur. Without this, partnerships between schools, communities and parents to develop LSPs will remain contingent on the personal networking skills and available resources of educators, business and community sector players in any given community. Many participants also expressed a desire to 'move beyond the pilots' and embed a partnership approach to learning.

- While Learning Support Programs have developed in response to local level demand from teachers, students and parents, an intentional **expansion of coverage to the most disadvantaged places** is required.

- The strongest message which emerged from the day was that **responsibility for funding programs** should rightly sit with State and Federal government. The current mix of philanthropic and community organisation funding jeopardises program sustainability and quality.

- Another key message was that **policy frameworks** should support the development of LSPs as part of an integrated suite of services surrounding schools. At the same time, government funding and policy recognition should be managed in ways which allow community providers to continue to be flexible in response to local need. Learning Beyond the Bell, which coordinates government funding and provides support to programs provided by community organisations, is a promising model for how this can be achieved.

Next steps

Melbourne Citymission and the Brotherhood of St Laurence will continue to advocate to both State and Federal Government for recognition of Learning Support Programs through supportive policy frameworks and funding. We are also seeking to build an advocacy alliance with other interested stakeholders. Hanover Welfare Services has already joined the partnership.

If you would like more information, or to join us in this work, please contact:

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[2] This summary may not represent the views of all the presenters.

Appendix 1: Key themes from group discussions at the Partnering to Learn Forum

1 Financial - How can LSPs be supported to ensure their financial stability?

Participants observed that current funding is inconsistent, provided through a 'patchwork of funding sources' and short-term pilots. One group stated that LSPs 'operate on a shoestring and are not sustainable'.

The responsibility of state and federal government as a core funding provider arose as the strongest theme. Long term, systemic LSP funding should be provided, with programs integrated into mainstream education and school funding. This commitment from government should be guided by a 'dawn-till-dusk' model which takes a 'lifelong learning approach.' As one group argued: 'Schools must be engaged to understand why LSPs are effective. Bolt on programs don't work.' Integration through the development of learning hubs and LSPs potential inclusion with maternal health centres and / or preschools for the younger ages was emphasised.

Several groups called for the DEECD to be more prescriptive regarding expenditure of funding for low socioeconomic schools to ensure they offer a 'suite of activities…to support young people to stay at school'.

Some groups emphasised the responsibility of schools with regard to literacy and numeracy interventions, believing regional school networks should fund LSPs. Schools solve the issue of a venue and after-hours programs can be staffed by teachers. However, schools involvement, for example in training volunteers, e.g. in current literacy and numeracy methods, requires funding.

The 'high' and sometimes 'hidden' cost of collaboration and partnership between schools, LLEN, government were noted by a few groups. They emphasised that funding is needed to facilitate these partnerships which were otherwise difficult. The School Focussed Youth Service was identified as another point of collaboration where resources and coordinators could be clustered and shared.

Local government was perceived to have a role in resourcing LSPs through council grants and the provision of a venue. Another minor theme was the need to produce a list of potential funders and avenues for other resources, and the role of ourcommunity.com.au in listing available resources

While there was broad consensus that responsibility for funding programs should rest with government, some participants reported the positive role of philanthropic funding. However, this funding is generally short term and limited to a few core programs which happen to fit the funders mission and objectives.'

Finally, program sustainability could be addressed by developing a 'robust costing model that looks at other income streams'. For example, it was suggested a regional program including 'poorer' independent schools would enable the pooling of resources.

2 Quality - What is the role of governments in ensuring high quality delivery of LSPs over the next decade to enhance educational outcomes for disadvantaged students?

Benchmarking 'high quality', the development of best practice models, a code of practice, and an accountability framework were identified as quality control issues within the sector by many groups. Accompanying this was the need for research and evaluations to develop outcome measures, demonstrate achievement and share learnings.

The state education department was perceived to have a major role through the development of a central administrative unit to support LSPs. Groups saw this as having the potential to:

- provide funding and resources which are linked with quality
- embed policy quality standards using the Learning Beyond the Bell model
- establish regional reference committees
- continue regional networks such as those developed by DEECD / Learning Beyond the Bell
- provide training and resources for programs
- extend the curriculum beyond homework to sport, health, family welfare, and take a whole-of-life approach to learning.
- ensure the provision of tutor training in:
    - literacy and numeracy so methods are consistent to those used in schools
    - sensitivity to CALD communities issues and those relating to people with special needs and low-income families
    - safety procedures
- regulate volunteer 'Working with Children' and police checks
- seed a research agenda and develop this in partnership with other stakeholders.
- establish a clearinghouse for LSP policy and research

One group identified the role of NGOS and LLENs in ensuring quality. Others expressed concerns that government regulation might be heavy-handed saying: 'quality doesn't necessarily need to be institutionalised.' Several were concerned that regulation must be balanced with the need for program flexibility in specific communities. Recognising 'the place of community and the importance of retaining community engagement' was seen as critical. In thinking about quality another emphasised the need for community education and parent involvement noting that otherwise there were impediments such as parents not signing forms.

3 Sector development - How can these issues be adequately addressed into the future?

a) recruitment / retention of tutors

Potential recruits

The development of partnerships with Victorian universities was a strong theme. Many emphasised the potential role of pre-service teachers as LSP tutors and some suggested that recruitment could be expanded to include students in other courses who should receive credits for their participation. However, one group noted constraints associated with the use of students as tutors. These would conceivably be related to availability outside of university teaching periods, participation during exam periods, and ability to fit travel and participation in LSPs with other classes. One table suggested that post-Year 12 students were a further potential source of tutors, presumably with alumni assisting in the same community they attended high school.

Two groups suggested using 'mature age people as a means of tapping into community knowledge'. Recruitment of this cohort could occur through the University of the Third Age and older people's groups.

Two groups also referenced the use of parents as tutors. While this was seen as positive one noted that the volunteering capacity of mothers was limited due to their increased workforce participation.

A further source of volunteers identified were corporate employees who could be recruited through organisational corporate social responsibility strategies.

Strategies

In recruiting and retaining volunteers the following strategies were suggested:

- Central promotion of LSP volunteering and advertisement of positions through local government volunteer agencies. The importance of recruiting locally was noted.
- Good coordination that is funded. This role includes supervision and debriefing, support for volunteer 'rights and responsibilities'. Building relationships was perceived as important and ensuring that volunteers feel 'valued.'
- Provide access to resources to aid the coordination of volunteers, e.g. position descriptions.
- Fund some tutor positions and or reimbursement of costs such as petrol
- Offer accredited tutor training with some provided by current teachers. Use of modelling to teach tutors, and ongoing professional development
- Obtain feedback from students on good tutoring
- Use of peer tutoring and support between students.

b) sharing good practice

Mediums

Networks were seen by groups as an effective means of sharing good practice. Groups noted the potential to use existing networks such as the LLEN and School Focussed Youth Service. One group suggested that postcode rather than regional level groups would be most useful, presumably for developing local programs. These networks, which need to have funding, should provide practitioners with a chance to share over cheese and wine 'what works' and also support the exchange of 'failure' or what didn't work. These networks should have a relationships component.

In addition to in-person meetings, groups suggested the use of technology to support the sector, for example, to save people from travelling to meetings and an online government-coordinated clearinghouse for best practice and information about LSP networks.

Ideas

Other groups made best-practice related suggestions. Several emphasised the importance of mentoring, role modelling and allowing children and young people to help. Working with parents was also seen as important. Programmatically, the need for a Prep to Year 12 logic in delivery was noted, presumably as a lifelong learning and transitions approach. The potential role of libraries as learning hubs was also acknowledged.

Program evaluation was also seen as important in documenting best practice. Finally however, one group made the distinction between best practice and best principle suggesting the importance of flexibility across local programs.

c) stronger links with schools

A key theme from groups was the importance of establishing a contact point or person in schools for LSP related communication. One option was having, as the Smith Family did, staff based within a college. Otherwise, communicating or promoting the benefits of LSPs within schools was noted as important.

The development of steering committees and memorandum of understanding with schools was suggested, but more generally the inclusion of school representatives on networks was seen as critical. Existing networks such as DEECD regional Network Leaders and LLEN regional networks had a role to play in encouraging this involvement. More broadly the education department was perceived as needing to facilitate school involvement in partnerships to address services provision if not to: 'mandate that schools to engage with community [rather than this being]…left to individual initiatives.'

More generally schools were perceived as having a role in:

- Moving towards a more integrated, school-based services model that recognises the 'intersection between welfare and education'
- Embedding workers in schools

- Helping programs engage 'at risk' students and promote programs: 'How do you get young people to LSPs, just putting them in place doesn't mean students will come'.

- Acknowledge that education also 'happens outside of schools'

d) responding to needs across communities (coverage)

Community coordination

Regional networks and coordination was raised by groups with the need for 'strategic distribution' of programs across communities. These were to be guided by regional reference committees. Government was perceived to have a role in ensuring that disadvantaged communities were targeted through 'part of state-federal policy and funding'. Another group added that this funding needed to be 'more prescriptive/conditional and more targeted to areas of need.'

Community engagement

From the perspective of the community, one group said you 'can't underestimate the importance of a stable place to go' describing LSPs as a 'connector' in the community for young people.

The importance of engaging parents was reiterated. This engagement needed to include communication about the value of education with LSPs having the potential to disseminate other information among parents. This could include information about welfare services, education, careers, parenting etc. Parents could also be engaged and supported to participate in LSPs as tutors.

Appendix 2: Partnering to Learn Forum Discussion Paper

The Discussion Paper, sent to participants in advance of the Forum, outlines our argument as follows:

- The social context for learning: how social exclusion / disadvantage affects learning outcomes
    - Disadvantage and educational outcomes throughout school
    - The context for educational reform
- The role of community organisations in supporting learning
    - Partnering to learn: Learning Support Programs
- A policy gap?
- Policy frameworks and options for support to LSPs

The social context for learning: how social exclusion / disadvantage affects learning outcomes

Children do not come to school as 'blank slates'. They come as members of a family, and of a community. Their ability to grasp social and learning opportunities at school is influenced by what is going on at home, by their social networks, and by the activities and resources open to them in their local communities. It is also influenced by the opportunities for learning support available to them both within and beyond school.

Clearly, some children come to school equipped with the personal, social and material resources to learn. They are likely to have parents who are able to assist them with homework, or pay for private tutoring and provide them with extracurricular social and recreational opportunities which build self-esteem and confidence. These students are provided with additional supports outside the classroom which maximize their potential to learn and to secure future opportunities in higher education and training or sustainable employment.

However, other students, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds and locations, face significant barriers to their academic, social and personal development, which can affect their progress through school, particularly at key transitions. For example, children growing up in families experiencing homelessness may have disrupted schooling, including prolonged absences and frequent changes of school. [3]

[3] There were 21,940 homeless young people aged 12-18 across Australia in 2006. In the ABS Census 2001, 9,941 children under the age of 12 across Australia and 36,173 young people aged between 12 –24 experienced homelessness. 10-16% of students in Australia are perceived by their teachers to have learning difficulties and support needs, particularly in literacy, that go beyond those normally addressed by class teachers – in Louden, W., Chan, L., Elkins, J., Greaves, D., House, H., Milton, M., Nichols, S., Rivalland, J., Rohl, M., & van Kraayennoord, C. (2000). *Mapping the territory, primary students with learning difficulties: Literacy and numeracy,* Vol. 1, 2, & 3. Department of Education, Training & Youth Affairs: Canberra, ACT.

Furthermore, some parents struggle to assist with homework or learning activities due to their own educational or language barriers. Income poverty also limits the capacity of disadvantaged families to support their children's full participation in extracurricular activities; to meet the costs of learning resources such as computers and books; and to pay for private tutoring. [4]

Children from disadvantaged backgrounds are less likely to make successful transitions throughout their school careers and more likely to leave school early. The association between early school leaving and students' social and economic backgrounds is strong and consistent. [5]

Disadvantage and educational outcomes throughout school

The Victorian Government's aspirations for children and young people are articulated in *The Victorian Child and Adolescent Outcomes Framework*. [6] These aspirations are for:

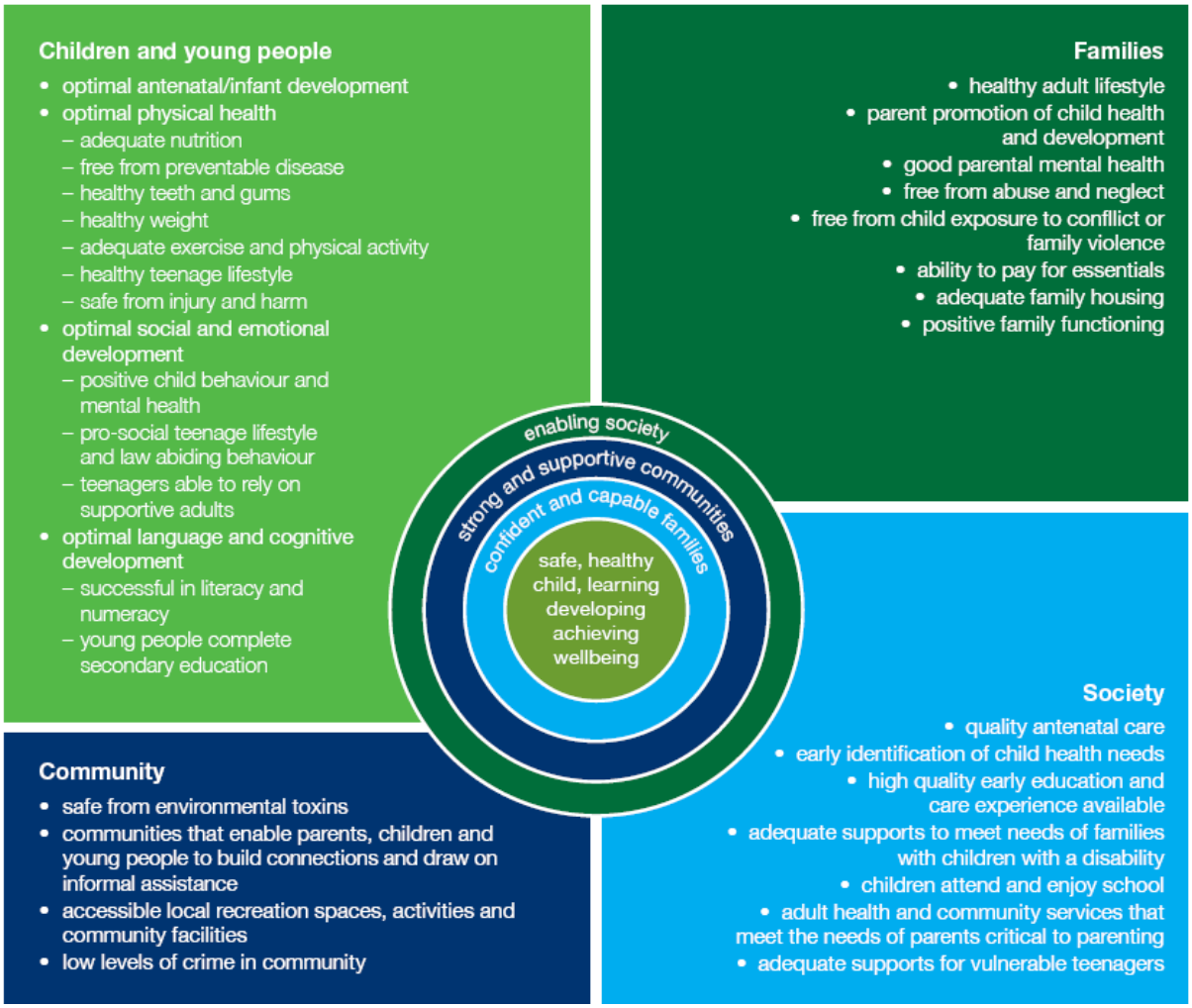
- young people who are safe, healthy and continuing to develop, learn and achieve wellbeing
- confident and capable parents
- strong and supportive communities … positive peers
- an enabling society.

The framework illustrates identified outcomes for children and young people across the key domains of individual, family, community and society.

[4] Sharon Bond, *Learning Support Programs: Education reform beyond the school*, Brotherhood of St Laurence, p.1

[5] Lamb et al cited in Jack Keating, *A new federalism in Australian education: a proposal for a national reform agenda*, Education Foundation, 2009, p.16

[6] Office for Children, Department of Human Services, 2007, *A strategic framework for Family Services*, Victorian Government, Melbourne



It is evident from the framework that factors which support learning need to be addressed across all the domains, and that some children and young people lack supportive contexts for learning.

The links between social background and educational outcomes are apparent before, during and after the school career. The strongest predictor of success in formal education, including school completion, is early learning success. The second strongest predictor is social background. [7] In practice, social background and early learning success are interconnected.

Variable rates of access to preschool education, and social background, mean that children come to primary school with different levels of cultural, social and learning capital. [8]

The most socially and economically vulnerable groups have the weakest patterns of participation in formal preschool education. [9] Numerous studies have found that children

[7] Jack Keating, *A new federalism in Australian education: a proposal for a national reform agenda*, Education Foundation, 2009, p.15

[8] *Ibid*., p.41

[9] *Ibid.,* p.15

from financially disadvantaged families begin school with poorer cognitive and language abilities. [10] Children from financially disadvantaged families are at greater risk of poor school readiness, due to much higher rates of risk factors and the accumulation of risks experienced. [11]

Children who live in persistent poverty have also been found to display more behavioural and emotional problems compared to children who experience short-term poverty and those who have never been poor. [12] Children with specific learning needs or behavioural issues do not always cope well with traditional classroom environments, and may not receive sufficient additional support within the education system.

Intensive intervention programs to support children who have not reached age and grade level expectations in the early years of primary school are not consistently available within schools. Children may therefore begin to fall behind from a very early age.

Outcomes in the middle years of school are also highly variable. Children from disadvantaged backgrounds are at greater risk than other children of disengaging from school in the middle years. [13] Low literacy and numeracy achievement in middle schooling is a significant contributing factor to school non-completion. [14] Greater equity in the middle and early years of schooling will be required if higher rates of Year 12 retention and post school education and training are to be achieved. [15]

Black observes that *'The pre-conditions for successful middle years learning for disadvantaged students include a raft of factors that stem from and can only be mediated outside the classroom'*. [16]

Some groups of young Australians are failing to make successful transitions from school to work or further study. [17] In May 2008, 13.3 per cent of all 15–19 year old Australians were neither in full-time education nor in full-time employment. In Victoria, the corresponding figure was 9.8 per cent. [18] Students whose parents are in manual or low-skilled occupations are amongst the groups less likely to make this transition successfully.

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[10] Diana Smart, Ann Sanson, Jennifer Baxter, Ben Edwards, and Alan Hayes, *Home-to-school transitions for financially disadvantaged children,* The Smith Family, November 2008, p.7

[11] *Ibid.,* p.49

[12] *Ibid.,* p.7

[13] Rosalyn Black, *Beyond the classroom: Building new school networks,* State of Victoria (DEECD) and The Foundation for Young Australians, 2008, p.39

[14] Marks, G. and McMillan, J. 'Early school leavers: who are they, why do they leave, and what are the consequences?' pp.6-12 in *Report of the ACER Research Conference 2001: What does the research data tell us?* ACER, Melbourne, 2001

[15] Jack Keating 'Systemic solutions for equity', in Rosalyn Black, *Beyond the classroom: Building new school networks,* State of Victoria (DEECD) and The Foundation for Young Australians, 2008, p.82

[16] Black, *Beyond the classroom*, p.40

[17] Bond, *Learning Support Programs. Education reform beyond the school*, pp.6-7

[18] *Ibid.*, citing ABS 2008 data

While student motivation for learning is informed by social as well as individual factors, this is largely neglected in discussions of educational reform.

Students from disadvantaged backgrounds need more support to help them reengage with learning, to overcome personal, family and environmental barriers to participation, and to strengthen their achievement.

The context for educational reform

The context for educational reform is increased economic inequity and a concentration of poverty in families with school aged children. [19]

Despite a long history of government policies to achieve greater equity in education, there has been no gain in equity, as COAG has noted. [20] The pursuit of equity is corroded by the institutional arrangements of Australian schooling, specifically: the division between government and non-government schools, the culture of school competition for enrolments, and the tradition of schools as isolated fortresses. [21]

These institutional aspects of Australian schooling impact on patterns of participation and transition. In a competitive system better-off parents are able to exercise choice, sending their children to schools which achieve high scores, while students from disadvantaged backgrounds are increasingly concentrated in schools with falling enrolments and poor educational outcomes. [22] These patterns of school selection concentrate poverty and disadvantage in schools to a greater extent than the 'neighbourhood effect' alone. [23]

Schools with a high proportion of students from disadvantaged backgrounds are also often the least equipped to meet their needs. [24] Research suggests that children of low SES background living in areas of concentrated disadvantage do less well in schools that have a high concentration of low SES children than those of the same background who attend more mixed schools. [25]

Access to enhanced learning support is therefore arguably of greatest importance in disadvantaged communities where there is a concentration of students who face barriers which affect their progress through school.

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[19] Keating in Black, *Beyond the classroom*, p.82

[20] P. Dawkins, 'Federalist Paper 2: The Future of Schooling in Australia' (revised edition), a report by the Council for the Australian Federation, Department of Premier and Cabinet, Melbourne, September 2007

[21] Keating in Black, *Beyond the classroom*, p.83

[22] *Ibid.,* p.81

[23] Keating, *A new federalism in Australian education*, p.20

[24] *Ibid.,* p.42

[25] *Ibid.,* p.32

Although economic inequity is increasing, and is increasingly concentrated in particular locations, here has been a relative decline in the level of policy and program activity in the area of educational equity. [26]

It is evident from this discussion of the social context for learning, that some students and schools are under-resourced and need additional support. The question then is what form this support should take, by whom it should be delivered, and in what settings.

The role of community organisations in supporting learning

Education is increasingly viewed as a responsibility of the whole community, rather than simply of schools in isolation. Schools that perform well have 'rich networks invisibly in place' which provide role models and a culture of success, diverse opportunities and access to people and resources from beyond the school. [27] Well-resourced independent schools already have these networks.

Networks between schools, community organisations, philanthropy business and parents are important for all schools, however as Rosalyn Black has argued, they are particularly vital for schools in areas of concentrated disadvantage. These networks can be transformative, particularly in *'positively changing students' desire to learn, providing support for teachers and overcoming social disadvantage'*. [28]

While recognised as important at present these networks and partnerships between schools community and business organisations often emerge and develop opportunistically. They are not the result of a systematic funded and resourced policy and programmatic approach, led by the DEECD, to fostering and supporting such networks in all disadvantaged areas. As such the emergence of successful school community partnerships is largely contingent on the personal networking skills and available resources of key educators, business and community sector players in any given community. In many cases schools, communities and community sector organisations in disadvantaged areas lack these resources.

Partnerships not only bring needed resources into schools serving disadvantaged areas, providing students with diverse opportunities and learning experiences and/or direct access to a range of welfare services. Most importantly, they can also provide essential support to directly improve social and learning outcomes for children and young people. [29]

Student engagement is one clear example where 'multiple, integrated strategies involving [partnerships between] students, schools, families, and other organisations within the community' are increasingly recognised as critical. [30] Strategies to address

[26] Keating in Black, *Beyond the classroom*, p.82

[27] Koshland in Black, *Beyond the classroom*, xi

[28] Koshland in Black, *Beyond the classroom*, x

[29] Black, *Beyond the classroom*, p.6

[30] H. Butler, L. Bond, S. Drew, A. Krelle, & I. Seal, *Doing It Differently: Improving Young People's Engagement with School*, Brotherhood of St Laurence, Melbourne, 2005

disengagement might include programs to meet health, welfare and social needs delivered by a variety of non-education providers in partnership with parents and communities.

In more recent years select community organisations are partnering with schools to address disengagement and learning needs directly, in response to local level demand from teachers, students and parents. They have done this through the provision of Learning Support Programs (homework clubs and tutoring programs) in alternate learning settings. These programs are based on mentoring relationships between students and volunteer tutors, and are increasingly recognised as a valuable addition to the range of supports available to disadvantaged students.

Partnering to learn: Learning Support Programs

In Victoria, there has been significant growth in Learning Support Programs provided by community organisations, particularly in areas of socio-economic disadvantage.[31] The goal of most LSPs is to prevent disengagement and early school leaving of children in disadvantaged circumstances.

Specific populations of disadvantaged students are accessing LSPs and benefit from participation in them. These include students who are homeless or at risk of homelessness; students with a diagnosed or undiagnosed specific learning difficulty or learning disorder; and students from families which find it difficult to help their children with learning, for example because they do not speak English or are experiencing financial stress. All these groups are at high risk of early school leaving.

Evidence from the literature indicates that students who are most at risk of dropping out of school may not respond well to programs which simply extend school hours.[32] Community-run LSPs typically provide one-to-one tutoring and homework help by volunteers in informal environments, usually outside of school premises. This support helps children catch up with their peers, and creates opportunities for students who do not thrive in classroom settings, or who lack confidence, to experience success. The mentoring relationships between tutors and students introduce students to a broader set of expectations and experiences, building their cultural capital. These relationships can be equally enriching for tutors.

Developing children's confidence and reigniting their interest in learning provides a necessary foundation for improved academic outcomes … *'once students feel a desire to*

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[31] Michael Horn and Deborah Fewster, *A Profile of Learning Support Programs in North-West Melbourne,* Research & Social Policy Unit, Melbourne Citymission, April 2007

[32] www.afterschoolalliance.org 'Afterschool Alert – Expanding Learning Opportunities: It Takes More than Time' Issue Brief #29, September 2007

learn, all else follows: improved literacy and numeracy, positive changes in problematic behaviour, increased self-organisation, and even willingness to tackle difficult subjects'. [33]

Research has shown that the benefits of LSPs include:

- academic outcomes (eg. improvement in grades and/or engagement in learning)
- social and personal development outcomes (eg. improved confidence, self-esteem, and language skills)
- family or community gains [34]
- and assistance with transitions. [35]

In 2007 Melbourne Citymission conducted the first major evaluation of LSPs in Australia. [36] This showed very positive results across both primary and secondary age groups for students attending four Melbourne Citymission LSPs. While academic improvement occurred with sustained attendance, more immediate improvement included increased student interest in learning, confidence, homework completion and learning skills. It is important to note that given the multiple barriers students face, many will not move from 'D-grade' to 'A-grade'. However, the 'distance travelled' should also be regarded as progress.

Schools which participated in the research were overwhelmingly supportive of the programs and valued their contribution to children's education. Principals viewed them as a useful complementary resource that provided a different type of learning environment, one commenting that *'if it's just another hour of school it loses its charm'.* [37]

LSPs can play a significant role in supporting students through transitions, when students from disadvantaged backgrounds are at particular risk. [38] For example, the transition from primary to secondary school is a critical period during which disengagement and alienation can occur. Factors contributing to disengagement include difficulties with literacy and numeracy, falling behind on work, having limited access to help, limited

[33] Ellen Koshland in Black, *Beyond the classroom*, ix

[34] Horn and Fewster, *A Profile of Learning Support Programs*, Melbourne Citymission, 2007, p.27

[35] Sharon Bond, *Learning support programs. Education reform beyond the school*, Brotherhood of St Laurence, p.4

[36] Anne Pate, *Learning Support Programs - A chance to experience success*, Melbourne Citymission, September 2008. Two previous smaller studies in Australia were: Horn M. and Parkinson S. *Hanover Family Services Tutoring Program - A response to the educational and social learning needs of children and young people experiencing homelessness: Evaluation Report*, Hanover Welfare Services, South Melbourne, December 2004, which found significant positive outcomes for participants; and Brisbane City Council *Homework clubs in Brisbane and beyond,* Draft report of the Homework Club Research Project, Community Development - Youth Team, Brisbane, 2005, which documented successes and challenges including funding insecurity, finding volunteers, and accessible space.

[37] Anne Pate, *Learning Support Programs - A chance to experience success*, Melbourne Citymission, September 2008, p.39

[38] Bond, *Learning support programs. Education reform beyond the school*, Brotherhood of St Laurence, p.6

opportunities for success and feeling negatively judged by teachers or peers. In making this transition, students require support from significant others, recognition of their individual needs and the opportunity to experience success.

Research shows that LSPs can achieve significant outcomes for participating students at relatively low cost. [39]

LSPs can strengthen the commitment to learning for students from disadvantaged backgrounds and lay a foundation for greater success. However, they remain largely invisible in policy.

A policy gap?

The exponential growth in the number of LSPs in Victoria, most of which are operated by the community sector, has been driven by increased demand from students who are at risk of disengaging from education, and by their parents, teachers and school principals. [40]

This growth in the number of LSPs has taken place in the absence of a policy framework or dedicated funding stream (apart from the recent initiative targeted to refugee students), even though research shows these programs are a valuable and low-cost preventative strategy. In the absence of a policy or funding framework, programs are not sustainable and there is regular turnover of initiatives.

The lack of coordination by government also has consequences for program quality and particularly for the extent to which effective links with schools can be established. Currently the unmet social and education needs of students who fall behind in their learning in the public education system are being borne by community sector LSPs. However, as Melbourne Citymission has shown this is neither equitable nor sustainable. [41]

To date, Australian State and Federal governments have not intentionally used LSPs to further education policy goals such as improving student engagement and retention rates. Improving retention has long been a policy concern for government due to the lifelong consequences of early school leaving.

Yet despite school reform, retention rates in Victorian government schools are stuck at around 80% for year 12 completion, well short of the target of 90% by 2010. Across Australia, the year 12 completion rate in 2007 was 74%. Australia is performing poorly in comparison with most other OECD countries. [42]

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[39] Estimated at $1000-1500 per student per annum, in Anne Pate, *Learning Support Programs – A chance to experience success*, 2008, p.5

[40] Horn and Fewster, *A Profile of Learning Support Programs,* Melbourne Citymission, 2007, p.31

[41] Pate, *Learning Support Programs – A chance to experience success*, Melbourne Citymission, 2008, p.5

[42] Jack Keating, *A new federalism in Australian education: a proposal for a national reform agenda*, Education Foundation, 2009, p.15

There has been substantial reform of education at both State and Federal levels in recent years. Much of the emphasis of these reforms has been on teacher quality, school performance, curriculum reform, dissemination of school performance data, and infrastructure and facilities. All of these are important in lifting education outcomes. [43] However, these reforms are unlikely to be sufficient to achieve the COAG attainment target of 90%, because they do not directly address the needs of the most disadvantaged students.

The COAG Productivity Agenda has identified literacy and numeracy, and greater funding for low socioeconomic status schools, as major areas for reform. However, the amount of extra resources provided to schools with high concentrations of students from low income households is minimal. [44]

Continuing to treat educational reform as synonymous with school reform in policy is unlikely to help the 10-15% of young people who are poorly engaged in education. School reform alone will not achieve greater equity for students from disadvantaged backgrounds since it fails to consider the need for alternative learning contexts for some students. [45]

In contrast to Australia's rather limited approach to educational reform, the UK government has invested in Study Support, a national framework for extending learning opportunities. By 2010 all schools will be 'extended schools', offering access to Study Support and other core extended services including child care, some of which will be operated by community organisations. Australia has yet to develop such a comprehensive vision for schools.

Policy frameworks and options for support to LSPs

While there is no dedicated state or federal program or funding for learning support programs for all disadvantaged students, recent policy directions look promising. Both the Social Inclusion Agenda objectives and the Melbourne Declaration of National Educational Goals are consistent with LSPs. LSPs fit well as a programmatic response to government policy, even though this has not yet resulted in their national implementation. [46]

In its *Blueprint for Education and Early Childhood Development*, the Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development recognised the value of partnerships between schools and community organisations, as well as with business and the philanthropic sector, to support children's development and learning. [47]

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[43] Michael Horn and Sharon Bond, 'Understanding the cost barriers to education', paper presented at the *Cost barriers to educational opportunities: collaborating to create change* Forum, hosted by the Equity in Education Alliance, October 14th, 2009

[44] Keating in Black, *Beyond the classroom*, p. 82

[45] *Ibid*., pp.81-85

[46] Sharon Bond, *Learning support programs. Education reform beyond the school*, p.11

[47] *Blueprint for Education and Early Childhood Development*, State of Victoria (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development), 2008, pp.28-31

However, the creation and maintenance of such networks needs to be systemically supported and not simply left for schools to achieve. [48]

The development of strategic partnerships between government, schools and the LSP sector is necessary to build capacity, improve the integration of LSPs within the broader suite of learning support, and strengthen school-program coordination at the local level. Two options and models for this are presented below.

1) A precedent for Government involvement in LSPs: Learning Beyond the Bell

The Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development recently took a step towards recognising the value of LSPs. Through 'Learning Beyond the Bell', administered by the Centre for Multicultural Youth, funding is provided to 20 programs which meet the criterion of having 50% of students from refugee and migrant backgrounds to help them implement best practice principles. 'Once only' funding is also provided to a further 45 programs to purchase resources for their students.

The Learning Beyond the Bell grants program is a component of broader support provided for all LSPs across Victoria. This support includes assistance with volunteer tutor recruitment and training, and free professional development opportunities for program coordinators. Additional support is provided through regional networks, the provision of program resources, and advice and assistance in creating sustainable partnerships with schools and community organizations.

While Learning Beyond the Bell is a welcome development, on the basis of equity eligibility for direct funding must be extended beyond refugee and migrant-targeted programs, to include students from all disadvantaged populations. Learning Beyond the Bell provides an opportunity to test a model for direct program funding which if successful could be replicated across a broader range of programs. LSPs which work mainly with students with other needs operate according to similar principles and incur similar costs to those working primarily with refugee students, and should not be treated any differently in policy.

Melbourne Citymission's research indicated that around half of LSPs operating in 2007 in the northern and western suburbs did not cater primarily for refugee or CALD students. [49] The Learning Beyond the Bell database contains around 200 programs, of which two-thirds are refugee-focused (unpublished data). However, there is no comprehensive profile on the extent and coverage of programs statewide. A properly resourced census of LSPs is needed to provide a baseline on how many there are, what areas are covered, who operates them, how long they have been running, who they support, and how they are funded and resourced, as well as to document the key elements of the service model.

[48] Black, *Beyond the classroom*, pp.6-7

[49] Horn and Fewster, *A Profile of Learning Support Programs*, 2007, p. 19

2) LSPs as a place-based partnership between schools and community organisations

Gaps in student achievement are most striking when mapped against geographic location. For some years in Australia there has been a growing concentration of educational failure in specific postcode areas. [50] Achieving the target school completion rate of 90% will depend upon raising participation rates in areas and schools where participation and completion rates are currently lowest. [51]

Keating advocates place-based responses delivered by community organisations and schools in partnership in these areas, which have high levels of educational need but are under-resourced. [52] It is in this context that Learning Support Programs, delivered by schools and community organisations in partnership in areas of concentrated disadvantage, can make a significant contribution.

We propose the extension of Learning Support Programs based on best practice approaches so that all students living in disadvantaged communities have access to this form of community based assistance with learning. Funding could be provided for primary and secondary LSPs in 77 low SES postcodes. To capitalise on local resources and expertise, programs should operate as partnerships including local schools, community organisations, and business. This should include an evaluation of outcomes for students, parents, schools and communities.

Conclusion

Our argument for LSPs implies an expanded view of education policy which recognises the links between social disadvantage and educational outcomes, and creates opportunities for governments and community organisations to work in partnership within and beyond the school gate. More effective education networks which bring schools and community organisations together are critical to reduce educational inequity, as Rosalyn Black has argued. [53]

Melbourne Citymission and the Brotherhood of St Laurence call on both State and Federal governments to develop a more proactive approach to the expanding, yet drastically under-resourced, LSP sector. Such an approach would entail the development of strategic partnerships between government, schools and the LSP sector to build capacity, improve integration of LSPs within the broader suite of learning support, and strengthen school-program coordination at the local level.

Increased investment in the provision of Learning Support Programs will deliver improved outcomes for disadvantaged students and make a significant contribution to achieving the COAG goal on Year 12 attainment.

[50] Black, *Beyond the classroom*, p.4

[51] Keating, *A new federalism in Australian education*, Education Foundation, 2009, p.42

[52] Keating in Black, *Beyond the classroom*, pp.85-87

[53] Black, *Beyond the classroom: Building new school networks,* p.2

Questions sent to forum participants in advance

1) What is the leadership role of government in stimulating school-community partnerships to ensure the delivery of high quality LSPs for disadvantaged students?

- How can government and the community sector form a mutually beneficial partnership in which differing missions, expertise, responsibilities and boundaries are understood?
- What risks are there in school-community partnerships and how can these risks be mitigated to **increase the provision** of LSPs in disadvantaged communities?

2) How can we foster a whole-of-government response to supporting disadvantaged students through LSPs?

3) How can we foster a whole-of-community response in which learning is seen to occur everywhere (not just at school) and is everyone's responsibility?

4) Should governments invest in Study Support, as part of an Extended Schools program, as has occurred in the UK?

5) From your perspective, what is the biggest challenge to developing a sustainable LSP sector?