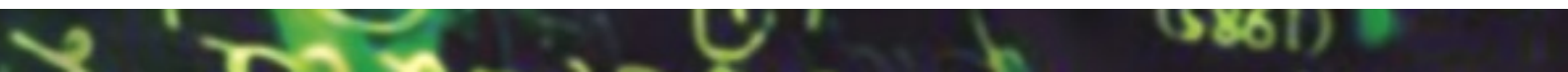


DOING IT DIFFERENTLY: IMPROVING YOUNG PEOPLE'S ENGAGEMENT WITH SCHOOL

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and Social Environments Program,
on behalf of Anglicare Victoria,
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ISBN 1 74056 008 6

This report is also available from:
<http://www.anglicarevic.org.au>
<http://www.bsl.org.au>
<http://www.rch.org.au/cah>

Suggested citation:

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



FOREWORD

DOING IT
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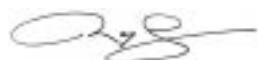
Anglicare Victoria, the Brotherhood of St Laurence and the Centre for Adolescent Health are pleased to present this outline of the background and development of the Doing It Differently project. This project focuses on improving engagement of young people with school during the Middle Years (Years 5-8), particularly during transition from primary to secondary school. Research has identified that this can be a crucial period of disengagement from school, not only affecting the wellbeing and learning of the young person but also the wellbeing of families and communities.

In acknowledgement of the multiple influences on engagement and disengagement, the project aims to strengthen the interconnections between schools, families and supporting community organisations. The project will develop and evaluate a replicable model for schools and their communities to work together, that can be applied in diverse communities and locations.

The agencies collaborating in Doing it Differently have become increasingly aware of the need to develop community-based responses and models of working, building on community strengths, with greater devolution of direction given to the communities in which they are located and better integration of approaches. Doing it Differently is an opportunity to demonstrate a creative joined up approach to the issues of school engagement, building on previous work of the partner organizations.

We thank the Flora and Frank Leith Charitable Trust for their generous funding for this project.

SIGNED



Dr Ray Cleary
Chief Executive Officer
Anglicare Victoria Prof.



Tony Nicholson
Executive Director
Brotherhood of St Laurence



Susan Sawyer
Director
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The Collaborating Organizations

Anglicare Victoria provides a diverse range of services for children, young people and families across Victorian communities. Strategically Anglicare Victoria is increasingly seeking to achieve alignment between research and practice with particular emphasis on engaging service users in intervention that will prevent the onset of chronic and entrenched difficulties. We are very pleased to be working collaboratively with our partners in learning more about the impact of life stage transitions on immediate and future well being. The critical challenge is how we as partners can use our combined skills, knowledge and resources to strengthen communities in caring for and supporting individuals and families during periods of change.

The Brotherhood of St Laurence has long been committed to the enhancement of life opportunities for young people. We have been working intensively in the area of transition to school and from school to work and have identified the transition from Primary to Secondary school as a time of disengagement and alienation for some young people. 'Doing it differently' gives the Brotherhood an opportunity to work in partnership and continue working in a preventative manner in school transition and to engage young people to ensure positive educational and life outcomes.

The Centre for Adolescent Health aims to make the difference to young people's health by advancing adolescent health knowledge, practice and policy. 'Doing It Differently' is part of our Adolescent Health and Social Environments Program (AHSEP), funded by the Baker Foundation. Through collaborative research with school communities, this program aims to better understand, and apply in practice, ways that schools as key social environments can actively promote the health and wellbeing of young people. Doing It Differently is an exciting opportunity to further understand the impact of schools within broader community environments.

DOING IT DIFFERENTLY

THE PROJECT

*Transition from primary to secondary [school] administrative arrangements and educational styles, if not carefully monitored and supported, can create disengagement where there was none before, or exacerbate any problems which had begun to surface earlier.*¹

“Doing it Differently” will assist school communities to improve engagement of young people with school during years 5, 6, 7 and 8. Its focus is on strengthening the interconnections between schools, families and supporting community organisations. It will be developed by a collaborative partnership between school communities and a team from Anglicare Victoria, the Brotherhood of St Laurence and the Centre for Adolescent Health. The project will develop, implement and evaluate a process for co-ordinated action and produce an integrated suite of practical tools for use by other communities.

The project has been developed in response to a range of research that has identified a pattern of accelerating alienation and disengagement from school for many young people during the middle years of schooling (Years 5-9).

This pattern is of concern because genuine engagement with learning and with others within the school environment is a key to positive outcomes across a range of immediate and long-term health, academic and life outcomes.

The project recognises that disengagement from school is best considered not as an event but rather as a process influenced by interaction between a young person, his or her parents/carers, teachers, and the school and community contexts in which he or she lives and grows.²⁻⁴ Disengagement is therefore likely to be best addressed by multiple integrated strategies involving students, schools, families, and other organisations within the community. In many communities, programs may be operating well in some of these areas, but effective interconnectedness and

support for student engagement is compromised by lack of clarity about roles, processes and structures; duplication of activities; poor communication; inadequate resources; or misunderstandings, blame and guilt.

Initially, the project will focus on communities of greatest need, where student disengagement from school can often be exacerbated by lack of opportunity for community involvement, family poverty and low parental engagement with education. A priority will be to assist families in the development of active partnerships between home and school, and to explore ways in which community organisations can support this.

In recognition of the complexity of the context of student engagement with school, the project has been developed using an ecological perspective and a community-based participatory research (CBPR) approach.⁵⁻⁸ An ecological perspective locates the focus of research and action on the interaction between individuals and the multiple social systems – family, school, neighbourhood, peers - in which they are embedded. The project is thus working with clusters of schools in communities rather than with individual schools. A community-based participatory research approach involves professional researchers operating as collaborators with members of a community or organisation.

The Doing It Differently project is designed not to reduce complexity and diversity of research, perspectives and experiences to simplistic ‘magic bullet’ solutions but to assist school communities to draw from what is already known to construct integrated strategies that work for them. This paper summarises the range of evidence and experience that has informed the project’s starting point in this selection and construction process.

A FOCUS ON STUDENT ENGAGEMENT IN THE MIDDLE YEARS

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Research and practice in both education and public health has increasingly focussed on the school experiences of early adolescence as crucial in promoting engagement with learning and enhancing physical, social, emotional and spiritual well-being.

A useful definition in a recent OECD report encapsulates many other definitions in characterising 'student engagement' as "a disposition towards learning, working with others and functioning in a social institution, which is expressed in students' feelings that they belong at school, and in their participation in schools activities".⁹ Importantly, the report notes that engagement is not just a result of individual characteristics and home influences but can be affected by parents, and teachers, and shaped by school policy and practice.

Further research emphasises "connectedness" to family and to school as central to emotional well-

being.¹⁰⁻¹³ In this project, we are interested in students' connectedness to or engagement with school, through positive relationships with peers, teachers and learning, and in the interconnectedness of students, families, school staff and community organisations.

We are particularly interested in the period of transition from primary to secondary school as it can be an opportunity to build resilience and self-esteem but for some young people is a time of disengagement from school and a decline in motivation, achievement and self-perception.¹⁴ We have drawn below from the growing body of research seeking to identify the needs of early adolescents and therefore the types of school environment, relationships, and learning experiences that would best promote engagement.

ALIENATION AND DISENGAGEMENT: WHAT'S THE PROBLEM?

*'I got to meet lots of people at school...but I didn't need school for that...The teachers didn't really care if I was interested in the work. All they cared about is that I did it. And when it was so boring why would I bother!...I thought it would get better. And it didn't. If anything, it got worse. So why should I bother?'*¹⁵

For many children and young adolescents, patterns of behaviour are established through the middle years of schooling, which both jeopardise continued participation in schooling and have adverse consequences in later life.

It has been recently demonstrated in Victoria, nationally, and internationally, that students' attitudes, motivation and commitment to school, become increasingly less

positive in successive years from year 5 to Year 9.^{9,16-18} This has raised concerns about absence rates and, indeed, young adolescents who are not participating in education at all. Leaving school early does not preclude pathways to further study or work opportunities, but it does increase the likelihood of periods of unemployment, restricted options for employment and reliance on government income support.²⁻⁴

The important message from these studies is that the process of disengagement for many students begins in primary school and is exacerbated by the transition to secondary school.

WHAT CAN SCHOOLS DO?

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Somewhere, I suspect down in the elementary school, probably in the fifth and sixth grades, a subtle shift occurs. The curriculum – subjects, topics, textbooks, workbooks, and the rest- comes between the teacher and student. Young humans come to be viewed only as students, valued primarily for their academic aptitude and industry rather than as individual persons preoccupied with physical, social, and personal needs unique to their circumstances and stage in life. Goodlad in Fullan ¹⁹

School communities are examining organisation and structures that support adolescents in developing a sense of belonging and engagement with school. Findings from numerous studies highlight the benefits of reorganising and restructuring aspects of the social, physical and learning environments in the early secondary school so that practices match more closely the needs of young adolescents. ^{14;17;20-22} Such studies show that while there is a wide diversity of adolescent experiences and it is therefore simplistic to consider adolescent development as a linear pathway, students in the middle years of schooling

are often dealing with multiple challenges: physical, emotional, intellectual and social changes; developing independence and autonomy; social acceptance and changing relationships with peers; and developing identity, including personal values, sexual orientation and expectations about education and work. These studies highlight the need for safe but intellectually challenging school environments in which students can negotiate these challenges.

Young people have clearly identified that school experiences play a direct and primary role in engagement with, or disengagement from school and early school leaving. These interact positively or negatively with a range of factors beyond the school. As outlined in the table below, such experiences include issues including nature, relevance and delivery of curriculum; relationships with others in the school; difficulties with learning or with the organisational structures and processes of school. Clearly, and importantly, there is an interplay or interaction between those factors which lie within the school environment and that lies outside of the school environment.

WHAT CAN SCHOOLS DO?

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Factors promoting engagement	Factors contributing to disengagement
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a supportive school culture • a sense of belonging and being valued • friendly and mutually respectful teacher/student relationships • genuine involvement and participation in a broad range of school activities, including participation in decision-making • opportunities for cooperative learning • catering for a diversity of learning styles • options for practical and applied knowledge • work that is worthy of effort rather than routine, trivial or superficial • content that is meaningful, significant and part of the real life of young people • learning and teaching practices that are challenging, active, deep, thought-provoking and cooperative • collaboration between teachers and students in the learning experience • opportunities to develop confidence in abilities to master environment (personal efficacy) • opportunities to make a contribution to one's community & develop a sense of mattering • contributions being noticed and acknowledged • school goals that are clearly stated and honest • strong links between families, schools and broader community resources • success oriented assessment that is designed • to give feedback on what has been achieved • having a chance to make mistakes and learn from them 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • falling behind in work • having limited access to help • difficulties with literacy/numeracy • perception of curriculum as boring or irrelevant • limited opportunities to experience success • embarrassment about failure • feeling negatively judged by peers/teachers • being teased, bullied, feeling unsafe • poor relationships/conflict with teachers • having no adults who know you well • going unnoticed • difficulty in getting to school • episodes of suspension/exclusion • perceived unfairness and inflexibility of teachers in applying "the rules" • being humiliated in front of others <p style="text-align: center; font-size: small;">16;18-20;23-26</p>

EASING TRANSITION FROM PRIMARY TO SECONDARY SCHOOL

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Traditionally, primary to secondary school transition programs tended to consist of an orientation day and some introductory activities in the secondary setting. The literature suggests a need to see transition not as an event but as a process, involving changes in both primary and secondary school environments to facilitate engagement and strategies for students, teachers and parents for negotiating transitions from primary to secondary school see Middle years brochure.^{18,27-30} The following summarises transition strategies recommended in the literature:

- provide closure to the experience of the previous setting
- enhance linkage between primary and secondary schools, for example through shared teacher professional development and working parties, continuity of curriculum and shared student activities
- welcome newcomers and ensure clearly accessible social and academic support
- monitor transition success and implement timely interventions when transitions are not successful
- pay attention both to preparation of students in the primary setting and adjustment of the secondary setting

- minimise the number of staff each student has to deal with each week
- identify staff to have significant contact with students, for example homeroom teachers, mentors
- reduce the amount of movement required between classrooms and other spaces for students in the early stages of secondary schooling
- consider changes to classroom organisation in secondary schools, for example, table working groups
- review teaching and learning practices in light of what is known about student engagement
- promote student self-efficacy through approaches that enhance goal-setting, mastery learning and inter-personal problem-solving skills
- involve families through the provision of information, opportunities for discussion and awareness of what they can do to support the student
- provide professional development and the opportunities for teachers to work in teams

THE IMPORTANCE OF GENUINE OPPORTUNITIES FOR PARTICIPATION

*For students, really 'having a voice' is much more than being consulted in a research project (where others will analyse their responses and present findings) or even really being involved in the governance of a community (where some students will get to speak 'on their behalf'). It is much more concerned with having a valued and recognised role within that community – where what we think and say is measured against what we do, how we are appreciated and what difference we make.*³¹

Genuine involvement and participation in a broad range of school activities is a recurring theme in middle years, school improvement, positive youth development and retention focussed literature.^{9,19,20,31-33} This challenge

has been increasingly taken up in recent years in Victorian programs and projects.^{34,35} The challenge is to move beyond special projects and make such efforts everyday expectations and activities in schools.

Research on participation, particularly consultation with young people, emphasises that effective student participation involves:

- creating partnerships between young people and adults
- ensuring that all young people have access to opportunities to take part
- providing a wide range of activities that have meaning for all young people³⁵

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR TEACHERS?

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Clearly, teachers have a crucial influence on the engagement or alienation of young people from learning. Indeed, a number of studies have identified quality of interaction between student and teacher as the most powerful factor influencing student learning.^{17;18;36;37} Of key importance is the belief on the part of teachers that all students can learn and that teachers can make a difference.

Equally clear is the need for teachers to be supported by the creation of conditions that motivate and sustain them in their own learning and in their teaching practice.³⁸⁻⁴¹ Strategies that have been identified as useful in creating such conditions include:

- pre-service teacher training which provides prospective teachers with a strong foundation of knowledge, skills and attitudes for effective teaching and for continuous learning throughout their careers

- professional development strategies which focus less on training teachers to faithfully deliver 'products' and more on building their capacity to make informed professional judgement in order to learn from each other and their students, devise teaching and learning strategies appropriate to local conditions and manage continuous change
- replacement of "one-off" in-service sessions with more sustained, coherent, inquiry-based programs
- professional teams within schools to assist staff to reflect on progress and problems and to review and refine activities
- a "reflective practice" framework and structured processes and time for enabling staff to do this

IT IS NOT JUST ABOUT SCHOOL

There is a growing recognition, however, that disengagement from school is not just about school. Studies show young people grappling with personal and family issues, including conflict, violence and abuse; high family mobility requiring lots of "fresh starts"; family history of negative experiences with school; lack of transport; parents with physical

or mental illness or drug related issues; financial pressures; trouble managing work and school; drug and alcohol issues; and mental health issues.

There is also growing recognition that strategies to deal with such broad ranging issues require interconnected school-community planning and action.⁴²⁻⁴⁴

HOW CAN FAMILIES BE INVOLVED?

...as the evidence shows, once teachers and parents interact on some regular basis around specific activities, mutual reservations and fear become transformed, with positive results for the personal and academic performance of students and for parent and

*teacher attitudes. One other fact should not escape us: Some teachers and schools incorporate parents in the education of their children in fundamental and multifaceted ways, in contrast to other teachers and schools facing identical parents and communities*¹⁹

The key transition programs and websites used in Victoria advise schools to involve parents and parents to be involved with schools.^{30;45} Schools have acknowledged the challenge of systematically involving parents in transition initiatives and parents have transition issues of their own.^{16; 46} The literature suggests that school communities need to consider a range of avenues for family, as well as parent, involvement, and consider what schools need to know and do to support students and families as well as what parents and families need to know and do to support schools and students.^{16;19;46-50} Commonly described areas for family participation include volunteering; supporting learning at home; and decision-making and governance. Increasingly, family involvement is characterised as home-school collaboration or partnership, with recognition that developing this requires time and opportunities to negotiate the respective roles of families, school staff and members of the wider community. This is seen as important, as a move away from 'us and them' situations where parents are seen either as 'interfering' or as 'not interested' or as providing a 'poor home environment'. It has been found that most parents do not want to be involved in governance but do want information on student progress, extra-curricular opportunities,

and curriculum, so finding out from parents of the particular community what they want is important.

It needs to be emphasised that schools and communities need to develop particular practices for parent engagement that cater to the breadth of the parent population, and encourage the participation of all parents and families. It is clear that socio-economic disadvantage and minority ethnic status often impact on the likely engagement of parents with their child's schooling.^{6; 47; 50} While the greatest benefit of parent involvement on educational outcomes for children seems to be in those families who are economically disadvantaged and/or belong to a minority ethnic group, it is these very parents for whom attendance at school activities may be practically difficult or who may feel less able to participate. Moreover, educators often have narrow ideas about the roles parents can play in schooling, and these narrow roles generally conform to values and norms of higher socio-economic, dominant cultural groups.

Understanding barriers to and positive strategies for family involvement can help school communities build respectful partnerships.

Strategies for family involvement	Barriers to family involvement
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use a range of approaches and opportunities to involve families • Use a variety of information-giving and information-getting strategies • Recognise that the primary caregiver may be any of a range of family members or, indeed, other adults • Acknowledge a diversity of parent views, values and cultures • View home-school collaboration within the context of the entire community and as a whole-school responsibility • Recognise and value the contributions families can make to the educational process • Build on existing family involvement • Provide a welcoming environment • Provide resources such as child care during meetings or activities, parent rooms, interpreters • Practice active listening, not just hearing but paying attention to non-verbal language too • Provide parents with support and training for involvement at home or at school • Facilitate access to community agencies, adult learning classes eg literacy, computers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of clarity about roles for families in the middle years clearer roles compared with in preschool and primary school • Parents' own past negative feelings about school • Parents feeling that their knowledge of their children is not valued or that their capacity to make a difference is limited • Parents feeling blamed for children's difficulties • Teachers feeling unsure about how to involve parents • School staff labelling families as dysfunctional and underestimating their capacity to contribute to children's learning • Schools' programs and procedures for parent involvement not having flexibility to meet demands of parents' lives <p style="text-align: right; font-size: small; margin-top: 20px;">16;26;46-48;50;52</p>

HOW CAN COMMUNITY ORGANISATIONS BE INVOLVED?

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Encouraging greater retention poses some challenges to schools.⁵³⁻⁵⁶ Schools are expected not only to cater for the more diverse needs of students staying longer but must also improve academic outcomes for all as measured by state and national standardised tests and benchmarks. In addition, schools are expected to support the health and well-being of their students and, in many schools, this means they are supporting students and families grappling with a range of personal, social, economic, health and well-being, employment, and housing issues. Any integrated model of school community development will need to have in place appropriate services, processes and pathways for such support.

Traditionally, the role of community organisations has tended to fall into 4 main categories:

- service provision to individuals within school setting
- supporting children and families outside school
- running programs for targetted groups of students developing and delivering knowledge-based health programs as part of curriculum

Community in the form of local business is taking an increased role with schools in many areas. This includes both sponsorship and other support of

school activities, and programs focussed on improving students' understanding of employment and industry. The latter aims to improve student engagement to school by providing incentives for successful school completion.

Further than this, however, research and practice has explored school - community collaboration focussing on community development and rebuilding a sense of community, strengthening infrastructure of communities rather than just looking at how to deliver services more efficiently.⁵⁶⁻⁵⁸ This may involve schools and community organizations moving out of traditional 'comfort zones' and exploring the need for community advocates, new strategies for engaging the diversity of community members, and significant re-training with regard to their own ways of engaging with, including and empowering young people in communities. This kind of integrated model not only needs significant time and support to establish, but also acknowledgement of and responses to the challenges posed to previously existing individual and organisational roles.⁵⁷

THE NEED FOR AN INTEGRATED APPROACH TO CHANGE IN SCHOOL COMMUNITIES

There is a huge body of research reporting on what sorts of strategies make a difference to outcomes such as learning, drug use, mental health, antisocial behaviour, school non-attendance and disengagement.^{11;18;20;59-64} Data is burgeoning on what can happen at the level of the individual student's skills and competencies, family support, school improvement and community links. Strategies for working at the various levels of individual, family, school or community abound. In the past, however, there has been a tendency for these strategies to operate in isolation, for example work with families, or work in and with schools.

More recently, there has been increasing recognition of a need for better understanding of how to put the pieces together within broader school communities, and to start early so that risks are minimised and protective factors raised as children move into adolescence and beyond.^{13; 59; 65} It is this challenge that Doing It Differently is seeking to address.

A growing message from schools is one of being overwhelmed by the choices of projects, programs, and initiatives to address different health and behavioural issues, while continuing to provide good teaching

and learning. Both in health and education, there is growing recognition of the need to help schools cope with the complex challenges they face and the need to work at a range of levels. There are two main emerging approaches to addressing this complexity: a prevention science approach of multi-component packaged interventions, or an ecological approach.

In the field of prevention science there have been calls for research trials of more integrated sets of intervention strategies that span sectors and target multiple outcomes. Thus, we are seeing the development of more complex, multi-component packaged interventions delivered with an emphasis on fidelity to the prescribed program or package. Such interventions have shown promising results, but maintaining fidelity in new contexts has been recognised as a challenge.^{60;66}

An alternative view is that improving outcomes for school communities and young people is not just about bigger and better products, faithfully adopted, but rather about taking an ecological approach to working with schools and communities.^{8; 19; 39; 41; 67-69} Such an approach recognises the complexity of change and the importance of interactions between individuals and environments rather than simply changes in either individuals or environments. The intervention goal of

ecological approaches is community development, increasing the resources of the community of concern.

Such approaches steer us away from looking for the “magic bullet” program and towards recognising the importance of paying attention to the conditions and contexts for successful reform, such as responding to local needs and demands for change, ensuring local advocates for as well as widespread ownership of the reform, adequate resources and ongoing support.

The implications of such an approach for our work with school communities is to see our work not as a research project but as a social change project in which the relative roles of outsiders and community members are negotiated according to the existing resources and capacities of all the players, shared goals of change and available timeframes for collaborative action.⁷ Underlying such an approach are the assumptions that:

- health problems have multiple determinants
- communities must participate in both the definition and solution of health problems
- the success of an intervention depends on the capacity of the community to engage in effective action⁷⁰

HOW CAN WE SUPPORT SOCIAL CHANGE IN SCHOOL COMMUNITIES?

In practice, typical activities within this approach include outside researchers / intervention teams working collaboratively with community members to (see^{7;8}):

- collaboratively define the issue or problem
- assess the community context
- design interventions that increase community resources and capacities
- analyse and report results
- plan and implement further action based on results

A key role in change processes in schools and communities is that of the informed outsider as a ‘critical friend’ or facilitator.^{39; 43; 71}

In the development and implementation of the Gatehouse Project, for example, the facilitator or ‘critical friend’ role began as an administrative one and evolved to include:

- supporting and challenging the school action team through all phases of the initiative
- coordinating the feedback of school survey data and assisting in making sense of this

- helping schools to identify issues, consider options and plan priorities
- supporting the development and integration of strategies
- assisting in the provision of professional development and fostering skills of reflective practice
- recognising achievement, asking tough questions, and providing encouragement and motivation³⁹

Another way of considering this role is that achieving the social change goals of community-based action research requires that four roles be fulfilled: leader or animator, community organiser, popular educator (facilitator of learning, and participatory researcher). Initially most of these roles might be undertaken by the critical friend/outsider/researcher, but ideally, for sustainability beyond the outsider’s presence, the community needs to take on these roles.

WHAT DO WE NEED TO DO?

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Our understanding of the key messages from the literature suggests that, in developing, implementing and evaluating the Doing It Differently project, we need to:

- keep young people engaged with school during this period of transition as it is crucial for a range of life outcomes.
- support a process of transition that builds self knowledge and self efficacy in individuals as well as environments which support positive youth development and engagement with school.
- support schooling experiences which engage students with learning, each other, teachers and community, and give young people a sense of agency in their own transitions.
- pay attention to individual student needs – knowing students well and listening to students, processes for referral and support – while simultaneously working on building supportive environments.
- support teachers and other workers to take a reflective approach to their teaching, mentoring and support of young people.
- support schools to identify and facilitate the professional development, collegial learning and reflective practice necessary for teachers to operationalise messages from research about how to better engage children in the later years of primary and early years of secondary school.
- provide the conditions, the processes and opportunities for families to be able to negotiate their roles in school communities as well as being

encouraged and supported to participate. We need to work out what support is

- required from schools and the wider community.
- consider community organisations not just as service providers but as contributors to building strong school communities.
- use approaches to research and practice which focus on schools and communities as systems, and on students, school staff, families and community members as co-researchers and participants in planning, implementing and evaluation action.

Expected practical outcomes from Doing It Differently include:

- development of a model to assist Victorian school communities to develop a more systematic, integrated approach to planning the involvement of students, families, school staff and community organisations in transition between primary and secondary schools and in engaging students with school in these years
- an integrated suite of practical tools and resources to help students, schools, families and community organisations work together to promote engagement through transition

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