



Melbourne Citymission
Building Inclusive Communities

‘Education and learning for all Victorian children’

**Paper presented to the VCROSS Congress 2005 on 20th
October in Melbourne**

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Introduction

The Victorian Government's initiative to review the Education and Training Legislation has provided a vital opportunity to reaffirm our community's commitment to universal and secular education that is inclusive for all children and young people whatever their backgrounds or experiences.

Melbourne Citymission therefore welcomes the Government's White Paper that affirms free instruction to Year 12, the raising of the school leaving age to 16 years and a stronger accountability framework for schools. The Minister should be congratulated for her commitment to universal access to secular education that promotes democratic principles and maximises transparency through an enhanced school reporting framework.

Melbourne Citymission provides a range of employment, education and training services in response to the individual issues and structural barriers that discourage or preclude young people making the transition from school to work and independence. Evidence gathered in preparing our submission to the Review (MCM 2005) indicates a significant level of disengagement and poor educational outcomes for children from disadvantaged backgrounds despite significant policy reform over the past few years.

Whilst the changes foreshadowed in the White Paper are very welcome, they do not go far enough. Melbourne Citymission seeks a stronger legislative framework that will provide a clear mandate for a more outward focussed and inclusive learning system.

This Paper seeks to highlight the inadequate outcomes for a significant proportion of Victorian children; to outline the key issues to be tackled through education reform; and then suggest principles and policy directions for the future based on Melbourne Citymission's experience.

The key pathway to a 'fairer Victoria' is one that addresses educational disadvantage. It is our proposition that such pathways to full economic and social participation, which will avoid generational exclusion and poverty, require better integrated models of learning and community support services that build on school as a community hub in regions facing disadvantage.

If the Government is to achieve its goals for education achievement by 2010 and beyond, it is essential that an effective legal mandate is introduced to drive policy and program settings to implement an integrated learning system that maximises inclusion of all young people.

Melbourne Citymission Services in Education, Training and Employment

Melbourne Citymission provides a wide range of services and support for children and young people who are struggling to make a successful transition from dependence and social exclusion, including JPET, PSP, SFYS, YEETI and tutoring programs in Melbourne.

A focus on employment, education and training has been established in response to a range of individual issues and structural barriers which discourage or preclude children or young people from actively participating in learning and skills development matched to their capacities and aspirations. Young people are provided with a range of personal support and learning assistance to enable them to access or maintain education and training pathways.

As part of Melbourne Citymission's School Focussed Youth Support Service, that has been operating since 1999, a project was developed in 2002 at a primary school in Sunshine. It focussed on marginalised families to strengthen their relationship with school and hence reduce absenteeism and school transience. In 2004, SFYS successfully applied to FaCS (Stronger Families and Communities Strategy) for 12 month funding for the Family School and Community Connections Project (MCM 2005).

The core model consisted of casework support provided to 10 families that was complimented with a range of community development and relationship building activities involving schools, community support agencies and families. The report has made 4 key recommendations:

- i. Strengthening the development of the primary welfare coordinator role
- ii. Promoting clear communication mechanisms with parents to promote engagement with school and learning
- iii. Offering family based activities within the school setting
- iv. Developing a family support hub within schools supported by community agencies

This paper incorporates the learnings from this project in setting out principles and policy solutions for a better-integrated education environment that is inclusive of all children and young people.

Victorian Government Policy Directions

The Victorian Government has undertaken a range of reviews and implemented significant reforms in the provision of education over the past 6 years. Clearly these are having a significant impact on the overall quality of education.

For most children, progress through education is relatively straightforward - enabling a smooth transition to work and independence. The most important issue for Melbourne Citymission is how to better integrate and strengthen the education and training system to significantly improve the participation of children and young people facing disadvantage or with learning or developmental difficulties. We argue that the focus over the past decade has been placed too much on the linear path to Year 12, gaining VCE's leading to a place in tertiary education.

The Government acknowledged the need for change, resulting in the Blueprint for Reform and revised resource allocation model to better resource schools working with students who do not follow this linear path through learning. The analysis undertaken for the Department in support of the Student Resource Package clearly shows the strong correlation of absenteeism and poor educational achievement in both primary and secondary schools grouped by SES (Teese 2004).

It should be noted that the *On Track* analysis has aimed to provide a more balanced view of school education outcomes by going beyond VCE scores and retention rates in undertaking its survey of school leavers. However, its survey focussed on Year 10 to 12 leavers engaged to some degree in training or employment activities. Early school leavers not in education, training or the labour market were excluded from analysis (Teese et al 2004). As our scan of selected education outcome indicators shows below, the proactive monitoring of schools performance could be significantly improved.

Whilst we acknowledge the further implementation of the 'It's not OK to be away' campaign responding to absenteeism announced in the recent State Budget, a much more structured approach is required through a mandated obligation on DET to maximise inclusion for all children. This requires specific performance criteria to be included in departmental output statement to report on absenteeism, transfers and suspensions.

As part of the Victorian Government's policy response to growing homelessness, the issue of youth homelessness was acknowledged through a commitment to the Youth Homelessness Action Plan through the Office of Housing. The First Stage report identified the array of State and Commonwealth programs that broadly aim to 'reconnect' young people into learning options. However, the Department of Human Services acknowledged the need for greater integration between disengaged young people and education or training opportunities with a focus on prevention and early intervention (DHS 2004).

The School Focussed Youth Service model (SFYS) was introduced across Victoria in 1999 and targeted at risk young people and their families. The approach was founded on an acknowledgement of the need for better coordination of assistance across education, health and welfare sectors to intervene to prevent young people's disengagement from school. SFYS has proved to be highly successful in developing local initiatives that meet community needs and gaps. *'SFYS is embedded in the community, providing local innovation, and social capital, consultative processes built on local governance arrangements and cross sectoral partnerships.'* (O'Connell cited in SFYS 2003: 8).

Despite these welcome program initiatives, the education system must be encouraged to work in a seamless way with community support services through a more structured and integrated model to respond to the needs of families and their children facing disadvantage.

Key Issues facing Victoria's Education and Training System

One of the key goals of a modern education and training system is to maximise the employability of young people for a smooth transition to adult life to ensure personal well being, lower welfare dependence, reduced social and welfare costs for the community and to increase the productivity of the workforce. It follows that the objectives of both legislation and policy frameworks should include:

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- Maximising Year 12 completion rates for young people, and
 - Maximising post-compulsory vocational training completion rates targeted at industries with growth demand for labour across all skill levels

A necessary starting point for considering the most effective strategies (legislated or policy) for achieving the above objectives is a sound analysis and understanding of the current gaps and weaknesses of the learning system in the context of social and economic developments, which are likely to continue over the next decades.

The evidence for poor education outcomes is summarised below:

1. School retention:

The apparent school retention rates have been improving nationally and in Victoria since 1998. The 2004 rate for Victoria from Year 7 to Year 12 was 81.1% for all schools; however, the retention rate at government schools was significantly lower at 74.4% compared to 91.9% in non-government schools (ABS 2004: Table 50).

There is a significant gender variance in retention rates with males who continue in FTE (Yr 7 to 12) generally 10% lower than for females. *This means that over one third of males do not continue through to Year 12 and undertake at least 12 years of school based education.*

2. School & work participation:

Based on ABS 2004 data, the participation rates for key year cohorts, that is those not enrolled in secondary schools as a percentage of the total population was:

- 5% of 15 year olds
- 13% of 16 year olds
- 26% of 17 year olds (ABS 2004: Table 53)

Whilst this data shows the non-participation rate in formal schooling, it does not take into account those young people who leave school early to take up vocational or work opportunities. In May 2004, 12.6% of 15-19 year olds in Victoria were not in full time school, tertiary study or full time work. Based on current population estimates (Sep 2004), about 40,000 15-19 year olds may be poorly attached to work or learning.

The *On Track* 2003 survey of Year 10-12 Victorian school leavers in 2002 found that 17.1% were unemployed and hence not in any form of post-school education, training or work. This figure excludes those young people not looking for work. The response rate of the cohort of early school leavers was 55% raising some concerns about the representativeness of the participants (Teese et al 2004).

This data suggest that in order to make further gains in participation, retention and achievement, reforms must focus increasingly on those young people who may be characterised as poorly engaged with learning in general.

3. Absenteeism:

Bourke et al (2003) cite evidence from an unnamed State from 1998 that one quarter of government secondary school students are absent for 20 days or more in a year and 29% miss 10-20 days per annum (Bourke et al). More recently the Victorian Auditor General concluded that over the period 1996-2002 there has been a substantial increase in the level of absenteeism in government schools, citing departmental data:

- Average of 18 days per student in Year 8 in 2002
- Average of 21 days per student in Year 9 in 2002
- Average number of absent days increased by 44% for Year 5 students, 24% for Year 7 and 20% for Year 9 students in 7 years (Auditor General 2004).

Conclusions about the justification for absence is problematic because of the poor quality information on explanations collected. However, typically, over a third of absences are unexplained for non-indigenous students and two-thirds unexplained for indigenous students (Bourke et al 2003).

Melbourne Citymission's Family, School and Community Connections Project provides a casework approach with families to reduce absenteeism in the metropolitan western suburbs. One third of referred families reported entrenched absenteeism. At the extreme level, this means minimal attendance or learning – one Year 8 student only attended 7 days in Year 7 and 4 days thus far in Year 8; Another student has been suspended on 4 occasions for excessive truancy within a six month period.

In practice, 'explained' absences mean that parents have provided a reason for non-attendance. *However, parental acceptance of non-attendance by their child is influenced by their attitude and commitment to their child's learning against competing factors. This should not be underestimated in considering legislative change to strengthen educational outcomes.*

Absenteeism, especially for families from disadvantaged backgrounds, may be partly explained by child or parental illness, parental needs for sibling childcare, for assistance in the home or at work (self employed parents), family and cultural commitments and travel or holidays.

Some families evidently change their children's enrolment to avoid engaging with the school to deal with the issues resulting in non-attendance. A report examining school transience found that some schools in the local area had an annual school turnover of 20% with one school reporting 58% student turnover (Bell et al 2000).

Underlying weak commitment to schooling also relates to alienation due to poor literacy, poor English proficiency for children of CALD or indigenous backgrounds, learning or developmental delays, and experiences of bullying, teasing or violence at school.

Social and economic changes over the past decade have exacerbated all these factors, for example, the increase in single parent families, family conflict, homelessness, CALD background families; shortages in child care, inadequacy of income support and welfare reforms.

4. Educational achievement and disadvantage:

Early school leavers are significantly more likely to:

- Become long term unemployed and dependent on income support
- Experience higher levels of transience and homelessness
- Be involved in illegal activities leading to imprisonment (House of Representatives 1996)

Melbourne Citymission's mission is to provide services to individuals and families who are disadvantaged in our community. A recent analysis of Melbourne Citymission service users found that nearly half (42%) of young people (15-24 year olds) had no post-school qualification. Nineteen per cent of young people left school before Year 9, whilst 11% completed Years 9 or 10 (Melbourne Citymission 2005). Service users of indigenous background were twice as likely to have no post school qualification.

The 'Project I' study of 403 homeless young people in Melbourne (conducted in 2001) found that over one third (36%) had left school at Year 9 or earlier, although a proportion of these may have been still engaged in learning (school, JPET) (Rossiter et al 2003).

Young people experiencing homelessness are significantly more likely to have poor educational outcomes. In a study of 227 homeless adults in Melbourne (mean age 25 years), over half had left school aged 15 years or younger and 18% at 16 years. Half reported no school, tertiary or trade qualification (Horn 1998).

Young people assisted by Reconnect (8,000 nationally either homeless or at risk, between 2001 and 2003) were typically:

- 75% aged 14-17 years
- 61% female
- 79% educated to Year 10 or less
- 66% in full time education, and
- 42% had left the family home (RPR 2003)

The most frequently reported reason for young people to become homeless is family conflict, violence or breakdown. However, the extent of associated factors, such as parental substance abuse and chronic illness, child substance abuse, behavioural issues or conduct disorders, indicates the barriers for young people in maintaining school attendance and commitment to learning.

Specifically, the Reconnect evaluation found that 32% of young people assisted had been suspended from school and 'in 9% of cases young people had been expelled from one or more schools.' (RPR 2003: 41) The evaluators commented on the high prevalence of expulsion and compared it with uncited Victorian data that indicate a lower expulsion rate of 0.15% or 330 students in 2001 (RPR 2003). The association between family well-being, child circumstances and poor attachment to education is evident.

This level of exclusion from education is supported by other research. In the Project I study, one in ten young people who had experienced homelessness and were attending school had been expelled, suspended or asked to withdraw in the previous three months (Rossiter et al 2003). Poor educational achievement and disengagement from secondary school is further explained by the significant level of housing mobility, transience and homelessness of low-income families.

A study of young people experiencing homelessness in the 1990's found that 44% had attended between 5 to 8 schools and an additional 17% had attended 8 schools or more (Smith 1995). Three main reasons were reported for their school moves: family mobility, expulsions and multiple placements under State care.

Whilst not all young people of school age who experience these issues become homeless, the prevalence of the range of social issues faced by Victorian children is clearly sufficient to effect education system performance. Thus, assuming a prevalence rate of homelessness amongst Victorian school students of 11 per 1,000 (Chamberlain and MacKenzie 1997), based on current student numbers in 2004, we calculate that about 9,000 will experience homelessness in the school year. On any single night an estimated 4,600 young people aged 12-18 years are homeless across Victoria based on the 2001 Census (ABS 2004b).

This evidence shows that the further education reform in Victoria needs to take into account the social context that influences educational attendance and achievement.

Education Policy Reforms

School within the modern community setting

It is our belief that the education system still has a narrow worldview of its role. The emphasis within curriculum and school activities has been far too much on an assumed linear and smooth progression for young people through primary and secondary years to VCE and tertiary study.

The experience from other countries, such as Korea in the 90's of the adverse impact of education policy on many families and their students, should warn us of the risks of over emphasis on performance at the high achievement end of the education spectrum (Lee 2001).

Curriculum:

School has a pivotal educational value beyond what is perceived as the 'core curriculum'. Social and demographic changes have in many ways reduced the developmental experiences that mould children into adults who respect the core values that we expect in the community. Practical life skills, careers advice and financial literacy would more often have been provided within family through adult role models, siblings or extended family members. The modern educational system needs to take a broader view of curriculum if it is to ensure that young people are fully prepared and resourced to make the transition from education to work. This has partly been recognised in the new Victorian Essential Learning Standards curriculum planning framework, which aims:

'to equip students with capacities to: manage themselves and their relations with others; understand the world and act effectively in that world.'

VCAA (2005)

However, the *Physical, Personal and Social Learning Strand* should be expanded to include an additional domain on Independent Living Skills to ensure that all children and young people have access to learning practical skills to facilitate their transition to adulthood in the modern world.

A significant proportion of under achieving young people leave school early because of disinterest and perceived irrelevance of the subjects on offer. Recent UK experience with 'at risk' 14 and 15 year old males found that *school-based courses* that teach practical life and vocational skills can be successful in not only building confidence but also re-engaging them into school work (Lloyd 2002). A more flexible and inclusive curriculum is required to provide a variety of learning options that are creative, engaging and relevant to student needs and circumstances. *Both the curriculum framework and professional development of teaching staff in schools need to respond to the challenge of maintaining commitment of middle years students. This requires a clear imperative to be included in the new legislation.*

Rather than focus on punitive or coercive measures to improve attendance and outcomes for students, Melbourne Citymission encourages the multifaceted approach that incorporates mandated requirements on all schools to proactively monitor absenteeism, to implement technology based strategies for following up parents, but standardises best practice approaches to flexible and relevant curriculum and professional development to engage disinterested young people. As outlined by Withers (2004), there are several examples of local strategies in Victoria (and overseas) that should be extended and resourced through legislated provisions in the new Act.

Melbourne Citymission does **not** support a weakened Act that allows a 'light touch' regulatory framework as suggested in departmental material – rather, a stronger balanced framework is required to clearly put responsibility on education services and schools to implement and monitor proactive strategies for engagement and participation of under achieving young students. In this respect Melbourne Citymission welcomes the White Paper's commitment to a new Statutory Authority with responsibility for the oversight of a more comprehensive accountability framework.

Choice versus inclusion:

Melbourne Citymission supports the Government's reform agenda, which has placed importance on raising the quality of formal education across Victoria (DEET 2000: Appendix 2). However, we are concerned that too much emphasis is being placed on creating 'choice' in public education. The growth of 'high achievers' and 'accelerated learning' programs through increased autonomy in secondary schools should not be at the expense of higher levels of exclusion of difficult or under achieving students. If this trend is allowed to continue, it may lead to ghetto schools in low socio-economic areas. We are especially concerned at the prospect of increased 'out of zone' enrolments that may exacerbate this polarisation. What choice do the majority of struggling families really have in say Reservoir or Dandenong?

Whilst Melbourne Citymission is supportive of the general principle of offering choice to parents within the government school system, we remain concerned about the risk of the further evolution of a two-tiered public education system. The new legislation must therefore include effective provisions that prevent exclusionary practices by schools.

School procedures and practices for dealing with difficult students

Despite the procedures in place for schools to follow in implementing sanctions against students who contravene acceptable behaviour at school, the level of communication and engagement of parents prior to suspension or expulsion is still insufficient. Communication strategies are based on unreasonable assumptions concerning the capacities and understandings of many parents, for example families in health, housing or personal crisis and culturally and linguistically diverse families. Such families have poor understandings of processes, options and rights and may often be defensive, intimidated or preoccupied to address the concerns raised by the school.

Expulsion should be a last resort for schools after all other options have been tried. Staff report that some schools are using 'rolling' suspensions that in effect are expulsion. There is a significant level of student transfers between schools and high annual turnover. *Stronger obligations on school are required to assess other options ahead of transfers, which take, into account family issues and the imperative to maintain student engagement in school and local community.*

As school performance is increasingly focussed on high-level achievement indicators, there is serious risk of reduced tolerance of students from disadvantaged backgrounds and who may have learning difficulties. Anecdotal feedback indicates greater inflexibility by schools in 'sticking with' difficult young people. Once expelled, it is difficult to re-enrol in a new school. Schools, that do accept young people who have been expelled or transferred, are insufficiently rewarded by additional resources to support these students and to enable them to catch up with missed studies. The lack of skilled support to assist school staff with low achieving and disengaged young students needs to be addressed.

In addition, the increasing levels of absenteeism, problematic behaviours in schools need to be targeted through better integration of the range of support services currently in place. A stronger preventative approach is required. Community support agencies need to become involved earlier in the process at the first signs of significant risk of disengagement or bad behaviour. A holistic approach should be developed that is based on a shared understanding of the contributing factors that include parental or family issues.

The issue of homelessness and transience experienced by students is still poorly understood by schools in terms of associated causal factors and lack of support networks. For many young people who experience cycles of homelessness or transience, education plays a secondary role in their lives. When they realise they are behind at school and not coping, the easiest solution is to further disengage, not attend or become disruptive.

Melbourne Citymission and other community support agencies have had to develop Tutoring Programs that provide valuable opportunities for disadvantaged children who have missed school to catch up with their studies. These programs have been shown to be very effective at improving education levels, building self-esteem and improving the engagement of child and parents in learning activities (Horn and Parkinson 2004).

These interventions should be expanded as part of an integrated suite of support that brings together the expertise of community based services to work more closely with schools to ensure a holistic learning plan for under achieving children and young people. We urge the Government to consider that such measures be mandated on the education system within the new legislation.

Parental commitment to learning and compliance

Melbourne Citymission supports raising the school leaving age proposed in the White Paper. However, our experience with young people who have poor education outcomes tells us that this measure will only encourage a small proportion of 15 year olds to stay at school and commit to learning. Currently, school is in effect a holding pattern for some young people who want to get into work or are alienated from formal learning. A small but significant number of under 15 year olds drop out of school or have poor attendance records and high absenteeism. *A significant contributory factor for underachievement at school is the lack of commitment and support to education by parents.*

Strategies for gaining the commitment of parents to their child's education should be a core element of an integrated approach to improving educational achievement. Such strategies should be based on an understanding of the circumstances and experiences of parents. Barriers to parental commitment may include:

- family conflict and breakdown
- parental chronic ill-health, disability or substance abuse
- diverse cultural values and expectations of education
- low socio-economic status
- poor parental education achievement or experiences
- lack of parent coping or living skills
- concerns over reporting to DHS Child Protection Services
- school and housing transience

Student attendance guidelines must be combined with a proactive approach to family support needs and parenting skills. The evidence from the Melbourne Citymission auspiced School Attendance Support Project (Fisher 2000) supported overseas findings on the benefits of integrated parent focussed initiatives in achieving higher rates of student re-engagement. Experience from Tutoring Programs indicates that many students do not have a role model who encourages or supports their learning (Horn and Parkinson 2004). Parental support is a critical factor in ensuring student participation and commitment to learning – from literacy and numeracy through to careers advice and expectations of work environments.

Schools need to be encouraged to proactively strengthen communications and engagement with parents of 'at risk' students, through resourced strategies such as student award ceremonies for completion of social education and development modules, personalised involvement in specific activities or projects at home, and parental participation in tutoring events.

School is the best place for early intervention as teachers are able to assess the majority of young students at risk of poor educational achievement. An integrated education system should therefore include proactive engagement strategies aimed at parents through the late primary and early secondary years. It is too late to wait until disengagement at Year 9 and beyond. Parental commitment and practices need to be developed in the primary years.

Whilst the out of date compliance provisions in the current Act require revision, it is more important to ensure innovative *positive incentives* that encourage the young person to fully participate in schooling. Examples include the Connexions Card for 16-19 year olds in England, Student Learning Accounts in Queensland, as well as targeted support services such as Tutoring Programs for at risk students.

Financial burden and disadvantage causing disengagement from education and learning

Young people in families in financial hardship or those without family struggle to maintain participation in education and learning. Whilst we acknowledge that income support is a Commonwealth responsibility, the inadequacy of payments leaves many students in poverty (MIAESR 2003, Welfare Rights Centre 2002). The extra and increasing costs of education at all levels acts to exclude young people from learning or developmental activities.

Whilst the increases in Education Maintenance Allowance provided through the 2004/05 State Budget may have helped, the principle of a free education with equitable access should be enshrined in legislation. In addition, there needs to be greater clarity in how EMA can be used by schools.

The education system clearly has a direct role in poverty alleviation through EMA. This is acknowledged in the White Paper (DET: 7); however the principles espoused for free education do not go far enough.

Specifically, rather than the narrow definition of 'free instruction', the legislation should adopt a broader definition that ensures *free participation* in all education and related learning activities provided by schools. The range of educational activities should be clearly defined to include school-organised camps, sporting events and developmental outings. The EMA would then be restructured in its scope to be clearly utilised for curriculum resources, such as books and consumables, by families unable to provide these for their children.

The White Paper's guarantee of free education at a government school or TAFE to the end of Year 12 is to be welcomed. However, this guarantee should include the availability of a *Learning Credit* to enable students who miss significant periods of school or who drop out of school prematurely to access recovery tuition. This entitlement would enable, for example, a primary school aged child who has experienced homelessness to catch up or facilitate more flexible access to education and skills development through the life course for older students. These credits would also be used to fund approved education related costs for the young person enrolled in accredited learning.

An integrated learning and support model: school as community hub

Schools need to be further encouraged to develop flexible study options and build inclusive pathways to learning and training options. Many children's educational and support needs are complex and require an individualised family approach within the school setting. The education system needs to become more inclusive and outward focussed. A strong legislative framework is required to ensure that under achieving or disengaged children and young people receive an integrated model of assistance linking school, vocational training, careers advice, employment programs, health and welfare support together. Currently there exists a patchwork of 'reactive' programs funded through a range of departmental portfolios and community agencies.

Overseas experience has led to structured models for joining up assistance that are tailored to the individual circumstances of children and young people. Examples include Connexions (UK), the Follow Up Service in Norway, Gear Up (USA) and Mission Locales in France (cited in DfEE 2000). Similarly, developmental approaches for better coordinated, client centred support are being trialled in Victoria in the area of training and enrolment assistance, for example YP⁴ for disadvantaged young homeless jobseekers (Horn 2004). A more preventative approach, which places school and formal education at the centre of an integrated model will significantly improve education and learning participation and outcomes and reduce welfare and health costs in the future.

Melbourne Citymission's recent development project, the Family, Schools and Community Connections Project, in collaboration with colleague agencies and schools in the western suburbs, provides the basis for such an integrated approach. Elements of an integrated approach are found within Victoria (Hillside) and internationally (Family Connection Centres, Washington State, USA).

The main objectives of the FSCC included:

- assist and support families with children identified as 'at risk'
- engage with school staff to develop opportunities for their participation
- engage with community services to develop outreach support into school
- foster connections between school, parents and community support services
- improve school attendance of children (MCM 2005)

Key learnings from this Project, and analysis of similar approaches mentioned above, indicate the need for a structured and resourced integrated model that should include:

- a) teacher assessment of child risk of disengagement or poor learning
- b) school based case work support with families and their child
- c) brokerage to directly assist families and promote engagement
- d) dedicated infrastructure and space within school setting
- e) consultative committee with broad representation to coordinate program resources
- f) consultation with parents and community to ensure support for the program
- g) school facilities to encourage family friendly environment
- h) information library for parents
- i) outreach by specialised services to school
- j) tutoring, before and after school care, parental support & social activities

Full case management would focus on the relatively small number of families and their children with complex or multiple issues that resulted in poor attendance and commitment to learning. However, an integrated model as described would also provide a preventive response through the availability of accessible information, advice and support within a family friendly environment. We believe the State Government should take a bolder approach in its education reforms that will lead to the implementation of such integrated models to improve outcomes for those most disadvantaged and to improve the efficiency of the current system.

Conclusion

Australia is a signatory to the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child, which places obligations on all levels of government, including Victoria. The Review of the education legislation provides an opportunity, indeed an imperative, on the Victorian Government to implement changes that ensures the new legislation meets the Convention's Articles that deal with education and learning.

Melbourne Citymission supports the White Paper's commitment to the core principles of universal access to a secular public education system that promotes democratic principles and maximises transparency through an enhanced accountability framework. However, the evidence of disengagement and poor educational outcomes shows that the Government needs to be more visionary in framing its new legislation if it is serious about driving change to address educational disadvantage in Victoria.

Young people who have a poor history of learning achievement require a different style of learning. Such young people do not compartmentalise their needs in the way in which education, training and work experience are invariably provided. These young people do not develop a neat linear pathway to work and career as often assumed by the way in which education and training is offered. They often struggle with traditional forms of education because of poor concentration, learning difficulties and difficulty in retaining information.

A significant proportion of young people have health, family, learning or housing difficulties that adversely impact on their capacity to maintain commitment to learning. School is a critical point of connection in the community to identify these risks for disengagement and social exclusion.

Parents need the coordinated support of education, allied health and welfare professionals who understand children with special learning needs. In many cases, the generational transfer of a negative perception to school and learning must be countered through school and community based strategies to better engage the student in learning. Schools need to be encouraged to have structured approaches to engage with parents as well as to develop educational styles and courses that connect with under achieving young people.

The White Paper does not address these issues. Yet, a strong mandate through legislated provisions is necessary to drive reform for a more balanced, better resourced and inclusive education system for the next generation of Victorian children.

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