



Melbourne Citymission

Policy Bites

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EDUCATION AND LEARNING FOR ALL VICTORIAN CHILDREN

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. Our evidence indicates a significant level of disengagement and poor education outcomes for children from disadvantaged backgrounds despite significant policy reform over the past few years.

The new legislation should take into account the modern social context that influences educational attendance and achievement.

Whilst the changes 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.

A modern learning system needs to better integrate formal education with family support services.

Despite over a decade of strong economic growth, too many families with children are struggling and need proactive support to maintain attendance and learning at school.

A broader definition of 'free' education is needed that goes beyond the Government's proposed limit of 'free instruction', to enable all children to take part in school organised camps, sporting events and developmental outings.

We need to recognise through policy and subsequent practice that parents should be encouraged and supported to accept equal responsibility with their school for learning outcomes. Teachers need the support and commitment of parents to ensure full participation of their children in education.

The education system must be encouraged to work in a seamless way with community support services through policies to identify children at risk, to provide a Learning Credit to enable children to catch up after extended periods of absenteeism, to ensure schools implement a pro-active approach to strengthening parental commitment to learning and resolving barriers to school attendance.

We urge the Government to be more visionary in framing its new legislation if it


is serious about driving change to address educational disadvantage in Victoria.

Pathways to full economic and social participation that 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.

Melbourne Citymission's recent project, the **Family, Schools and Community Connections Project**, in collaboration with colleague agencies and schools in the western suburbs, provides the foundation for an innovative model that will reduce absenteeism and strengthen the engagement of children, and the commitment of their parents, to education.

We encourage the State Government to take a bolder approach in its education reforms that will ensure the implementation of such integrated approaches.

Anne Turley
CHIEF EXECUTIVE



Too many families with children are struggling and need proactive support to maintain attendance and learning at school.

Melbourne Citymission has developed 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. We have also developed tutoring and homework programs to enable children in school to catch-up with their education and maintain their commitment to school.

Research and evaluation of our on-the-ground service experience shows that there is significant room for improvement in education and learning outcomes for Victorian children and young people. The current Review of the relevant legislation provides a valuable opportunity for Victoria to set in place a framework to drive reform for a more inclusive learning environment that acknowledges social and demographic trends over the coming decades.

This policy paper sets out recent evidence of the level of disengagement and poor educational outcomes for a significant proportion of children, followed by a set of recommendations for policy reform. We also present an outline of a practical proposal for a trial of a collaborative model that seeks to better integrate education with family and community support services based on school as the hub.

Key Findings

Melbourne Citymission's Submission to the Review of Education and Training Legislation identified significant levels of poor education outcomes summarised as follows¹:

- The retention rate (Years 7 to 12) in government schools is 74% (ABS 2004)
- Over one third of males do not continue to Year 12
- Significant non-participation rates of 15 to 17 year olds in formal schooling: 5% of 15 year olds; 13% of 16 year olds and 26% of 17 year olds (ABS 2004)
- 13% of 15-19 year olds are not in school, tertiary study or full time work
- Absenteeism is significant and growing according to the Auditor General: average of 18 days in Year 8; 21 days per student in Year 9 (2002 data)
- High rates of student turnover or transfer in disadvantaged regions (Bell 2000)

Clear evidence also exists on the strong association between poor educational achievement and social disadvantage and exclusion. 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

The national evaluation of Reconnect, an early intervention program for young people at risk of homelessness found that 32% of the 8,000 clients had been suspended from school and 'in 9% of cases, young people had been expelled from one or more schools' (RPR 2003).

We have estimated that about 9,000 school students will experience homelessness in the school year.

This evidence shows that the review and subsequent development of legislative parameters for education in Victoria need to take into account the social context that influences educational attendance and achievement.


Policy Solutions

It is our belief that the education system has too narrow a world view of its role in the community. 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. This is fine for the 85-90% of children in the education system, however, a significant proportion of children do become alienated and disengaged from school and learning.

A modern education and training system needs to have a balanced suite of policy settings that focus on the twin objectives of:

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

If the State Government is to achieve its goals for education achievement by 2010, it is essential that a legislated framework be



introduced to ensure a more integrated learning system to maximise the engagement and inclusion of all children and young people, including those with disabilities and learning difficulties.

Schools need to be better supported and encouraged to ensure the active commitment and participation of children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Parents need to be encouraged to be active partners in the education of their children.

Acknowledgment of the barriers and pressures on families due to social and economic circumstances provides the starting point for policy initiatives to significantly improve learning outcomes for the 10-15% of low achieving students. These include:

- A more flexible & inclusive curriculum to provide a variety of learning options that are creative, engaging and relevant to student needs to overcome disinterest and disengagement
- A Learning Credit system to enable children to catch up after significant periods of non-attendance through family homelessness or ill health
- Provision for an integrated learning and support model with structured links to support services
- A stronger mandate for early assessment of risk of disengagement from school, resulting in collaborative learning plans
- Integrated strategies for strengthening parental commitment to child learning

It is imperative that the new Act incorporates provision for a stronger professional development focus for teachers. This should include understandings of the circumstances of disadvantaged families to enable assessment of 'at risk' children, their learning capacity and parental commitment to learning. More intentional procedures for such assessment should lead to individual learning plans developed in collaboration with health and welfare support services.

Melbourne Citymission welcomes the White Paper's commitment to strengthened performance reporting.

A more balanced accountability framework should include indicators of engagement, rather than the

We must do more to ensure all Victorian children are engaged and committed to education, if we are to avoid generational exclusion and poverty.

current emphasis on attainment with public reporting of schools performance against a more balanced set of quality and outcome criteria.

Melbourne Citymission supports increasing the school leaving age. However, this measure by itself will have negligible effect on attendance, absenteeism, truancy and completion rates without additional reforms predicated on a more holistic understanding of the social and economic context.

Proposal for a new approach

Schools and community services in disadvantaged regions are struggling to develop more effective collaborative models. Melbourne Citymission has worked with the Harvester Network of schools in the western metropolitan region (Family Schools & Community Connections Project) to develop an integrated approach focussed on vulnerable families that will strengthen the engagement of children in education.² There are other cross-cutting approaches to service delivery that should also be used to guide future models for trial.

Whilst there are budget implications for building more targeted inclusive means to reduce absenteeism, suspensions and disengagement from learning, these will be outweighed by the gains through reduced social

exclusion and increased educational outcomes that lead to a more highly skilled workforce.

There are also potential benefits of integrated models that eliminate many of the inefficiencies through current fragmented and reactive service delivery.

References:

1. MCM (2005) 'Learning for all Victorian children and young people', Submission to the Review of Education and Training Legislation, 12 May 2005, Melbourne.
2. MCM (2005) **Family Schools & Community Connections**, A Report to the Department of Family and Community Services, Melbourne.

DID YOU KNOW?

Melbourne Citymission has been providing assistance and support to disadvantaged households in Melbourne for over 150 years.

Melbourne Citymission is widely recognised as a leader and innovator in the provision of services to the community.

Established by the Churches of Melbourne in 1854, Melbourne Citymission is a non-denominational organisation that provides assistance to thousands of Victorians of many faiths and cultures, who are disadvantaged, isolated and vulnerable.

Providing a hand up, not a hand out, supporting people to take charge of their own lives and participate fully in community life, remains the focus of Melbourne Citymission's work.

Our service areas include:

-  Children, Youth, Adult & Family
-  Disability
-  Employment, Education & Training
-  Homelessness
-  Aged Care
-  Palliative Care

Client profile:

- Every week at least 1,800 people seek MCM's assistance
- An additional 2,400 people are clients of the organisation's range of programs
- Sixty-one per cent of MCM clients are female
- Less than one quarter are married or in a de facto relationship
- Thirty per cent are under 30 years old; 40% aged 30-65 years & 20% aged over 75 years

Indicators of disadvantage:

- Sixty per cent of MCM clients have a disability or chronic health condition
- Ninety-four per cent are reliant on government benefits for income
- Over one third experienced multiple signs of financial stress in previous 12 months
- Fourteen per cent are homeless; and 34% are likely to move home within the next year
- Only one quarter (29%) have VCE qualifications

Further Information:

Policy Bites is produced by Melbourne Citymission's Research and Social Policy Unit.

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