



## Submission to the *Education State Consultation Paper*

**Written by:**

Deborah Fewster  
Head of Policy, Advocacy and Government Relations  
Melbourne City Mission  
164 – 180 Kings Way  
South Melbourne 3205  
Victoria  
Email: [dfewster@mcm.org.au](mailto:dfewster@mcm.org.au)  
Mobile: 0417 259 516

**Authorised by:**

Ric Holland  
Chief Executive Officer  
Melbourne City Mission  
164 – 180 Kings Way  
South Melbourne 3205  
Victoria  
Email: [rholland@mcm.org.au](mailto:rholland@mcm.org.au)  
Mobile: 0458 766 123

## Introduction

Melbourne City Mission is one of the State's oldest and largest community services organisations, with a diverse service platform that supports marginalised community members to forge a pathway to social and economic participation.

We know that for children and young people experiencing disadvantage, education is a key enabler for social and economic mobility. Consequently, Melbourne City Mission has a strategic focus on supporting education participation and attainment.

This submission is informed by:

- Our experience as Victoria's largest community education provider of the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL). Through the *Melbourne Academy* (our high-support Community VCAL program), Melbourne City Mission currently has in the order of 250 students undertaking Foundation, Intermediate and Senior VCAL studies, including Vocational Education and Training in Schools (VETis) offered through our integrated Registered Training Organisation. A 12-month independent evaluation recently completed by Victoria University (and launched by the Minister for Education, The Hon. James Merlino MP) confirms that the *Melbourne Academy* model is delivering great outcomes for students across a range of academic and social indicators. (More detail about these outcomes is provided later in this submission).
- Our experience running mentoring, tutoring and other programs for 'at risk' students in mainstream school settings, including the State Government funded *School Focused Youth Service* and the *Detour Innovation Action Project* (which works with young people and families who are vulnerable to homelessness).
- Our experience running re-engagement programs that provide pathways back to mainstream school or to alternate settings such as the *Melbourne Academy* – for example, the State-funded *Springboard* program (which focuses on the needs of young people who are transitioning from the Out of Home Care system).
- Our experience providing parenting support to vulnerable families, including families where a parent or child has a learning difficulty or cognitive disability.
- Our experience running early childhood intervention services and early childhood education services, including parent-child activity groups such as *Mother Goose* (which has an early years literacy focus), supported playgroups, long day care, and three and four-year kindergarten. The *Cradle to Kinder* program, which focuses on families who have, or are at risk of, Child Protection engagement is also highlighted as a case study later in this submission.

**Melbourne City Mission understands that there are economic imperatives that are driving the *Education State* agenda. However, we take this opportunity to highlight the social imperatives and the opportunity for the *Education State* to close the equity gap and build higher levels of social cohesion across Victorian communities, in tandem with economic considerations.**

# Melbourne City Mission's perspectives on the *Education State* agenda

## ***The Education State must be a whole-of-government agenda***

Whilst the majority of Victorian children will make a seamless transition to education and go on to attain a Year 12 qualification, there remain cohorts of students who encounter significant barriers to learning along different parts of the education pathway. These include:

- **Children and young people who have developmental delays and/or cognitive disabilities – or whose parents have cognitive disabilities and need assistance to support their child's learning<sup>1</sup>.** The Australian Bureau of Statistics notes a significant gap between students with disability and those without, notably in the attainment of Year 12 or equivalent, vocational education and training qualifications, and participation in university studies.<sup>2</sup>
- **Children and young people who have been exposed to, or have experienced, neglect or violence.** For example, approximately 90 per cent of the Melbourne Academy student cohort fits under the Department of Education and Training's definition of 'complex trauma', as presented in *Trauma Informed Classrooms* material and training, impacting their ability to form relationships with teachers and peers, as well as their ability to concentrate and retain and recall new information.
- **Children and young people who have missed vital stepping stones on their education pathway and are struggling to 'catch up'.** This cohort ranges from children who have not attended – or have sporadically attended – early childhood education, through to young people who have had their primary and/or secondary schooling disrupted for diverse reasons, for example, ill-health or disability (their own, their parent's and/or a sibling's), housing instability/homelessness, or transport disadvantage. Approximately 95 per cent of students who are studying at the *Melbourne Academy* – Melbourne City Mission's education program for 15-25 year olds previously disengaged from education – do not have the requisite literacy and numeracy level for their age upon enrolment, and have insufficient education to undertake industry specific training.
- **Children and young people growing up in home environments and neighbourhoods where there are patterns of intergenerational early school leaving** – for example, in Braybrook, where Melbourne City Mission runs early childhood education services and youth mentoring and training programs, 52 per cent of adults have not completed secondary education.

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<sup>1</sup> Melbourne City Mission notes that the State Government is currently undertaking a review of the *Program for Students with Disabilities* (PSD), and is committed to implementing other policy and funding measures such as the *Inclusive Schools Fund*. Melbourne City Mission will feed into the *PSD Review*. However, we take the opportunity to note here that parents have previously provided feedback to Melbourne City Mission that in mainstream education, there is a significant gap between Departmental guidelines and what happens in practice at schools. Parents make a distinction between students with disabilities being **present** and being **genuinely included** and **enabled to actively participate** in learning. School culture, as well as adequately-funded support (for students and for teachers), are identified as key barriers to inclusion. Parents note that a disempowering, deficits approach, in which students are made to fit into categories of impairment and/or worst case scenarios documented in order to attract funding. Students with 'hidden' disabilities, such as Acquired Brain Injury, find it difficult to access education support.

<sup>2</sup> See [www.abs.gov.au/ausstas/abs@.nsf/Lookup/4446.0main+features102009](http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstas/abs@.nsf/Lookup/4446.0main+features102009)

Given the significant impact that issues such as health (particularly mental health and substance use), disability and housing have on education (to give just a few examples), it is vital that there is collective ownership of the Education State agenda across government.

**Whilst the Department of Education and Training should have primary responsibility for delivering the Education State agenda, Melbourne City Mission contends that there should be mechanisms – such as an Interdepartmental Committee (IDC) – to drive an ‘Education in all policies’ approach going forward.**

A whole-of-government approach that identifies and attends to risk factors from birth to the early years, middle years, and through adolescence is vital to creating the conditions for academic success for all Victorian children and young people. **Going forward, strategic investment in early intervention programs will be a critical enabler for the Education State agenda** – not only in early childhood (when neural pathways are developing), but at later developmental phases and transition periods.

**CASE STUDY:  
CRADLE TO KINDER**

Victoria’s *Cradle to Kinder* program – located in a number of ChildFIRST catchments across the State – provides intensive ante and post-natal support for vulnerable families, with a focus on young women under the age of 25 who are pregnant or new mothers.

The majority of Cradle to Kinder parents have been engaged in the Child Protection and Out of Home Care systems during their own childhood and adolescence, and many have histories of disrupted schooling, education disengagement and/or identified learning difficulties. The program builds the capacity of parents to not only provide for their children’s health, safety and development (including linkages to maternal and child health and early years education – for example, supported playgroups, child care and kindergarten), but to build their own self reliance and sustainability through access to education, vocational training and employment.

Whilst Cradle to Kinder is a Department of Health and Human Services funded program, Melbourne City Mission contends that it is an excellent example of how jurisdictions outside the Department of Education and Training contribute to education outcomes. In terms of Melbourne City Mission’s own service platform, Cradle to Kinder provided the impetus for Melbourne City Mission to establish a dedicated “Young Mums” classroom through its Melbourne Academy program. This classroom, delivered in partnership with the Cradle to Kinder program, is now in its third year at Melbourne City Mission.

## **Creating the conditions for academic success – the importance of the early years**

The *Education State Consultation Paper* notes that the “vast majority of young Victorian children visit maternal and child health services and participate in kindergarten, which gives them a good start early in life” and that “we rank above all other- Australian states and territories when measuring the proportion of 5 year olds who are developmentally on track”.

However, Melbourne City Mission notes that while the overall rates of participation in early years education are high – and Victorian children rate well in terms of developmental milestones – there remain pockets of persistent disadvantage. For example, in some parts of the Whittlesea growth corridor, 35 per cent of children are entering school ‘developmentally vulnerable’.

Melbourne City Mission concurs with VCOSS’s assertion that:

*“Universal early childhood services and schools are uniquely placed to identify signs of early vulnerability and to implement strategies that improve young people’s wellbeing and life outcomes”*<sup>3</sup>

and that:

*“To make Victoria the Education State, we need to establish a high quality, accessible early childhood education system. This includes providing universal access to three-year-old kindergarten and increasing rates of participation in four-year-old kindergarten among vulnerable children. It also includes increasing playgroup participation rates of children aged 0-4, to support early childhood development and parental engagement. Playgroups provide an ideal way to engage parents early and prepare them for on-going involvement in their child’s education, as well as setting children on a positive education trajectory.”*<sup>4</sup>

Melbourne City Mission agrees that full – and ongoing – government funding is critical to delivering **universal access** to early years education.

**Additionally**, given the multiple and complex needs of highly vulnerable groups, Melbourne City Mission contends that funding is required for **assertive outreach and intensive support models** in order to drive **universal participation**, recognising that where disadvantage is deep and persistent, the engagement process may be difficult. To enable and sustain participation, policies and programs need to comprehensively address the personal and structural barriers to participation. **‘Client seeking’ strategies** are required – it cannot be assumed that universal services will simply ‘pick up’ children and families with multiple and complex needs – **together with longer-term investments in intensive wrap-around supports** where there is evidence of intergenerational disadvantage and/or complex trauma.

Effective early intervention takes time and requires a long-term investment – longer than governments are typically used to funding. Whilst this is a more expensive way of working in terms of upfront costs, this needs to be weighed up against the long-term costs of not acting (as well as the moral obligation we have to our children and young people).

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<sup>3</sup> Victorian Council of Social Service (2015), *The Education State. VCOSS Response to the Education State Consultation Paper*, published at [http://vcoss.org.au/documents/2015/08/SUB\\_150731\\_Education-State-Consultation\\_FINAL.pdf](http://vcoss.org.au/documents/2015/08/SUB_150731_Education-State-Consultation_FINAL.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

***Diversifying education models:  
Acknowledging a one-size-fits-all approach does not work  
Valuing and resourcing 'alternate' education models***

While mainstream secondary school education prepares the majority of Victorian students well for social inclusion and labour market participation, there remains a core group of younger people with multiple and complex needs who succeed in a different model of education and support.

Every year 10,000 young people are leaving secondary school without completing Year 12, according to Victorian Department of Education and Training data. Of the 7,000 who move into the VET system immediately after disengaging from secondary education, 6,000 go on to disengage from VET after just one year. This is clear evidence that for a large group of Victoria's young people these models of education are not working.

Since 2001, a range of policy measures have been implemented to minimise educational disengagement, optimise school completion and promote effective post-school pathways for young Victorians. Whilst a primary focus has been on retaining students within the mainstream school system, education policy has recognised that issues such as homelessness, trauma, family breakdown, poverty, mental health issues, low self-esteem, previous low attainment, or behavioural issues can compromise a student's ability to learn within school settings.

Community VCAL programs delivered by non-school Senior Secondary Providers, such as Melbourne City Mission's *Melbourne Academy*, have provided options – and opened new pathways – for students who are at risk of disengaging from education, or who have already disengaged. (More information about the impact of the *Melbourne Academy* over the page.)

Whilst we agree that the capacity of mainstream schools to respond to 'disadvantaged' learners should be bolstered as part of the *Education State* agenda, 'alternate settings'/'diverse models' – such as those delivered by community schools and community education providers like Melbourne City Mission – should continue to be a vital part of the education landscape. In particular, Melbourne City Mission contends that, going forward, policy and funding should recognise the 'heavy lifting' undertaken by these education providers, in engaging and re-engaging the State's highest needs learners.

Melbourne City Mission wishes to particularly highlight that the current Student Resource Package (SRP) allocation to students who are identified as 'disadvantaged' does not reflect the true cost of meeting their high-support needs in the classroom.

In terms of our education provision, Melbourne City Mission's *Melbourne Academy* student body comprises:

- young people who are experiencing homelessness
- young women who are pregnant or parenting
- young people who have grown up in families characterised by inter-generational early school leaving and long-term unemployment
- young people who have had engagement with statutory services.

Most of the students have a two to three year gap in their education attendance/enrolment. As stated earlier in this submission, approximately 90 per cent have complex trauma. These are young people whose multiple and complex needs cannot easily be met in a 'mainstream' secondary school environment.

For this cohort of learners, outcomes such as regular attendance, participation, and attainment cannot be achieved unless the high-support context is acknowledged and addressed. Under our model, success is being experienced in the following domains, as evaluated by Victoria University:

- **Academic achievement** – Despite significant educational barriers, 65 per cent of the cohort completed all or part of their VCAL certificate in 2014, and many worked towards VET certificates. Staff, students and parents agree that most students would not have achieved these qualifications without the opportunity to attend the *Melbourne Academy*.
- **Attendance and participation** – 83 per cent of *Melbourne Academy* students agreed they were more likely to come to school. Over the course of the year, the proportion of students who were 'engaged' increased from 44 per cent to 76 per cent in terms of class participation and from 59 per cent to 78 per cent in terms of satisfaction in their own work.
- **Aspiration and motivation** – aspiration is pivotal for enhancing young people's access to post-school pathways. In the student survey, 86 per cent listed working in a job that interests them as their future aspiration and 83 per cent indicated that they were attending the *Melbourne Academy* to gain their VCAL in order to achieve their goals.
- **Connections with peers and community** – a key component of connection to the *Melbourne Academy* is having family, friends and other significant people supporting and encouraging the young person to do well. In the student survey, 93 per cent indicated they got on better with teachers at the *Melbourne Academy*; 75 per cent indicated they are with friends at the *Melbourne Academy*; and 90 per cent indicated their family encouraged them to do well.
- **Social and personal wellbeing** – The Engagement Matrix used in the research found significant increases in student confidence (an increase from 54 per cent to 85 per cent) and resilience (from 41 per cent to 68 per cent). Students' wellbeing is enhanced through increased feelings of pride, self-belief and ownership, and reduced anxiety and depression.

The Victoria University evaluation isolated particular elements of the model linked to positive student outcomes, including:

- Keeping classes small is a key strategy for the success of the *Melbourne Academy* (the student:staff ratio was 14:1 in the largest class in 2014). It lays the foundations for strong staff-student relationships.
- The teacher-youth worker pairs at each site (each *Melbourne Academy* classroom has its own teacher and its own youth worker for 20 students) are the greatest asset of the *Melbourne Academy*. Their complementary expertise enables the provision of holistic support to young people.
- Combining high expectations with flexible, individualised support is hard work for staff, but pays off as it facilitates success for students.
- Co-location of *Melbourne Academy* sites with a **range of other youth and community services** extends the range of professional expertise available to support young people at short notice and in close proximity.
- The duration of the *Melbourne Academy* (one to three years, longer than many other flexible learning programs) offers students with complex needs and large education gaps the stability and time to achieve valuable credentials.

- Young people are warmly welcomed at the *Melbourne Academy* regardless of their circumstances and formal enrolment status. New students can join a classroom immediately, rather than waiting until all paperwork has been processed and funding is received for their enrolment.

Whilst each of these elements combines to deliver highly-effective education outcomes for previously disengaged learners (which in turn, will deliver significant long-term cost-savings to government), each element also adds to the cost of delivering the model. Though the SRP has a 'student need funding' component – of which four (4) per cent is allocated on the basis of 'social disadvantage' – this allocation does not cover the true cost of delivering high-support education responses as described above.

This leaves Melbourne City Mission, a lean not-for-profit organisation running the State's largest community VCAL program, in a position where it is required to undertake corporate and community fundraising to cover a significant funding gap – a gap that is increasingly difficult to sustain.

Melbourne City Mission also notes that the Melbourne Academy model comprises eight dispersed classrooms (flexible learning spaces) with up to 20 students each across northern, western, inner Melbourne, and South Melbourne venues. The eight classrooms are located across six distinct sites, none of which are Department of Education and Training properties. Costs associated with setting up classrooms are borne by Melbourne City Mission, not the Department. Most of the classrooms are situated within youth service settings and the costs for such sites is a premium.

Melbourne City Mission is advocating for an increase in the SRP for our student cohort, in the order of 60 per cent to 80 per cent. This solution would account for the provision of intensive support provided by the community provider to the student and significant infrastructure provided by the community provider into the education system at no cost to the government (the main infrastructure items being buildings, including provision, maintenance and running costs).

With high levels of education disengagement and record rates of youth unemployment, Melbourne City Mission also contends that **intensive case management** is urgently required to fill the gap left by the defunding of Youth Connections by the Commonwealth.

Genuine re-engagement programs, such as *Melbourne Academy*, working with clients who present with multiple and complex issues, require an intensive case management model to sustain the re-engagement of young people into education. Our case managers work with students to overcome and resolve barriers to their participation and achievement within an education context. For many students this work is required to be completed prior to them even being ready to step into a classroom, and it is often six to 12 months until the young person can effectively participate in a class context. The role of the case manager once a student does engage then becomes an ongoing support role until integration back into education is complete.

The Victorian context is currently devoid of a funding model for this very important work. Melbourne City Mission believes this 'missing link' should be acknowledged and resourced as part of the *Education State* agenda going forward.