

DECEMBER 2019



VCOSS submission to the inquiry into Auditor-General's Report No. 253: Managing School Infrastructure (2017).

The Victorian Council of Social Service (VCOSS) welcomes the Parliament of Victoria's Public Accounts and Estimates Committee's follow-up inquiry into the Auditor-General's report on Managing School Infrastructure.

VCOSS is the peak body for the social and community services in Victoria. VCOSS supports the community services industry, represents the interests of Victorians facing disadvantage and vulnerability in policy debates, and advocates to develop a sustainable, fair and equitable society.

This submission will address Terms of Reference 6.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Invest in schools as community hubs
- Deliver co-designed and place-based responses
- Change the trajectory of disadvantage
- Resource service coordinators

Invest in schools as community hubs

Schools are already places where community members come together and engage with each other. Victoria can capitalise on this by strategically planning and designing facilities that reduce barriers to accessing services by investing in schools as 'community hubs'.

Community hubs foster greater collaboration between services and professionals, and can break down systemic or structural barriers families may experience in accessing services.

When services are co-located, less people fall through the cracks.

Community hubs can provide wrap-around supports that are tailored to the needs of specific communities. Alongside placing early learning on school grounds, these wrap-around support can include family services, health and wellbeing services, and adult engagement and education support.

The Victorian Government has already committed to building a new preschool in all new primary schools and is partnering to establish 10 'Our Place' sites across Victoria¹. These investments provide a strong foundation.

The Government can build on this by expanding community engagement and partnerships with community organisations and local government to deliver services on school sites, helping schools to more holistically engage with children and their families.

Deliver co-designed, place-based responses

Schools as community hubs create the opportunity to co-design place-based responses to local issues, and enable communities to build their strengths while addressing targeted areas in need of extra support.

Place-based co-design is important because it leverages local insights and empowers the experts (local community members) to develop and implement community-driven local solutions that build resilience and social capital as well as achieve health and well-being outcomes.

Successful co-design is contingent on community organisations, local government, and the broader community having sufficient time to engage in reflection and consultation processes. Building in time for community engagement is important not

only for organisations and local government to factor in planning and financial commitments, but to ensure that local needs are understood and embedded in design.

If insufficient time is put-aside for consultation and collaboration, there are serious implications for the ability of communities to meaningfully engage, and provide input into existing community strengths that can be built upon and solutions their communities need.

Change the trajectory of disadvantage

Shared and co-located facilities in disadvantaged areas can turn the trajectory of a community around. Schools as community hubs can enhance children and young people's education and support the wellbeing of families and communities as a whole.

Many families who experience disadvantage have difficulty negotiating the service system, and may be unaware of support that is available to them or lack the confidence to seek help. Schools as community hubs can provide easier service access pathways, a non-stigmatising environment, and extra support for vulnerable families. This model can enable families to move discreetly between services, which may otherwise cause embarrassment, and reduces time and money it costs to attend multiple appointments.

¹ Our Place.

Schools as community hubs can also help promote a sense of belonging, greater connections within families, increased

safety, stronger relationships with staff, and greater attendance at school.

Doveton does it better

The Our Place model at Doveton College is a place-based initiative that addresses structural causes of disadvantage and has a single entry point into early learning, school, adult learning, and community spaces.

The school has a diverse and often vulnerable student population with more than 50 nationalities and languages spoken within the school. There are also a significant number of students who have experienced trauma and require wrap-around supports such as formal mental health plans.

Doveton College provides a wide range of wrap-around educational and allied health supports including maternal and child health services, play groups, medical and allied health services, engagement programs for children and adults, and adult learning opportunities. The model has a whole of family learning focus.

Since the implementation of the Our Place mode, Doveton College has seen substantial improvements in the social connectedness of communities, improvement in children and family's health and wellbeing, as well as increased child and family engagement in learning, social opportunities and skills and employment².

Resource service coordinators

Navigating and understanding complex service systems can present significant barriers for people engaging in services, particularly in areas of high socioeconomic disadvantage, or for other families experiencing disadvantage such as those

from culturally and linguistically diverse communities.

For families experiencing vulnerability or disadvantage, the first opportunity to connect with a service can be vital in building a positive relationship and experience.

² Gregory McMahon, Strategic Director at Doveton College, *Witness Statement: Royal*

Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System, July 2019

To realise the full potential of schools as community hubs, schools should be funded to embed a dedicated coordinator to facilitate service collaboration, provide a single entry point, and remove barriers for families.

A service coordinator can support community hubs to be responsive and support families when they are ready to engage and creates a 'no wrong door' policy that helps build trust.



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