

2023 Community Sector Education Forum Summary

ABOUT THE FORUM

The Community Sector Education Forum is a flagship event held annually by the Victorian Council of Social Service (VCOSS), supported by the Victorian Department of Education (DE).

Each year the Community Sector Education Forum focuses on a theme that explores DE and community sector priorities in education. The theme in 2023 was *What surrounds us, shapes us*. This acknowledges the impact that factors both inside and outside the kindergarten and school gates (such as trauma, poverty, and the social determinants of health) have on children and young people's learning and wellbeing, and their education outcomes.

The forum provided a platform for attendees to explore opportunities for collaboration between education and community services, and to examine how the two sectors might work together to shape supportive environments and communities for all Victorian learners, from early childhood through to adulthood.

The event attracted over 130 attendees including:

- Senior representatives from DE, along with peak bodies and industry associations representing the education sector.
- CEOs and executives from community service organisations.
- Community services managers who oversee the design and delivery of wellbeing programs, mentoring, education support and education re-engagement programs.

The forum guest speakers included:

- The Hon. Ben Carroll MP (Deputy Premier of Victoria and Minister for Education)
- The Hon. Lizzie Blandthorn MP (Minister for Children and Minister for Disability)
- Secretary Jenny Atta (Secretary, Victorian Department of Education)
- Silvana Izzo (Trauma specialist)
- Amy Haywood (Deputy Program Director, Education, The Grattan Institute)

The full agenda and list of speakers, as well as the graphic recording by Sarah Firth prepared to capture the day is provided in Appendix 1.

Summary of key reflections

Ministerial addresses

- The new role of Minister for Children sets out to strengthen ties between the Department of Education, Department of Families, Fairness and Housing and Department of Health. The intention is to drive better health, wellbeing and education outcomes for children and families across the state, and to reduce education inequities.
- The Minister for Education (The Hon. Ben Carroll) and Minister for Children and Minister for Disability (the Hon. Lizzie Blandthorn) plan to work collaboratively to get the best outcomes for all children, young people and their families.
- The new Minister for Children role presents an opportunity to link services across the education sector, but also across government portfolios so that services align more with families' expectation that services are linked, holistic and not siloed.

Keynote address: Silvana Izzo

- Experiences of inequity, poverty and marginalisation can be deeply traumatic for children, young people and their families. We need to view these as systemic issues rather than individual issues.
- Silvana Izzo invited community service providers and others working with children to think about each child as a stream meandering through a landscape. There's an ecosystem that that river belongs to; community services and schools are part of the landscape that supports their rivers – but they are only one part of the system. This is collective work. Kids, families, schools, services, and advocates all support the health and flow of the river.
- Experiences of overwhelming traumatic stress have neurobiological, relational, emotional and spiritual impacts. Relationships and community resources can be protective; children who live in communities with higher rates of poverty are likely to have less access to resources that protect and support them to navigate traumatic life experiences, which is why we must address inequities across systems.

- Trauma is also political – it shapes the context or landscape in which children and young people are situated.
- When someone experiences trauma or stress, the areas of the brain responsible for learning and emotional regulation are blocked. This can result in reduced executive function, a reduced capacity to learn, and emotional outbursts. [Dr Dan Siegel's Hand Model of the Brain](#) provides a tool to describe how parts of the brain are activated and integrated and how trauma impacts learning and behaviour.
- Children and young people cannot be expected to self-regulate their way through traumatic events. When they experience overwhelm, they need regulated adults to create safe environments; to look beyond behaviour and try to understand and address the interpersonal or systemic causes of stress in their landscapes.

Addressing under-achievement and promoting education equity – Amy Haywood (Grattan Institute)

- The Victorian Government is committed to education excellence and equity. This is reflected in their Education State agenda.
- When we compare Victoria to other international jurisdictions using data from the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) we have more low-performing students and fewer high-performing students than the five top-performing international jurisdictions. NAPLAN also reveals that one-in-three students are not meeting proficiency standards.
- When you apply an equity lens to NAPLAN data, the students who are more likely to be in the 'not proficient' category are those from less advantaged backgrounds. Further, the achievement gap between high-performing students and low-performing students is widening with time.
- High-performing schools also have high equity results for their students; they have a focus on both academic achievement and wellbeing, and on building safe and orderly classrooms. Further, they have an awareness that academic skill, ability and achievement, and wellbeing are mutually reinforcing.
- The [MYRIAD project](#) is a seven-year study from the UK that is exploring adolescent mental health. So far, [the study has found](#) that schools in urban locations, with a

higher poverty metrics were associated with poorer pupil mental health. It also found that a more positive school environment was associated with better mental health.

- Class time should be focused on building a legacy of knowledge. [Tiered learning interventions](#) present a model for ensuring that all students' needs are met in the classroom.
 - Tier 1 – delivers high quality instruction (appropriate for about 80% of students)
 - Tier 2 – involves small group instruction (which is currently being delivered in Victorian schools through the [Tutor Learning Initiative](#))
 - Tier 3 – provides ongoing, intensive support that is tailored to support individual student needs (needed by roughly 5% of students).
- Governments can support schools by helping them to deliver strong, evidence-based literacy and numeracy instruction, by continuing to fund tutor learning and supporting its successful implementation.
- Many Australian schools are struggling with similar challenges relating to resourcing and workforce constraints. The UK government has a [Multi Academy Trust](#) system where several schools join together under the leadership of a single governing body. This leadership oversees and manages each school's finances, employees and curriculum. It can consist of members from each school or made up of an external governing body. This model or something similar could be employed in Victoria to facilitate resource and information sharing between schools, to ensure consistency in curriculum delivery, and to encourage collective effort to promote health, wellbeing, and achievement.

Student Voice – Victorian Representative Council

- Student voice must drive reforms to Victoria's education system. The VicSRC is the peak body for school aged students in Victoria. VicSRC representatives (Billy and Sophia) highlighted the value of student voice, the need to embrace difference across the student population and the worth of supportive and encouraging teachers. They also talked to the themes of their recent [Congress](#) event, which included mental health and student wellbeing, making education more inclusive and accessible, re-thinking definitions of success at school and securing greater investments for students, teachers and schools.

Supporting those who disappear from the education system to engage and stay connected from kinder through to adulthood – Panel discussion

- The [Those Who Disappear Report](#) highlights the number of children and young people that are lost to the school system in Australia. When the report was published in 2018, it was estimated that 50,000 primary and secondary school aged children were not in school in Australia. While it is challenging to accurately measure the scale of the issue, there is anecdotal evidence that the problem has been compounded by the pandemic, and that many children and young people are now chronically unable to attend school.
- Community sector presentations reaffirmed the value of the relationship between early childhood education settings, schools and community organisations. The social services system has unique line of sight to many of ‘those who disappear’ and are not visible to the Department of Education or mainstream schools. These organisations also have innovative models of care and support that assist children and young people to engage/re-engage, catch up on lost learning and get a second chance at education. For example:
 - McAuley Community Services for Women report that 1,600 women and their children were housed in motels in the last nine months as the result of family violence. Many of these children and young people disconnect from school for their safety, and struggle to re-connect. For many this means months of missed learning, and many never re-connect with school. The issue is compounded when they enter the homelessness system. McAuley have an online tutoring program that supports children and young people fleeing family violence to stay connected to school, which has seen excellent results.
 - MacKillop Education supports children who have disconnected from school to re-connect. They have a focus on restoring hope, building trusting relationships, providing children and families with positive experiences of the education system, and removing the stigma that many face when they’re outside the mainstream education system. If and when students are ready to go back to mainstream settings, MacKillop also supports these transitions.
 - Hester Hornbrook Academy is a specialist assistance school that supports young people 15 years and over to reconnect with the education system, and access training opportunities and employment. One of their biggest challenges

is in dealing with the demand for places across their CBD, Prahran and Sunshine campuses. Their model of education focuses on creating safe, trauma-informed learning environments where students are holistically supported to reconnect with their learning. Each classroom is supported by three professionals including a teacher, a youth worker and wellbeing specialist. They are also heavily focused on student health and wellbeing and adjusting learning timetables to meet student learning and wellbeing needs.

- The COVID-19 pandemic has had a notable impact on student wellbeing and mental health. There are more and more young adolescents who can't leave their home and can't return to school because their anxiety is so acute. This issue is compounded for students who are experiencing factors such as family violence, housing stress or homelessness and who are in out-of-home care or residential care.

Notes from breakout sessions and closing panel discussion – Silvana Izzo, Sheree Low and Nor Shanino

- There is a need to think more systemically about student learning and wellbeing needs:
 - to intervene early when students and families are facing struggles with housing or other challenges,
 - to more consistently address the impacts of trauma on learning in the education system,
 - to improve mainstream education so that it provides safe and trusted learning environments and more effectively addresses student wellbeing.
 - Consider how the community sector supports children and young people outside of school hours.
- The [Aboriginal Social and Emotional Wellbeing Framework](#) represents holistic healing and includes protective factors that support good mental health for Aboriginal Communities. It provides a deeper insight into what education and community services should be considering through their efforts to better support Aboriginal students.
- Racism is a common experience for many Victorian students. Trauma is caused and compounded by racism in systems and services. We need to have an honest conversation collectively about racism in the education system and take steps to

prevent it, address it, and better support students who experience the traumatic effects of racism.

- We need a sustained, co-ordinated investment in providing foundational training in trauma-informed practice for school staff. This work is not currently funded and we need modelling on the cost of not having a trauma-informed approach to education.

Appendix 1: Agenda

Time	Activity	Speakers
10.00am	Introduction Welcome to Country	Juanita Pope VCOSS Interim CEO Alex Kerr Wurundjeri Traditional Owner
10.15am	Partnership and collaboration in the 'Education State'	Jenny Atta Secretary, Victorian Department of Education
10.20am	Ministerial addresses	The Hon. Ben Carroll MP Deputy Premier and Minister for Education The Hon. Lizzie Blandthorn MP Minister for Children and Minister for Disability
10.40am	Ministerial Question Time	Facilitated by Juanita Pope
11.00am	<i>Keynote address</i> Calm, connected and ready to learn. This session explored the neurobiology of trauma and trauma specialist and the impact of overwhelming life events on children and young people's sense of safety, relationships, connection in the world, and their ability to learn. It unpacked the roles of the community sector and the education sector in building healing-oriented systems and communities.	Silvana Izzo Health and wellbeing consultant
11.30am	Addressing under-achievement and promoting education equity This session explored how education inequity is impacting children and young people's education outcomes in Victoria. It suggested steps to take to ensure that all children and young people have access to the evidence-based supports they need when they fall behind, and that all students are equipped with the foundational knowledge and skills needed for success in school and in life.	Amy Haywood Deputy Program Director (Education), Grattan Institute

12.40pm	<i>In conversation</i> Student voice This session explored the themes of the recent VicSRC Congress, and students' perspectives on 'what surrounds us, shapes us'.	William Naughton-Gravette Policy and Advocacy Manager, Victorian Student Representative Council, with student representatives Facilitated by Ryan Sheales VCOSS Communications Director
12.50pm	<i>Panel discussion</i> Supporting those who disappear from the education system to engage and stay connected from kinder through to adulthood. The panel discussion explored the systemic factors affecting engagement that are often associated with detachment from education. Speakers provided on-the-ground insights describing how they support children and families outside the system to form meaningful and trusting connections, build a positive relationship with learning, and achieve their full potential.	Sally Lasslett Principal, The Hester Hornbrook Academy Jocelyn Bignold OAM CEO, McAuley Community Services for Women Mark Singleton, Transition and Engagement Leader MacKillop Education Maidstone Facilitated by Megan O'Connell OAM
1.35pm	<i>Interactive breakout sessions</i> <u>Group 1</u> Beyond buzzwords and towards healing practice in education settings. <u>Group 2:</u> First Nations perspectives on healing intergenerational trauma and promoting social & emotional wellbeing across education settings. <u>Group 3</u> Tackling racism in schools – lessons from the Ubuntu Project.	Silvana Izzo Health and wellbeing consultant and trauma specialist Sheree Lowe Social Emotional Wellbeing Unit Executive Director, VACCHO Nor Shanino CEO, Ubuntu Project
2.30pm	Presenting breakout session themes and insights.	Facilitated by Ryan Sheales . In conversation with Silvana, Sheree and Nor . With assistance from graphic illustrator Sarah Firth .

3:00pm Close

Appendix 2: Graphic Recording

WHAT SURROUNDS US, SHAPES US

