

VCOSS Annual Community Sector Education Forum 2025

Event Summary Report

Bridges to Learning: Supporting children and young people's engagement and re-engagement in education

OVERVIEW OF THE FORUM

The Community Sector Education Forum is a flagship event held annually by the Victorian Council of Social Service (VCOSS) and supported by the Victorian Department of Education (DE). The 2025 Forum explored how the Education and Community Services Sector can continue to partner to support children and young people's engagement in education and help prevent and respond to disengagement. The event attracted 123 registrations across Government, the Community and Social Services Sector and Schools (government and flexible learning).

WHAT WE HEARD:

Video presentation from Hester Hornbrook Academy students

The event opened with a [video presentation from Charlie, Salma, Nix, Jackson, Haz, Tasha and Levi](#), who shared their education experiences before joining the Academy, what it's like for them now, and their education hopes and dreams for the future. We heard about:

- Belonging as a foundation for learning.
- How relationships support and sustain engagement, especially when things are hard.
- The importance of wrap-around supports (such as access to nourishing food throughout the school day).
- The need to sustain connection between student interests/passions and the way the curriculum is taught.

Juanita Pope, Chief Executive Officer, Victorian Council of Social Service opening address

While Victoria has an education system to be proud of, there are ongoing challenges regarding student engagement and disengagement.

A well-funded, high-quality and inclusive public education system helps to protect against the effects of poverty and disadvantage. Victoria is making progress through *Best Start*, *Best Life* and the Education State agenda include a significant focus on lifting senior secondary engagement and achievement, investing in mental health and wellbeing supports, and putting schools at the centre of communities. However, more work can be done to achieve equity, as well as excellence, including bringing forward Victoria's investment to fully fund the Gonski education reforms by 2028.

Tony Bates, Secretary, Department of Education address

While Victoria has strong attendance rates, there are still challenges in a post-COVID environment to lift attendance as well as engagement.

The Department is committed to supporting young people's engagement and investment in their learning, noting that trajectories can be changed with capability and a strong education system.

The Victorian Government continues to invest in initiatives to support children and young people's attendance and engagement. These measures span early childhood education and care (for example, Early Start Kindergarten) through to School Breakfast Clubs and school-based mental health and wellbeing supports and post-school transitions (for example, the Victorian Early Leavers Connection Initiative).

Looking ahead, the Department of Education will actively work with the First People's Assembly of Victoria to support Treaty process. Work is already underway to implement the Yoorrook recommendations relating to education and school curriculum.

There are also opportunities for the government school system to learn from approaches in complementary education settings. These settings are playing an important role in the education system, with smaller, flexible learning schools such as Hester Hornbrook Academy able to tailor their supports to meet student needs.

Panel Discussion: Strengthening education-family-community partnerships to support engagement and re-engagement with education. The panel was facilitated by Gail McHardy (CEO, Parents Victoria) and featured Dr Fiona Longmuir (Senior Lecturer, Educational Leadership, School of Education, Culture and Society, Faculty of Education, Monash University); Peter Jeans (Principal, Westall Primary School); and Dr Stephane Shepherd (Professor of Forensic Psychology and Criminology, Alfred Deakin Institute for Citizenship and Globalisation, Deakin University).

This panel explored systemic drivers of low attendance. In particular, it examined the intersections of poverty, disadvantage, family violence, housing instability, alcohol and other drug use, and how these impact on children's and young people's engagement in education. Panellists discussed:

- The link between under-representation in education and over-representation in the justice system. At-risk cohorts may already be two years behind their peers in literacy and numeracy by Grade 4 – 6. By the time a young person is in custody, they have likely been chronically absent from school.
- How broader societal challenges are impacting schools. The teaching environment is becoming more complex, with more students experiencing wellbeing challenges and barriers to learning. The workforce is under strain. Teachers are leaving the profession because they feel there is not enough time or resources to do their main role of educating children and young people.
- The need to bolster early intervention supports. The panel discussed opportunities to better leverage community sector capability, to help strengthen school and parent relationships and support engagement and re-engagement.

Ideas included:

- Employing community service sector workers in schools as community facilitators and providing a welcoming community space for parents, carers and families.
- Building stronger relationships between staff and families and creating a shared understanding of what students need at school and at home to succeed.
- Helping parents, carers and families to navigate challenging behaviours at home and social media use (including working with community service organisations to run information sessions).
- Co-locating services at schools to make it easier for families to engage and access services in the community.
- Delivering engagement programs in schools such as Hands on Learning.
- Providing regular feedback opportunities to enable students, parents, carers and families to have a voice in shaping school environments.

Panel Discussion: What's the role of 'complementary settings' in our system? What can we learn and apply across the broader system to strengthen support for students at risk? The panel included opening remarks from Stephen Fraser (Deputy Secretary, School Education Programs and Support, Department of Education). Facilitated by Professor John Firth (Vice-Chancellor's Strategic Fellow, Victoria University) and featured Debra Boote (Head of School of Education, Education & Creative Arts, Education, South West TAFE); Josie Howie (Principal, The Pavilion School); and John Andrew (Principal, Ignatius Learning Centre, Jesuit Social Services).

This panel reflected on the factors that drive students to complementary settings:

- Students that are drawn to complementary education settings are often experiencing significant barriers to engaging in education including family violence, disability, poverty, living in out-of-home care, bullying, mental health issues and/or contact with the youth justice system.
- Currently, some mainstream settings are under resourced to be responsive to the needs of students with more individualised or higher support needs.
- Complementary settings remain a necessary part of the education system, meeting the needs of students facing a variety of barriers and who haven't found a mainstream setting that meets all their needs.
- Some of the ways complementary settings are re-engaging children and young people in education include:
 - Offering individual transport (picking up a young person from home and driving them to school).
 - Providing a full school meals program (breakfast, lunch and snacks to encourage attendance at school).
 - Offering smaller class sizes and having more staff in the classroom (a teacher plus a learning assistant/wellbeing worker or youth worker).
 - Offering school classes in communities, for example at a library or recreational centre.
 - Having a no suspensions / expulsions policy – including keeping students in education to disrupt the cycle of youth justice involvement.
 - Teacher looping (having the same teacher and wellbeing worker in a class for a minimum of two years to build the relationship with students and families).
 - Centring a focus on wellbeing at school.

The panel discussed the need to improve the interface between mainstream settings and complementary settings, including provision of better student information from a student's previous school (e.g. assessments) and more timely processing of exemptions to avoid enrolment delays.

The panel identified opportunities to strengthen support for students at risk in mainstream settings, including:

- Increased funding in government schools to employ suitable qualified wellbeing staff (e.g. social or youth workers), to focus on personal and social supports. Principals also need to be further supported in using equity funding for these purposes.
- Greater focus on supporting students to manage difficult behaviours and their emotions by equipping teachers with the skills and additional resources to employ more wellbeing staff.
- Directing more resources to support students to catch up with their learning when they have been absent.
- Improving transitions between primary and secondary school – this is a key point when disengagement occurs, and a greater focus on supporting students and families is required. There are opportunities to leverage learnings from the early childhood sector and primary schools to create more caring and welcoming environments.

The Pavilion School was acknowledged for delivering self-determination in practice – including holding yarning circles, providing time and space for Elders to come into school and holding a smoking ceremony in lieu of a Monday morning assembly.

Victorian Government Question and Answer Session featuring the Hon Ben Carroll MP and the Hon Lizzie Blandthorn MP and facilitated by Juanita Pope

The Ministers reflected that:

- Education is the single most important measure to prevent young people entering the justice system, and school is the most protective factor outside the family home. To leverage schools as

centres of community, opportunities include increasing after-hours school care for children and young people and offering English language lessons for culturally and linguistically diverse parents, carers and families at schools. Co-designing programs at a local level in communities experiencing disadvantage is key.

- Ensuring children are developmentally on track as they enter school requires ongoing investment in universal supports and targeted services such as maternal and child health services, supported playgroups, toy libraries, three- and four-year-old kindergarten and co-locating services where possible with a focus on early years hub establishment.
- The Victorian Government is committed to delivering full and fair funding for public schools, noting that 70% of children and young people that experience disadvantage are in the public school system. The Government is also introducing the Stable and Strong Families scheme, which will establish whole-of-government shared responsibilities to drive improved outcomes for vulnerable children, young people and families.

Student Panel - Perspectives on how schools are supporting students to engage in education featuring Jude, Praneel and Teri and facilitated by Riya Rajesh (Policy and Research Officer, Victorian Student Representative Council – VicSRC).

Students shared their perspectives on:

- The important role student voice and strong student-teacher relationships play in supporting their engagement and re-engagement in education.
- Gaps in wellbeing supports – student identified funding as a key factor constraining access to what they need at school.
- The importance of schools being connected to community and the benefits this has for their engagement at school. Examples included, schools being connected with local TAFE; sporting clubs; community sector organisations delivering food relief; and programs that support students to obtain their learner’s permit.

WHAT YOU TOLD US:

Breakout 1: Supporting attendance and engagement in early childhood education. The Panel was facilitated by Dr Karina Davis (CEO, Early Learning Association Australia) and featured Anjee-lee Bamblett (Early Years Manager, Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Incorporated); and Nicole Artico (CEO, Kids First Australia).

Emerging opportunities and challenges to drive increased attendance, participation and engagement and support stronger transitions within services and to school include:

- Prioritising cultural safety in early childhood services.
- Increasing capacity for parents, carers and families to support their child’s learning at home and in services.
- Investing more in early childhood workforces including a permanent pay increase for educators, alongside increased professional development.
- Supporting transitions between kindergarten and prep and helping build relationships early between prep teachers and students.
- Investing in place-based partnerships with local service providers to provide wrap-around supports to children and their families.
- Better analysis and understanding of attendance patterns including why children are at a service and developing strategies that focus on supporting the child’s attendance and participation.
- Providing staff with the time to step away from teaching to have conversations with families.
- Better supporting access for inclusion funding and having this follow the child from three to four-year-old kindergarten and into school.
- Supporting educators to understand trauma that families may present with.

Breakout 2: The Missing Middle – a deep dive into how and why we’re losing students in the middle years and what we can do to solve it. The Panel was facilitated by Tim Warwick (Founder & CEO, Education Equity Alliance) and featured Shane Elevato (Principal, Surf Coast Secondary College) and Dr Jennifer Dam (Senior Project Coordinator, Centre for Adolescent Health, Murdoch Children’s Research Institute).

Panellists discussed emerging opportunities and challenges for middle years engagement include:

- Supporting schools to use their equity funding more effectively to work with community sector organisations, including providing a menu of local, evidence-based community sector programs that support student’s engagement.
- Supporting co-location of key services at schools. It was noted that Canada is doing this well.
- Strengthening transitions by intervening earlier and providing support to students as soon as they show signs of non-attendance or disengagement.
- Tackling literacy and numeracy gaps earlier by investing in small group tutoring in prep and Grade 1 and 2 to prevent disruptive behaviour, promote engagement and prevent disengagement.
- Systematically leveraging insights and expertise from complementary education settings (for example, flexible learning schools) and applying learnings across government schools, including supporting student engagement.
- Fully funding and bringing forward investment to 100% of the School Resourcing Standard by 2028.
- Leveraging learnings from students undertaking online and/or blended learning to support attendance and engagement.

Breakout 3: Partnerships and pathways for school engagement and re-engagement. The Panel was facilitated by Scott Widmer (Deputy Secretary, Strategy and Secondary School Reform, Department of Education) and Stephen Fraser (Deputy Secretary, School Education Programs and Support, Department of Education) and featured Dr Jodie Long (Assistant Principal, Research and Advocacy, David Scott School, Brotherhood of St Laurence); and Helen Coventry (Manager, Navigator, Jesuit Social Services).

Panellists discussed harnessing partnerships and supporting successful pathways, including:

- Focusing on transition points, for example, inviting students and families into schools to understand what this change will look like (especially Year 6 to Year 7, and secondary school).
- Increased investment in wellbeing supports in schools (for example, social workers and youth workers) to relieve pressure on teachers. This would support better referrals to community service organisations for additional supports for students and families.
- Refining support to specific cohorts of students through the new senior secondary pathway reforms.
- Continuing schools and the Department of Education’s focus on wellbeing supports and outcomes.
- Supporting student-teacher relationships and providing teachers with time and resources to understand their students.
- Using schools as community hubs to maximise existing schooling infrastructure and make schools a more supportive and welcoming space embedded in community.
- Supporting middle years engagement by adequately resourcing schools to deliver subjects and activities to promote engagement – including sport, music, art and elective subjects.
- Supporting vocational experiences including Year 9 and 10 tasters so students select the right subjects and see a pathway from school into the workforce.
- Continued investment and support for mental health practitioners in schools, alongside promoting access to allied health services.
- Leveraging the Our Place model and Principal Network meetings to share information and opportunities to leverage funding.

- Supporting staff to use trauma-informed practice.

Sharing Key Reflections featuring Dr Karina Davis, Stephen Fraser and Tim Warwick, and facilitated by Juanita Pope

Some of the key reflections include:

- A strength of early childhood education is the relationships educators have with families, which helps support learning and development and the opportunities to apply these approaches in schools to better engage families.
- Recognition of the developmental changes for children and young people in the middle years and how best to support these.
- The need for increased awareness of the impact of socio-economic status for families and students in navigating and accessing services.
- Invest in, and support for, relationships between students and families is key and can be the “pathway to equity”.
- Consider opportunities to strengthen pathways between mainstream government schools and complementary settings.
- Enable Universal for Design Learning to support success and equity.