

## Productivity Commission Inquiry into Early Childhood Education and Care

### Submission – Colman Education Foundation – May 2023

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#### About Us

[Our Place](#) is a holistic place-based approach to supporting the education, health and development of all children and families in disadvantaged communities by utilising the universal platform of government schools. Our Place is an initiative of the Colman Education Foundation, supported by our philanthropic alliance partners: by the Paul Ramsay Foundation, Dusseldorp Forum, Ray & Margaret Wilson Foundation, Sabemo Foundation, RM Ansett Trust, William Buckland Foundation and Kennards Hire Foundation.

Our vision is that all children and their families succeed in life. Our work enables schools to be the central place for learning, health, wellbeing and support services to overcome barriers to educational achievement. We do this because evidence shows that education is the key to unlocking the potential of children and communities. We put educational outcomes at the heart of all our work, including by integrating early learning and care for families with young children into the school community.

Our Place was developed from the learnings and outcomes at our original lighthouse site at Doveton College which was founded in 2012. The College is a Victorian Government school, designed in partnership with Colman Education Foundation to holistically meet the needs of children and families. Outcomes from Doveton College show a significant reduction in the number of children identified as developmentally vulnerable (from 55% to 37%) as well as large improvements in parent and student engagement (see **Attachment A**). Following on from the success at Doveton College, in 2017 the Colman Education Foundation and Victorian Government agreed to implement the Our Place approach in schools at ten sites across Victoria over a ten-year period in each location. Doveton was joined by schools in Officer, Carlton, Frankston North, Mooroopna, Morwell, Corio, Robinvale, Seymour and Clayton South.

This submission draws from our experience of creating **accessible, high quality and integrated early learning and school environments** to highlight key themes relevant to the Commission's inquiry.

For further information, please contact Sean Cory, CEO [\[redacted\]](#)



## A proportionate universal approach

As an organisation committed to improving educational outcomes for children, Our Place believes that investing in early childhood education and care is crucial for the development and well-being of Australian children and their families.

Children's early experiences with education systems have lasting impacts on their relationships, well-being and engagement in learning<sup>i</sup>. It can be the difference between children developing academically and socially to their full potential – or not<sup>ii</sup>. And while all children benefit from high quality learning, the evidence is clear that vulnerable children are the ones who have the most to gain from high-quality early learning and care<sup>iii</sup>. Research has consistently shown that children from disadvantaged backgrounds often enter school with lower levels of language development, early literacy, numeracy, and social-emotional skills<sup>iv</sup>. This gap persists and widens overtime, further entrenching disadvantage and increasing costs and lost opportunities for government expenditure.

As a result, future investment into early childhood should be tailored to the lives of children and families experiencing disadvantage and complex life circumstances and for whom the universal service system is not meeting their needs. This should focus on the needs of parents and carers in addition to young children, providing accessible opportunities for parents and carers to build their confidence and engagement in children's learning and to support healthy home learning environments.

## Investing in the early, early years: 0–3 year olds and their families

At a time of unprecedented focus on and investment in early learning for 3–5 year olds at a federal and state level, there is an urgent need to extend this appetite for support to families with children aged 0–3 years. It is well established that the experiences and interactions that occur during their first 3 years of life have profound and lasting impact on a child's physical, cognitive and emotional development. However, there is a comparative dearth of investment in supporting learning and care for children at this age.

Examples of investments that can support this cohort of families include universally-accessible, supported playgroups and new parents' groups delivered in a location where access to other key services is available. Our Place's experience at Doveton College was that universal supported playgroups were critical in building engagement and trust. This in turn led to a stronger connective tissue into kindergarten and school, along with ready access to other health and wellbeing critical services that support the healthy development of children. Research also consistently demonstrates the positive impact of these early interventions including:

- For parents and carers: social connections and support, improved knowledge about children's learning and development, and improved confidence and skills in parenting so that they are better able to build a healthy and nurturing home learning environment.
- For children: improved social skills (making friends and getting along with other children), emotional skills (confidence, ability to regulate emotions, behaviour), language and communication (speech and understanding) and physical development (active engagement in play) – all key attributes for improved readiness to achieve in kindergarten and school<sup>v</sup>.

Supported groups such as these provide a critical 'soft entry' for families to become familiar with the wider service and education system. They can also act as an early warning system, identifying challenges for children and families and helping prevent problems that can snowball. This can help to 'right track' these children and families through kindergarten, school and the rest of their life.

## Early learning and care in integrated, universal settings

Our Place is demonstrating the long term, and day-to-day, benefits of providing early learning and care from the universal platform of a government school. In the first instance, we work with government to identify and co-locate high quality early learning and care services at school sites including Maternal and Child Health, playgroups, allied health, early learning and other services. This co-location creates a range of benefits, including convenient access for families in a familiar environment, greater continuity for children and families, and improved utilisation of shared buildings and resources<sup>vi</sup>.

However, co-location in itself is not enough to change outcomes for children and their families<sup>vii</sup>. A truly integrated approach is required to overcome the entrenched barriers that make access to services inaccessible or daunting, especially for disadvantaged families. They have the most to gain from services working together, in a cohesive way and in a shared, non-stigmatising environment. This is not a case of funding more programs and services to support families who are often overwhelmed by navigating the existing service system. Instead, co-located integration ensures that existing investments are more coordinated, effective and accessible to the people who need them most.

To achieve integration, Our Place staff work on an ongoing basis to connect and collaborate with early learning, schools, local government, services and communities. We call this 'The Glue' and it includes:

- Building trust and relationship with families who access the site
- Developing shared approaches to warm, in person referrals, family-centre practice and collaboration between services and schools
- Establishing shared vision and governance for the site to establish authorisation for new ways of working that endure beyond individual programs
- Building and sharing data and evidence to inform local decision making and flexibility.

In addition to the benefits for children and families, we also know that integrated settings have benefits for the staff who work within the site. Our Place site partners have reported staff staying in the roles longer due to the collaborative ways of working, that they have greater uptake of their services and a sense of achievement and pride from seeing holistic change in the communities they work with.

The Commission should consider how current and future early learning and care systems can incentivise and enable a greater number of integrated service environments that replicate this approach, particularly in communities experiencing disadvantage. This should include both the infrastructure for co-location as well as the necessary cross-portfolio governance, resourcing and performance systems which support services to work in collaborative ways, with a focus on shared outcomes for families and children.

## Investing in Continuity of Learning from early learning and into school

As governments invest in increasing the quality and accessibility of early learning, attention is required to ensure that the gains achieved through this investment are not lost when children start school. There is clear evidence that children benefit from high-quality experiences that build on each other over time. However, when children move from one learning environment to another that is inconsistent with the previous, their emerging skills and abilities may stagnate or slip backwards. Particularly for disadvantaged and vulnerable children, the benefits of participation in high-quality early learning settings often fade out when they are in primary school settings with different approaches<sup>viii</sup>.

While most schools undertake time-limited transition programs, these transition frameworks tend to be heavily influenced by a focus on 'school readiness' and not on bridging system differences. This is not to say readiness is not important, but that it is limited in focus. The lens through which individual children's skills are interpreted is largely that of school expectations, practices and norms<sup>ix</sup>. Such an approach is

limited because it does not place enough value on the child's pre-existing experiences, knowledge and learning strategies and does not focus how learning environments could adapt to be ready for the child<sup>x</sup>.

To address this challenge, there is a need for system-wide investment to increase the continuity of care and learning for children and their families as they move through stages of learning. This should include a focus on the current differences across the early learning and school workforces. Despite their shared objectives, early learning and school system staff are typically disconnected from one another. This is fuelled by different qualifications and working conditions for educators across both systems<sup>xi</sup> and can lead to a reduction in outcomes for children, as well as inefficient use of government investment.

In the short to medium term, policy responses to improve continuity should include: shared professional development and learning between early learning and school staff; shared assessment and pedagogical approaches; and local governance arrangements which encourage collaboration, relationships across sectors and services.

In the long term, the Commission should recommend that all adults working with children aged 0-8 train together, with both school and early learning settings recognising the same qualifications and ascribing equal professional value and status. By establishing consistency, we can ensure that all early learning educators possess the knowledge and skills to support optimal child development and are recognised and remunerated for their critical skills.

Further detailed information on Continuity of Learning is available from the Our Place [website](#).

## Recommendations

In summary, Our Place recommends that the Commission's findings should:

- Focus future policy reform on building a **proportionate universal system** which prioritises the needs of families and children who experience vulnerability and disadvantage.
- Highlight the important of investment for **children aged 0-3** by providing families with the knowledge, resources, and support they need to create nurturing environments and promote their children's healthy development in their first 3 years.
- Recommend an increase in the number of **fully integrated environments** in disadvantaged communities where the services, support and learning for children and families can be delivered in a collaborative and family-centric setting, particularly in schools.
- Support increased **continuity of learning** between early learning, care and school including through aligning the training, pedagogy and career paths for educators.

## **Attachment A – Impacts at Doveton College**

### **High-quality schooling**

- Students made substantially above-average gains for reading and numeracy, compared to students from similar backgrounds with the same starting score (MySchool website, 2021).
- Rated in the Top-25 most-improved government schools for years 7–9 (2017 NAPLAN).
- One of only a few schools in Victoria where My School shows that the longer you're at the school, the better you do (MySchool website).
- Students consistently reported positive feelings of connectedness to school and are positive about their experience while at school.

### **High-quality early learning**

- Reduced number of children identified as developmentally vulnerable in one or more domains by nearly one-third, from 55% in 2012 to 36% in 2021 (AEDC 2021).
- Reduced number of children identified as developmentally vulnerable on two or more domains dropped by nearly half, from 24% in 2018 to 13% in 2021 (AEDC 2021).
- The early learning centre obtained an excellent rating twice from the Australian Children's Education & Care Quality Authority (ACECQA) – in 2014 and 2017. At the time, there were only fifteen of 16,000 centres in Australia to have been rated excellent twice.
- 100% of students who attended the early learning centre in 2013 and continued at Doveton College into 2017 were at or above national minimum standards for reading and numeracy in Year 3 (NAPLAN).

### **Engagement and enrichment**

- Participation in before and after-school activities increased eight-fold increase between 2015 and 2019 (engagement and enrichment program data collected by Doveton College).

### **Adult learning and engagement**

- 115 employment outcomes obtained by parents or community members who either accessed employment support and/or attended educational opportunities offered at Doveton College.
- 300 attendees participated in English language courses offered at Doveton College since 2015. These courses provide English language proficiency for community members with a non-English speaking background, building the capability to support their children in their education.
- 300 adult attendees from the Doveton College community have completed life-skills and prevocational courses and a further 200 attendees at Certificate III, Certificate IV or Diploma level courses since 2013.
- More than 300 adult attendees from the Doveton College community have completed life-skills and pre-vocational courses (including some Certificate I courses) and a further 200 attendees at Certificate III, Certificate IV or Diploma level courses since 2013.

### **Wrap-around health and wellbeing**

- Introduced a range of new services available at the school, including maternal child health nurse, speech pathology, occupational therapy, dietician, paediatrician, physiotherapy, counselling and GP clinic referrals and bulk-billing for allied health services and provision of Mental Health Care Plans.
- Introduced NDIS access onsite that allows children to spend far more time in class, compared to if they accessed this support away from the school, which would typically be the case.

## Attachment B - References

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- <sup>i</sup> SHUEY, E. A., KIM, N., CORTAZAR, A., POBLETE, X., RIVERA, L., LAGOS, M. J., FAVERIO, F. & ENGEL, A. 2019. Curriculum Alignment and Progression between Early Childhood Education and Care and Primary School: A Brief Review and Case Studies. OECD Education Working Paper No. 193. Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).
- <sup>ii</sup> OECD 2017. Starting Strong V: Transitions from Early Childhood Education and Care to Primary Education, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).
- <sup>iii</sup> OECD 2018. 'Executive summary' in Engaging Young Children: Lessons from Research about Quality in Early Childhood Education and Care, Paris, OECD Publishing.
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- <sup>vi</sup> ROBINSON, L. (2023) Planning Doveton College: Holistic Vision, Innovative Design and Paving the Way for Others, in Schools as Community Hubs: Building 'more than a school' for community benefit, Springer Press
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- <sup>viii</sup> STIPEK, D. 2017. The Preschool Fade-Out Effect Is Not Inevitable. Education Week, 17 March 2017; STIPEK, D. 2019. Quality and Continuity in Young Children's Educational Experiences. In: REYNOLDS, A. & TEMPLE, J. (eds.) Sustaining Early Childhood Learning Gains: Program, School, and Family Influences. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; JACOBSON, D. 2019. All Children Learn and Thrive: Building First 10 Schools and Communities, Waltham, MA, Education Development Center, Inc.
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- <sup>x</sup> BABIĆ, N. 2017. Continuity and discontinuity in education: example of transition from preschool to school. Early Child Development and Care, 187, 1596-1609
- <sup>xi</sup> SHUEY, E. A., KIM, N., CORTAZAR, A., POBLETE, X., RIVERA, L., LAGOS, M. J., FAVERIO, F. & ENGEL, A. 2019. Curriculum Alignment and Progression between Early Childhood Education and Care and Primary School: A Brief Review and Case Studies. OECD Education Working Paper No. 193. Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).