

Submission to Consultation Paper to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System

July 2023



Introduction

Launch Housing welcomes this opportunity to respond to the Consultation Paper to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System. This submission is informed by Launch Housing's ongoing work supporting families and children experiencing homelessness and presents evidence that is relevant to four of the five key areas from the terms of reference:

1. Lifting student outcomes
2. Improving student mental health and wellbeing
4. Data collection
5. Transparency of and accountability for school funding

Launch Housing is one of Melbourne's largest independent and secular community-based providers of housing and homelessness supports, providing over 15,000 Victorians last year with holistic housing and innovative support, education, youth and specialist services which **included over 1,600 families**.

The importance of children and their development is at the forefront of major policy documents, and while it is an entrenched and growing problem, homelessness is largely ignored. We are concerned to note that the Consultation Paper, as well as the Early Years Strategy¹, do not address the issue of children's homelessness. We strongly believe that it is vital for both these documents to highlight homelessness and its impact on children's educational development and wellbeing.

Decades of international research on family homelessness, and research undertaken by Launch Housing in collaboration with a range of university and agency partners, has illustrated the extent of the impact of homelessness on children. This can include one or more of the following:

- Disruption and disengagement from education and learning
- Significant gaps in academic and social skills
- Poor physical and mental health
- Relational and behavioural difficulties
- Disengagement from friends and community
- Increased risk of experiencing one or more traumas.

Without interventions, children experiencing homelessness have a higher risk of homelessness and disconnection from education in the future.²

Education is a key way to break the cycle of homelessness and disadvantage. We are deeply committed to intervening as early as possible to mitigate the negative impacts of homelessness for children and to ensure that no child falls through the education gaps. This commitment, or more accurately, duty of care to our youngest clients, is the heart of our Education Pathways Program, which is highlighted throughout this submission.

¹ <https://engage.dss.gov.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/early-years-strategy-discussion-paper.pdf>

² <https://research-repository.uwa.edu.au/en/publications/the-cost-of-youth-homelessness-in-australia-study-the-australian->

Homelessness is a growing problem with real consequences for children's educational outcomes

On Census night 2021, a total of 122,494 people Australia-wide were estimated to be homeless, including 28,948 children (0-18 years old), around a quarter (23%) of the total number.

There were 24,930 First Nations people estimated to be homeless, including 9,217 children, representing- 37% of all First Nations people.

In the five years to 2021, an additional 3,121 children were estimated as homeless on Census night 2021, a 12% increase.

Children are also represented in Australia's specialist homelessness services data. The latest available evidence from the Specialist Homelessness Services Collection (2021-22) shows that Australia-wide, 60,649 children (0 to 14 years old) were supported by specialist homelessness services over a 12-month period.

Among these children, 37,213 were students aged 5 to 14 years. But 7,917 (21%) were either not enrolled or their educational status was unknown. And while this means that most students (79%) were enrolled when they entered specialist homelessness services, the risk of school disengagement and absenteeism is heightened due to transience, frequent changes of schools, and instability. First Nations families are significantly more likely than non-Indigenous families to have children who do not attend school regularly, and are more likely to have had multiple changes of school.³

International evidence shows low levels of literacy and numeracy among children experiencing homelessness, many are at risk of having to repeat school years. Learning difficulties are common among children who are homeless, with an increased likelihood of falling behind with their school due to disruptions or irregular attendance. These vulnerable children tend to fall through the gaps of the education system, with academic and learning delays often left undetected and undiagnosed.⁴

The long-term effects mean that children are exposed to entrenched disadvantage and ongoing cycles of homelessness. This can mean an increased risk of experiencing homelessness as an adult. Yet education is critical to the prevention of homelessness and disadvantage. Intervening early in homelessness will achieve better long-term outcomes for children in education, health and wellbeing. One study estimated a reduction of learning problems by up to 55%; socio-emotional problems by up to 59%; and physical functioning problems by up to 49%.⁵

³ Debbie Noble-Carr. (2006). The experiences and effects of family homelessness for children. Institute of Child Protection Studies, ACU for the ACT Department of Disability, Housing and Community Services.

⁴ Naomi McNamara. (2003). Once upon a time in SAAP – A report of the Northern Region Children In SAAP Service Data Collection. Merri Outreach Support Service Inc. Victoria.

⁵ Centre for Community Child Health, Research Snapshot: Addressing disadvantage to optimise children's development in Australia, May 2018. Access at: <https://www.rch.org.au/uploadedFiles/Main/Content/ccchdev/CCCH-Changing-Childrens-Chances-Research-Snapshot-May-2018.pdf>

1. Lifting student outcomes – About the Education Pathways Program

Recommendations:

- Recognise and include children and young people experiencing homelessness as a unique group that require tailored and intensive support to overcome significant educational disadvantage.
- For the impact of homelessness on the vulnerability of children under 15 to be formally recognised in the education system to help them stay in mainstream education.
- Commonwealth and state departments of education and training to invest in the expansion of the EPP model.
- The review should be broadened to investigate why highly vulnerable and disadvantaged students are being excluded from state-based programs such as Victoria’s Program for Students with Disabilities (PSD).

Given the growing body of evidence and need to support children and young people with effective programs, Launch Housing designed the Education Pathways Program (EPP) to address the educational gaps and challenges faced by some of our youngest clients. **Since 2015, more than 600 children have been supported through the program, with more than 300 enrolments completed.**

EPP works with children and their families to support students to engage or re-engage in early childhood education and primary school; improve their attendance and engagement; and close gaps in their learning.

A 2019 evaluation⁶ found that between 2015 and 2018, EPP supported 187 children, of whom:

- 47% had histories of chronic absenteeism.
- Had on average been to 3 or 4 different schools.
- Only 20 of the 187 children were enrolled and attending school.
- 100% had delays in cognitive development.
- 94% were significantly behind with their learning.
- 75% were unable to meet school requirements, such as completing homework or attending excursions.
- 69% presented with challenges in emotional regulation.

Despite the cognitive and learning delays experienced by all the children, only 23% met the criteria for financial assistance under the state-funded Program for Students with Disabilities (PSD).

Even with such barriers and challenges, the 2019 evaluation demonstrated that EPP improved the educational outcomes for children experiencing homelessness:

- EPP enrolled nearly 80% (n=125) of the children in kindergarten and primary school.
- All 125 children began attending school regularly.

⁶ Evaluation Report, ‘No child misses out’: Education Pathways Program, June 2019, https://data.launchhousing.org.au/app/uploads/2019/07/Launch-Housing_Education-Pathways-Program_Evaluation-Report.pdf

EPP ensured that children stayed connected with learning when living arrangements changed:

- 52 children transitioned to new schools when they moved to long-term accommodation.
- 90% of those children continued to attend school regularly after EPP support ended.

In addition to the 2019 evaluation, EPP continues to monitor impacts for children, carers and schools on an ongoing basis.

In the last 12 months (2022 – 2023), EPP has supported 135 children of whom 82 were subsequently enrolled in local schools or early childhood education; a 25% increase for the program from the previous year.

Among the 82 new enrolments facilitated by EPP, 35 were for primary school students and 18 were for pre-schoolers so they could attend early childhood education (kinder). Remaining enrolments were for secondary school students and children in child care.

Thanks to the generosity of donors, the EPP expanded its reach in August 2022 to support children living in Launch Housing’s permanent supportive housing program for women and children fleeing family and domestic violence. This enabled an additional 42 children to be assisted by the program.

Overall, **EPP has engaged with 25 schools and 21 early childhood education providers** across Melbourne to support children overcome educational disadvantage.

Many of the families linked with EPP come from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, and have struggled to navigate the education system to enrol their children. EPP connects the parent and the school, assisting in building trust between parents, the school system and teachers. This further supports children’s school attendance and engagement, reflected in the following case example:

Recently, EPP intervened to support a family from disengaging from their primary school after an incident at the school left a mother of three feeling embarrassed because of homelessness. This mum was worried that her three children would also feel judged, and so did not encourage the children to attend school. Communication between the family and the school had broken down. A meeting between the mother and the school was arranged and attended by EPP staff, to make sure that the mother felt safe, heard and respected. The mother left the meeting, feeling hopeful and more engaged with her children’s school community. Importantly, with increased understanding of challenges faced by the family, the school was able to provide additional supports for the three children.

Only 10% of children who have contact with the homelessness service system have involvement with child protection. School disengagement or absenteeism is not considered a risk factor by the child protection system. EPP is one of the very few programs in the specialist homelessness services sector with oversight over school-aged children experiencing homelessness.

As one assistant principal at a new EPP partner school observed:

‘It is my honest belief that, without the support of the Educational Pathways Program team, we would have young people in our area that would be lost to the system and disengaged’.

Importance of partnerships and information sharing

Positive results achieved with improving student enrolments is facilitated by strong partnerships established by EPP with local schools.

'The EPP...places considerable importance on the children integrating to...[the new] school. As such handover information is provided. From my experience this appears to have strengthened partnerships with [the new] schools' [EPP stakeholder].

The example below illustrates the nature, extent, and value of the support provided by EPP:

A 10 year-old student supported by EPP was refusing to attend school due to bullying they experienced in the classroom. The EPP worker set up a meeting with the school's Assistant Principal and liaison officer (for culturally and linguistically diverse families), and accompanied the young student and their mum to the meeting. This young student was given the space to explain to the Assistant Principal what was happening in the classroom. The Assistant Principal then explained that the child carrying out the bullying, as well as the whole class, had been spoken to about bullying and what was and wasn't acceptable behaviour in the classroom. The liaison officer advised the young student where they could go if they had any other worries going forward. The 10 year-old was really happy with this stating, 'it feels like the problem has already been solved' and has resumed attending school.

In another example, EPP's speech pathologist was able to link a family in with specialist services at the local community health centre despite an initial referral being rejected by the intake team at the health centre. The speech pathologist was able to advocate for the young client to be accepted quickly into the children's program at the community health centre.

Transition support to new school

Developing a close partnership with a child's new school is critical to supporting children stay engaged in education. Once a family secures long term affordable housing, the EPP provides support to the parents to enrol their child/ren in a local school near their new home. The comprehensive transitional support to the new school involves assisting the family to navigate the enrolment process; providing the student's **educational assessment and learning plan** to the teaching staff; advocating for State Schools Relief for uniforms and fee plans; and ongoing monitoring of attendance rates of children with histories of significant absenteeism, as well as support to families. As one stakeholder explained:

*'We try and provide the child with a thorough orientation to the new school, which is **trauma-informed**. We really try, before they're just thrown into a classroom, we get them to meet the teacher beforehand. We try and introduce them to the welfare team. We talk to them [child and parent] about the school, how they might get there, what that might look like, so that they're not just being enrolled and put in school and then there you go; and that most importantly, that I think the classroom teacher really has the best understanding that they can of that child and what to expect' [EPP stakeholder]. [Emphasis added]*

EPP animated video – Kelemi’s Story

This short, animated video about Kelemi’s Story is representative of the experiences of many of the children EPP support. It was developed in consultation with Education Pathways Program staff who see the incredible impacts of support and early intervention for school-age children every day.

<https://impact.launchhousing.org.au/impact-measure-8-kalemis-story/>



2. Improving student mental health and wellbeing

Recommendations:

- Include mental health and wellbeing targets as part of the National School Reform Agreement (NSRA) reforms.
- Ensure that the experience and voice of students is central to NSRA reforms.
- Undertake regular student surveys in order to understand experiences of homelessness, safety, belonging and inclusion at school, to minimise the risk of students falling through the gaps.
- Develop a national framework based on the 2009 Victorian resource: *Supporting children, young people and their families affected by homelessness* to support the development of teachers and school leaders.

The intersection between homelessness, family and domestic violence, and children's mental health is especially important. Family and domestic violence is a leading cause of homelessness among women and children. In 2021-22 across Australia, family and domestic violence was a factor in seeking support from specialist homelessness services for more than 107,600 people, 93% of whom were women and children.⁷

Family and domestic violence and homelessness are profoundly traumatic experiences that have a detrimental impact on healthy childhood development. The evidence shows that these adverse life events impact learning, behaviour, as well as physical and mental well-being.⁸⁹ Ongoing and high levels of stress, referred to as toxic stress¹⁰, mean that the body's physical and neurological stress response system is overly stimulated, which can be very harmful to children's developing brains.¹¹

A 2013 study found that children experiencing homelessness and family and domestic violence face increased risk of low self-esteem and increased mental health problems, including depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress. It also identified that trauma related to homelessness can potentially change children's neurodevelopment.¹²

For the children supported by EPP, the 2019 evaluation showed that 75% had experienced family and domestic violence. Nearly all (91%) were part of a sole-parent household, many were from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds (64%), and 10% were Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander children.

The evaluation illustrated that children experienced improvements in their health and wellbeing. Key activities central to these outcomes included acknowledging the trauma experienced by children; the provision of appropriate supports and programs for children; providing stability, consistency and routine; and importantly, keeping children safe. Stakeholders interviewed as part of the evaluation offered the following insights:

'Children are given the opportunity to talk about how they are feeling [in the EPP]. This is very rare, as most services are adult-centric, and do not see or speak to children. Children often open up quickly and interventions are put in place. Children's physical health is also prioritised, which is something that is often put on the backburner by adult services' [EPP stakeholder].

'Children have the opportunity to be linked into psychological support through the CSSS [Children's Specialist Support Service] psychologist. This is a rarity in the service system.

⁷ Table FDV.1 – SHSC 2021-21

⁸ Marci McCoy-Roth, Bonnie B. Mackintosh and David Murphey. (2012). When the Bough Breaks: The effects of homelessness on young children. Early Childhood Highlights. Volume 3, Issue 1. Child Trends, 11.

⁹ Justin Barker, Violet Kolar, Shelley Mallett, Morag McArthur. (2013) What works for children experiencing homelessness and/or family/domestic violence? Part 1: Literature Synthesis. Melbourne, Hanover Welfare Services, February.

¹⁰ A Guide to Toxic Stress, Center on the Developing Child, Harvard University, <https://developingchild.harvard.edu/guide/a-guide-to-toxic-stress/>

¹¹ Brain Architecture, Center on the Developing Child, Harvard University, <https://developingchild.harvard.edu/science/key-concepts/brain-architecture/>

¹² Barker, J., Kolar, V., Mallet, S., & McArthur, M. (2013). What works for children experiencing homelessness and/or family/domestic violence? Part 1: Literature Synthesis. Melbourne: Hanover Welfare Services.

There have been many improvements in children's emotional well-being once this occurs'
[EPP stakeholder].

Capacity building and resources

A critical part of EPP is the capacity-building work undertaken with school teams around best practice supports for children who experience homelessness and trauma.

EPP staff work closely with schools, communicating regularly and including ongoing meetings to increase awareness and understanding of the issues of homelessness and family and domestic violence, and how these impact children's learning.

EPP provides capacity building sessions to schools who work with children experiencing homelessness and the trauma associated with it and with family and domestic violence. This ensures that the education staff feel well prepared to provide the best practice to these children and can build and develop a trauma informed environment for all who attend. This knowledge is continuously provided throughout the support period as EPP build professional relationships with significant staff members within the schools, ensuring the child's wellbeing is prioritised and that any areas of concern are highlighted and addressed.

Teachers and schools need resources that highlight the issues of homelessness and its impact on children's educational development and wellbeing. Such a resource was developed 14 years ago, in 2009 by the Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD).¹³

It included information about homelessness, tips on how to improve educational outcomes for students, examples of good practice, details of support services and advice, relevant agencies to contact, and tools and templates.

A 2015 report by Launch Housing noted that the resource *'is an exceptional resource for schools. Unfortunately, this great resource is hidden on the DEECD website'*.¹⁴

Recognising children's lived experience

At Launch Housing we are committed to embedding the voice of lived experience throughout our services, policy, advocacy and organisational planning.

As part of this commitment, we recently undertook a survey of primary school students accommodated in our family supportive housing program. The survey included questions on belonging at school and feeling safe school. We would welcome the opportunity to share the results of this survey with the Ministerial Reference Group once analysis of responses has been completed.

¹³ Supporting children, young people and their families affected by homelessness, 2009, <https://apo.org.au/node/29822>

¹⁴ The Empty Lunchbox, 2015, (p.48) https://data.launchhousing.org.au/app/uploads/2015/06/Research_The-Empty-Lunchbox-report_Final.pdf

4. Data collection

Recommendation:

- Reforms to the NSRA should explore the possibility of Centrelink assisting in the transfer of information between schools, given they are often the first point of contact for families when they move.¹⁵
- Emphasise the importance of data sharing between relevant departments such as the education and health departments to better understand the prevalence of homelessness amongst students.
- Relevant sectors agree on key indicators for homelessness risk or experience, for example, absenteeism.

Data is critical to increasing awareness and knowledge. It is only relatively recently that children have been counted as clients in their own right by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. However, the broader homelessness system remains adult-focused with many services and interventions designed primarily to address the needs of adult clients. This runs the risk that the specific needs of children and their parents are overshadowed or inadvertently undermined.

Increasing awareness and understanding within the broader homelessness system, as well as across multiple sectors, including education, are crucial to ensuring that services respond to the specific educational, health and welfare needs of children and their families.

This means that intake and assessment processes undertaken by the homelessness sector should include questions on school enrolment and attendance, and education needs should be stipulated as specific goals in support plans for each child experiencing homelessness. This would enable the education and other support needs of children experiencing homelessness to be properly tracked.

An overarching goal for improved data, for both the homelessness and education sectors, must be how to prevent young students from falling through the education gaps.

5. Transparency of and accountability for school funding

Recommendation:

- Emphasise the vital importance of consistent year-round funding for schools that enroll children experiencing homelessness after the 'census day' so they do not miss out on critical funds to support vulnerable young students.

Funding decisions for schools need to recognise the diversity of experience of schools regarding disadvantage. Funding based on per student enrolment, without consideration of the level or

¹⁵ Education Development Project, 2009,
<https://data.launchhousing.org.au/app/uploads/2011/04/EducationDevelopmentProject.pdf>

concentration of disadvantage, exposes schools to hardship and comprises students' educational outcomes.¹⁶

As highlighted in the 2019 evaluation of EPP, the amount of funding a primary school receives is determined by student numbers that are finalised on what is referred to as 'census day', the last day of February each year. On average, this amounts to roughly more than \$7,000 per student.

However, around 112 children supported by EPP were enrolled at the local primary school after the 'census day' (2015 to 2018). Effectively, the local primary school missed out on more than \$780,000 in funding for those 112 students.

Despite the important role played by philanthropy in providing financial support, it does not cover the full cost of delivering specialised interventions to children who are experiencing homelessness and who need intensive support to address significant gaps in their education and wellbeing. At the time of the 2019 evaluation, Launch Housing and the local primary school had jointly covered the substantial discrepancy in funding to ensure the program continued.

The Education Pathways Program has demonstrated that significant investment in time and resources, engaging with schools and raising awareness and understanding around children's homelessness, has resulted in improved educational and wellbeing outcomes for our youngest clients.

A valuable program, EPP is relatively small and relies predominantly on philanthropic funding. Clearly, more needs to be done to ensure that the educational exclusion of children and young people experiencing homelessness across Australia is addressed.

¹⁶ https://data.launchhousing.org.au/app/uploads/2015/06/Research_The-Empty-Lunchbox-report_Final.pdf