A Review of Victorian Education Initiatives Relating to Youth Homelessness

Associate Professor David MacKenzie (Swinburne University)

Dr Monica Thielking (Swinburne University)

Ms Chantal Chauvet-Allen (Time for Youth)

April 2012
TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION ........................................................................................................................................ 3

HOMELESSNESS RISK FACTORS ........................................................................................................... 3

Disengagement from schooling ........................................................................................................... 3
Care and protection orders .................................................................................................................. 3

Homelessness ....................................................................................................................................... 4
Mental Health ......................................................................................................................................... 4
Illicit Substance Use ............................................................................................................................ 4

OVERCOMING DISADVANTAGE - A WICKED PROBLEM ................................................................. 5

EARLY INTERVENTION FOR YOUTH HOMELESSNESS .................................................................. 5

A RETROSPECTIVE ON EDUCATIONAL POLICY AND PROGRAMS FOR YOUTH HOMELESSNESS ........................................................................................................................ 6

Victorian Suicide Prevention Taskforce ............................................................................................ 6
School Focused Youth Service ............................................................................................................. 8

FRAMEWORK FOR STUDENT SUPPORT SERVICES ........................................................................ 10

OTHER VICTORIAN POLICY INITIATIVES RELATED TO YOUTH HOMELESSNESS .................... 11

THE VULNERABLE YOUTH FRAMEWORK AND BETTER YOUTH SERVICES PILOT PROGRAM .............................................................................................................................. 11

ON TRACK ........................................................................................................................................... 15

FLEXIBLE LEARNING OPTIONS ........................................................................................................ 16

MANAGED INDIVIDUAL PATHWAYS (MIPS): .................................................................................... 16

OTHER RELEVANT POLICY INITIATIVES .......................................................................................... 17
EXPAND PATHWAYS, IMPROVED TRANSITIONS (EPIT)................................................................. 18

YOUTH PARTNERSHIPS ....................................................................................................................... 18

FROM POLICY TO PRACTICE: AN EXAMPLE OF ONE VICTORIAN COMMUNITY’S EFFORTS TO END YOUTH HOMELESSNESS ............................................................................. 20

The Geelong Project ............................................................................................................................ 20

REFLECTIONS ON THE FUTURE ........................................................................................................ 23

REFERENCES ......................................................................................................................................... 25

This project is supported by the Australian Government through the National Homelessness Research Agenda of the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs.
Introduction

The purpose of this report is to outline what has been done and what is being done in the education sector to engage in ‘early intervention’ for young people at-risk of homelessness or experiencing homelessness in Victoria.

Much of the debate in education about risk has been concerned about early school leaving with the concomitant policy setting of increasing ‘school retention’. The issue of improving school retention and responding to the most vulnerable and at-risk young Australians in schools has proven to be a difficult task. It can be aptly characterised as a ‘wicked problem’ on the grounds that the reasons for non-completion are complex and varied and are often interconnected. Furthermore, despite a whole lot of effort aimed at increasing school retention being made, many of these efforts have been met with relatively little success.

It can be argued that the problem of non-school completion is not only nor necessarily a purely educational problem. In all the areas of social policy, the solutions to ‘wicked problems’ depend on how a problem is framed. Recognising the complexity of the ‘problem’ and ensuring that sufficient resources can be mobilised over a long enough period of time are significant challenges for those charged with the task of reducing or eliminating ‘wicked problems’ (Horn, 2007)

Homelessness risk factors

Disengagement from schooling

Nearly all adolescents in Victoria pass through secondary schools and most complete Year 12 but a minority do not. In 2007, 22 per cent of 19 year olds had not completed Year 12 or its equivalent, with 14 per cent of early school leavers in that year being unemployed (The State of Victoria’s Children, 2008). According to Anlezark (2011), there are 236,440 disengaged youth in Australia (15-19 years of age) who are either not in full-time work or not participating in education. This makes up about 15 per cent of the population in this age group, and the figure has not shifted over the past decade. There were 377,200 disengaged 20-24 year olds in 2009 although the proportion of this age group who have completed Year 12 or its equivalent has been increasing. There are a range of risk factors that lie behind these broad cohort measures including school achievement, family background and socio-economic status.

Care and protection orders

The number of young people on care and protection orders and in out-of-home care has increased. Lamont (2011) reported that the number of Australian children aged 5-17 years in out-of-home care increased from 18,241 (June 2000) to 35,895 (June 2010). Many of these children have experienced maltreatment of some kind. In Victoria, between 2009-2010 the primary substantiated reasons for child maltreatment was (in order of frequency) emotional abuse, physical abuse, sexual abuse and neglect, resulting in a total of 6,603 cases of child
maltreatment. Spending time in the care and protection system is a known risk factor for youth homelessness (FaHCSIA, 2008).

**Homelessness**

A recent AIHW Specialist Homelessness Services Collection report (AIHW, 2011) revealed that from July to September 2011, half of all clients assisted by specialist homelessness agencies were under 25 years of age, with 18 per cent aged under 10 years (children accompanying a parent in nearly all cases). Overall, domestic and family violence was the most common reason for seeking assistance (26%) and the most common main reason for females (36%); for males, the most common reason was a ‘housing crisis’ (18%). In 2006, on a given night in Australia, there were 21,940 homeless young people aged 12-18, and in Victoria there were 3896 homeless young people in the same age group (Chamberlain & MacKenzie, 2009). Of the homeless youth population Australia-wide, 17,891 were out of home and on their own (Chamberlain & MacKenzie). This figure increases when enumerated over a longer period. For many young people, returning home is not a viable option and they attempt to continue their schooling whilst at the same trying to deal with all the issues of independent living.

**Mental Health**

Mental health problems among young people are at concerning levels. According to the ABS National Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing (2007), there were 391,000 16-24 year olds with anxiety disorders, 161,000 with affective disorders and 323,000 with substance use disorders (or about 26 per cent of that age group). In 2003, mental disorders accounted for almost 50 per cent of the total disease burden among young people aged 15-24 years (AIHW, 2007). Many people experience the onset of mental illness such as schizophrenia during adolescence. Depression is linked to self-harm, suicide ideation and suicide (Rickwood, Deane, & Wilson, 2007). Only a small number of young people who meet the criteria for a mental disorder receive treatment (Sawyer, Miller-Lewis, & Clark, 2006). There is a high prevalence of mental disorders and psychological issues for those young people who experience homelessness (Kermode et al., 1998).

**Illicit Substance Use**

About 20 per cent of 16-17 year olds and 30 per cent of 18-19 year olds have used an illicit substance in the past 12 month period, cannabis being the major illicit drug of use at this point (AIHW, 2007). Illicit drug use has remained relatively stable for more than a decade, but it is linked to mental health and homelessness and a variety of problems at school. Over a third of young people are reported to drink alcohol at amounts that put them at-risk of alcohol-related harm at either the short or long-term (AIHW, 2007). Again, substance abuse is an issue with a high correlation to chronically homeless young people. It can be a precipitating cause but also an outcome associated with homelessness (Australia’s Homeless Youth, p.151).
Overcoming disadvantage - a wicked problem

It is known that there are many young people who experience multiple issues. It is also known that adverse outcomes can be significantly correlated more broadly with low socio-economic status, family structure and low education achievement in school. However, detailed data on the way that these issues play out within schools are difficult to access or are non-existent. What is also lacking is data on the timely identification of risk and the best way to design ‘early intervention’ systems of support connected into and through secondary schools. The difficulty of making a real difference for this group or groups of vulnerable young people is why these issues can deservedly be described as ‘wicked problems’.

The term ‘at-risk students’ is generally used within the educational literature to mean ‘at-risk of leaving school before completing Year 12’. However, early school leaving prior to Year 12 completion is not the only problem that students may be at risk of whilst they are at school. Some young people are at-risk of becoming homeless (Chamberlain & MacKenzie, 2002), at-risk of ending up in a substance abuse spiral (Daley & Chamberlain, 2009), at-risk of mental health problems (Rickwood, 2005) and at-risk of not achieving mainstream employability and employment (Muir, Slack-Smith, & Murray, 2003) – to focus on some of the more significant issues. Often students experience co-morbidity or a circular combination of problems, with the causal relationships between each issue being difficult to decipher.

Much of what needs to be done in ‘early intervention’ requires a multifaceted and multidisciplinary response. Historically, there have been considerable resources deployed to target specifically defined youth issues. Program initiatives have often been narrowly focused on a specific youth problem, such as, for example, labour market programs, youth mental health services, youth homelessness services or dealing with drugs and crime. In terms of ‘early intervention’ though, the challenge is not to create a single consensus definition of ‘at-risk’ or to focus on one area at the expense of others. Rather, it is to recognise and work with the complexity of all the issues and to understand their inter-relatedness in an early intervention context.

Early intervention for youth homelessness

Victoria undertook several projects on homelessness and risk in the late 1990s. Two in particular focused on researching risk using quantitative methods. One research project was undertaken by Mackenzie and Chamberlain in 1996. Sixty three schools and some forty thousand young people were surveyed in five states, including a substantial number in Victoria. The risk instrument measured ‘risk of becoming homeless’. In about 80 per cent of schools some 10 to 14 per cent of students were potentially at risk of homelessness, while on average about four to six per cent of the school populations were seriously at risk of homelessness. Averages tend to mask the fact that the pattern of risk varies across schools, and some schools have larger numbers of at-risk students while others have less. This data was used to build an argument that ‘schools were sites for early intervention’ and that school welfare services should be improved and upgraded as essential components of the school (Chamberlain & Mackenzie, 1996).

The second was a state-wide survey of schools based on the work of Catalano and Hawkins and their Communities That Care concepts (Hawkins et. al., 1992; also see Hawkins et. al.,
In 2000, the Centre for Adolescent Health published the findings from an extensive sample survey in 194 Victorian secondary schools, a sample of 12,816 students in years 7, 9 and 11 (Bond et al., 2000). The purpose of the research was to ‘comprehensively assess the range of factors shown in longitudinal research to predict common psychosocial health problems in young people’ (p.1). This study provided data on a large number of risk and protective factors, reporting community profiles for all local government areas in Victoria, and several papers explored the relationships between the various variables. In terms of homelessness, the survey used the same instrument that MacKenzie and Chamberlain had used in 1996 and obtained corroborating results for the prevalence of youth homelessness.

These two major research projects directed policy attention in the same broad direction - a risk-focused approach to prevention and early intervention. The research stimulated some debate about whether it was sound to focus on risk factors, with some commentators arguing that use of the term ‘risk’ meant labelling students, thus creating ‘spoiled identities’ (i.e. Bessant, 2001). However, a discourse about risk does not necessarily label young people. And practical support work with (at-risk) young people does not necessarily require talking explicitly about risk. However, The terminology of ‘risk’ is needed to understand and identify the range of problems experienced by young people as well predict which young people experience problems due to individual circumstances. Reliable identification of ‘at-risk’ young people is important in order to provide timely support and interventions – sooner rather than later. Fortunately, there has been a stronger constituency of interest in how this approach might be developed further.

A retrospective on Educational policy and programs for youth homelessness

Victorian Suicide Prevention Taskforce

A reasonable, but perhaps unlikely starting point for an account of Victorian policy and programs for vulnerable young people is the Suicide Prevention Victorian Taskforce report (Suicide Prevention Taskforce, 1997) chaired by Peter Kirby. The Task Force was established in January 1997 and was directed to inquire into suicide as a social issue, with a particular interest in ‘youth suicide’. The Taskforce report was a notable initiative of the Kennett Government, which was committed to addressing a range of youth issues, despite controversial, and according to some commentators, ‘brutal’ restructuring of the education system shortly after that Government came to power.

The report (Suicide Prevention Taskforce, 1997) framed its analysis and recommendations in terms of ‘prevention’, ‘early intervention’, ‘intervention’ and ‘post-vention’. While suicide was the issue that the taskforce was convened to address, its most significant recommendations were broader in scope. Prevention, the role of schools and the strengthening of communities were highlighted (Executive Summary, p.3-4):

**Strengthening Families**

*Strengthening families was identified as an important factor in supporting the development of young people. Many parents seek knowledge on how to parent more effectively, and how to*
improve their relationships with their children. Support should be provided to families to enhance the physical and emotional health of their children, and to prevent the development of dysfunctional relationships.

**Creating Positive Relationships**

Positive relationships outside the family are also significant, and may occur in educational institutions, places of employment or community organisations. A number of submissions highlighted the importance of initiatives that create the opportunity for young people to receive the consistent support of an older mentor, particularly when such support is not available at home.

**Promoting the Role of Education**

Young people spend more time in school than in most other structured environments outside the home. They often have their most consistent and extensive contact with trained professionals in school. Schools are well placed to assist students in developing self-esteem and self-confidence, and to identify and support students at risk. The need for schools to adopt an holistic approach to a young person’s needs that balances responsibilities for pastoral care and student academic progress was a constant theme of the public consultation process.

**Strengthening Local Communities**

Task Force members were concerned by the apparent lack of knowledge about suicide prevention in the general community; however, they heard of many instances where it had been addressed by actions taken by the local community to improve links between services and strengthen local support.

**Creating Positive Social Behaviours and Problem Solving Skills**

Low self-esteem, especially in young people, is a common feature of suicide cases made known to the Task Force. It heard evidence of the positive benefit of community-based programs that develop problem-solving skills and/or provide adventure experiences for young people. Again under early intervention, the role of schools was emphasised (p.84):

> There was widespread community support for strengthening welfare practices in schools, and apparent consensus that the school is an appropriate site to target service delivery for students who are homeless, abused, depressed and lacking in social skills and self-esteem. Submissions to the Task Force supported the view that development of coordinated health, educational and welfare services could be further strengthened through networks established between the Department of Education and the Department of Human Services.

The recommendations that raised the role of schools included:

> 6.1 The Victorian Government support the Department of Education to expand the number of professional counsellors available to support at-risk students. One professional counsellor should be located in each government secondary school who would be responsible for providing professional counselling services to students at the secondary school and its feeder primary
schools, and for making direct links with the mental health promotion officer in each Department of Human Services region.

6.2 The Victorian Government support the Department of Education and the Department of Human Services to develop effective and ongoing linkages between schools and local community services based on the principles established by Keeping In Touch with Schools and An Extra Edge program, including establishing and maintaining multidisciplinary student support teams to provide coordinated health and welfare services to at-risk students in local school clusters (p.86).

In retrospect, the Task Force report that recommended the School-Focused Youth Service program was a notable initiative of the Kennett Government, which was committed to addressing a range of youth issues, despite a controversial, and according to some commentators, ‘brutal’ restructuring of the education system shortly after that Government came to power. Repeat of above. The most enduring legacies of the Suicide Prevention Taskforce have been the School-Focused Youth Service program and the upgrading of school welfare capacity. Both of these recommended reforms drew heavily on work done on youth homelessness, rather than the suicide prevention field.

**School Focused Youth Service**

The School-Focused Youth Service (SFYS) was established in 1998 as a joint program initiative of the Victorian Departments of Education and Human Services (but managed through the Department of Human Services). More recently, the program has been moved to Education, but it is still claimed as a jointly administered program. Although initially framed within a suicide prevention framework, and a key recommendation of the Suicide Prevention Victorian Taskforce (1997), the SFYS was always a program with a broader scope.

The program deployed 41 coordinators across the state of Victoria at a cost of about $6m in 2007. It is a uniquely Victorian program designed to facilitate cooperation between schools and the community sector. The program is inclusive of the Catholic Education Commission of Victoria and the Association of Independent Schools of Victoria. Only the Queensland Youth Support Coordinators program comes close to SFYS, but there are major differences between the two state programs, and they should not be thought of as congruent initiatives.

The two main components of the SFYS program are:

1. The development of linkages and coordination between youth services (in schools and in the community). In some cases this has been undertaken by collaborative planning facilitated by the local SFYS coordinator, the creation of protocols between schools and agencies, service mapping, information brokering and support for innovation.

2. Brokerage funding to fill identified service gaps. The brokerage funds have generally been distributed on a competitive project basis, on projects designed to improve the existing service system.

The overall purpose and operation of the SFYS is described as follows:

*The School Focused Youth Service (SFYS) aims to strengthen the support for 10–18 year old vulnerable children and young people by facilitating partnerships and coordination of services*
between schools and community service organisations at a local level. These partnerships facilitate the identification of key issues and the development of innovative strategies to address service gaps for vulnerable children and young people. Brokerage funding can be used to purchase services to meet those gaps.

The outcomes desired from SFYS are:

- improved planning at a local level to ensure children and young people are well connected to schools and services
- better connected school, health and welfare services that support vulnerable children and young people
- improved identification of children and young people who require prevention and early intervention strategies to assist their engagement and reengagement into education. (DEECD, 2006e)

An evaluation of the program (Redfern, Lewis & Marsh, 2007) found that ‘SYFS activities are leading to positive impacts for young people – both directly through brokerage and non-brokerage funding, and indirectly through capacity-building in the community agencies and schools’ (p.2) and that the ‘development of partnerships is considered to be an area of strength of the SFYS program (p.3). The evaluation drew attention to the inadequate collection of quantitative data but found that SFYS made a significant contribution towards:

- improved knowledge about issues and services in the community and school
- development of partnerships, planning and programs between education and community sectors at the local community level
- better peer relationships and communication skills
- more positive attitudes to self, peers, teachers and school
- positive changes in behaviours
- improved attendance and engagement with school
- significant improvement in the current service system as a result of the identification of gaps and subsequent service development and/or purchase. (School-Focused Youth Service Program Guidelines, 2009-2011, p.5)

The SFYS program was found to be well aligned with existing policies in Victoria and effectively responsible for a host of interesting relevant local activities and initiatives involving schools and agencies. SFYS has received funding from the Baillieu Government for a further 12 months (from 2011 to 2012) and the program will be reviewed at that point.
Framework for Student Support Services

The publication of the *Framework for Student Support Services in Victorian Government Schools* policy document (Department of Education, 1999) followed soon after the launch of the SFYS. Much of what was advised is familiar a decade later. The Framework was directed at schools but opened up the question that school support required a broader cooperation between schools and community agencies. Importantly, the Framework delivered some explicit policy messages to schools about what was expected as they responded to the needs of at-risk students. Successive Victorian Governments have strengthened the capacity of secondary schools to provide student support. The previous Labor Government created the Primary Welfare Officer Initiative with 256 welfare officers employed in primary schools. A further 150 officers were scheduled in 2012-2014. In November 2011, the Baillieu Government announced that the first of 300 primary schools would begin to receive funding for their first welfare officer over the next four years. The welfare officer in primary schools initiative was continued and expanded.

In the five years or so from the time the Framework was released, there was a major restructure in DEECD and a diminution of central direction and leadership around responding to disadvantage. On the other hand, schools have continued to reference the policy and there was a good amount of local activity and a rebuilding of capacity for student support. The idea that student support required a guaranteed position in the school staffing rather than being determined through the annual staffing establishments was a significant change. More recently, there has been a recovery of central policy direction and initiative in the student wellbeing area and work on these issues has a relatively high priority.

Today, Victorian schools have more specific guidelines for how schools should deal with homelessness (*Supporting Children, Young People and Their Families Affected by Homelessness: Guidelines for Victorian Schools*, Student Wellbeing Division, 2009). These Guidelines have been developed for all primary and secondary schools across Victoria to improve the wellbeing, educational experiences and outcomes of children and young people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. The Guidelines are intended to assist schools with:

- understanding more about homelessness, how and why it occurs and the impact it has on the lives of children, young people and their families
- identifying actions that schools can take to improve outcomes for children and young people affected by homelessness, and the principles that underpin these actions
- learning about what others are doing to improve wellbeing, educational experiences and outcomes for children and young people affected by homelessness, especially where these activities involve good practices
- identifying key contacts and resources that will enable schools to more effectively identify, engage and support children, young people and their families who are affected by homelessness.

However, in reality, what happens at the school level depends on the commitment of individual Principals and what individual schools are how they decide to implement the guidelines in practice. Consequently, there is considerable variation amongst schools around how these Guidelines are operationalised.
Other Victorian policy initiatives related to youth homelessness

In Victoria, in 2003, DEECD (previously known as the Department of Education and Training) and the Department of Human Services (DHS) developed a Partnering Agreement – ‘School Attendance and Engagement of Children and Young People in Out of Home Care’ aimed at improving the educational experience and academic outcomes for children and young people in out of home care.

The Department of Planning and Community Development (DPCD), through their ‘A Fairer Victoria’ annual releases since 2005 show the Government’s strong commitment to reducing disadvantage and to increase opportunities for the community with specific goals focused on young people. In fact, in 2006 this department implemented their youth policy: ‘Future Directions: An Action Agenda for Young Victorians’, which aims to improve life outcomes for young people through a range of preventative and early intervention activities relating to community participation, education, information, health and safety.

Also in 2006, DHS outlined its youth homelessness strategy: ‘Creating Connections: Youth Homelessness Action Plan’, which focused on early intervention and interdependence, tailoring accommodation and housing support to the complexity of needs of homeless young people, enhancing service capacity and access to complementary services in order to respond to the range of difficulties experienced by young people receiving support.

In 2007, DHS outlined their reform agenda for the child protection sector with the implementation of the ‘Every Child, Every Chance’ and ‘Victoria’s Plan to Improve Outcomes in Early Childhood’. These documents show the importance of whole-of-school approaches in the prevention of and early intervention for the range of issues that children and young people face, such as mental health problems and homelessness.

The ‘Blueprint for Education and Early Childhood Development’ (DEECD) was introduced in 2008, providing a five-year vision for the Victorian Education and Early Childhood Development sectors. This document represents a commitment by DEECD to provide every child and young person with the opportunity to be successful, independently of where they happen to live or their socio-economic background. This plan outlines the key priorities for the Department to improve the outcomes for disadvantaged young people, and specifically to develop a strategy to improve educational outcomes for students who are homeless (DEECD, 2008b).

The Vulnerable Youth Framework and Better Youth Services Pilot Program

In August 2008, the Department of Human Services (DHS), the Department of Planning and Community Development (DPCD) joined with the Department of Education and early Childhood Development (DEECD) to publish the Vulnerable Youth Framework discussion paper (DHS, DPCD, & DEECD, 2008) seeking input on five focus areas – ‘prevention and early intervention’; ‘engagement with education, training and employment’; ‘local planning for
youth services'; ‘tailored responses for particular groups’; and ‘effective services, capable people’. The questions for discussion were:

1. **Prevention and early identification**
   - How can we best identify vulnerable young people early?
   - What initiatives/tools/guidelines work best in responding early to young people showing signs of vulnerability?

2. **Engagement in education, training and employment**
   - How can the education sector be better supported to identify and respond at an early stage to vulnerability in young people?
   - What tools/resources would they need to achieve this?
   - Are there enough and the right types of programs reconnecting young people back to school or into training or employment? What else could be done?
   - How can we improve coordination across schools, community and training and employment?

3. **Local planning for youth services**
   - Do you think it is feasible to have local youth plans? Who should lead the development of youth plans in each LGA?
   - How can the state government departments work best with local government and community-based organisations to deliver/provide/establish/improve the youth service system?
   - How does local collaboration between local services currently occur? Are existing networks or coordination mechanisms effective? How can collaboration be improved?
   - How do we ensure vulnerable young people are involved in service planning and program development?

4. **Tailored responses for particular groups**
   - How do local area youth services and networks recognise and respond to diversity in the youth population? How could this be improved?
   - Are vulnerable young people from particular groups included in local planning efforts?
   - What tools and resources would you need to strengthen the involvement of young people from diverse backgrounds and vulnerable young people from particular groups in local planning efforts and youth services?
   - How would we know that any specific actions taken to respond to the needs of particular groups of vulnerable young people are working?

5. **Effective services, capable people**
   - Do you agree a workforce strategy should be developed?
   - How should a workforce strategy be developed? What are the key components or activities to be undertaken?
   - What would an effective youth service system look like? How would we know it is working? What are the key components of good quality and effective practice?
• How should an evidence base for youth services be developed, maintained and accessible to those who need it?

In addition, the following overarching questions were asked:
• Do you think the five focus areas are where and how we can make the greatest amount of effective system change? If not, why?
• Which are your priority focus areas? Why?
• Do you think the actions for change are adequate? Do you have other suggestions?
• Which actions are the priority actions from your perspective? Why?
• If you could do one thing to improve the existing youth service system, what would it be?

The intent was to provide a policy framework to strengthen the State’s response to vulnerable young people by providing ‘inclusive, developmentally responsive, timely and proactive, place-based and comprehensive, flexible and enduring support’ (DHS, DPCD, & DEECD, 2008, p.32). The three year demonstration project aimed to deliver consistency in assessing and referring young people across the different sectors, addressing the issues young people are facing at an early onset by using early intervention strategies, and identifying clear entry points to the appropriate services including alternative education options. The goals were to improve education and training engagement, and reduce the escalation of the different issues faced by young vulnerable people. A notable feature of the development of the Vulnerable Youth Framework was the collaboration between the three government departments and their respective sectors. The Vulnerable Youth Framework still stands up as probably the most cogent framework of its type yet proposed in any Australian jurisdiction.

Following a Ministerial Forum on Vulnerable Youth in April 2008, the Victorian Government initiated the Better Youth Services Pilot (BYS) program as a way of exploring how the Vulnerable Youth Framework might be developed locally. If innovation on the ground was to be on outcomes then local innovation had to be facilitated. If local planning of youth services was a desired outcome then a process whereby local planning and greater coordination could take place was necessary.

The pilots aimed to improve the current arrangements for the early identification of risk for vulnerable young people, the collection of youth services data and improved youth service delivery at the local level. The following three questions formed the basis of the project:
• How can vulnerable young people be identified and supported earlier and more systematically?
• What data is needed to enable better planning of local services to improve outcomes for vulnerable young people?
• What can be done to improve existing State Government funded youth service coordination and delivery?

Between September 2008 and January 2009, pilot projects commenced at three sites across Victoria. The cities of Frankston, Wyndham and Greater Bendigo were the first three municipalities selected to take part in the BYSP. The initial three pilots all confirmed the view
that it was difficult to navigate the range of youth programs across Victoria due mainly to (a) insufficient data sharing between providers, (b) relatively little systematic co-ordination, and (c) complex service delivery arrangements. In the next round, Frankston, Wyndham and Greater Bendigo were funded to implement their recommendations. Then, pilot sites were extended to the Local Government Areas of Swan Hill, Geelong and Yarra Ranges. Swan Hill was the first rural municipality to receive BYSP funding. In 2010, Geelong became a Stage 1 pilot site.

All BYSP sites produced reports on their local activity and the former Labor Government allocated $11.2m to continue the program under the name of ‘Brighter Futures’. A change of Government at the end of 2010 placed the future of this initiative in some doubt, However, the Baillieu Government decided to continue the program under the new name of Youth Partnerships (see under Youth Partnership section) and has strengthened the program concept.

**Local Learning and Employment Networks (LLEN)**

The Local Learning and Employment Networks or LLENs are another uniquely Victorian approach to connecting education and training with entry into the workforce. Since 2002, 31 LLENs have been established across Victoria with the task of ‘Connecting local groups to improve education, training and employment options for 10-19 year olds’ (DEECD, 2008c). The local networks act as the liaison between employment, education and training providers, government and community groups as well as with individuals to develop innovative initiatives to address the needs of young people.

As such, the LLENs have a particular brief to address the issues of young people at-risk of disengaging from education or those who have already disengaged from education and who have not entered employment or training. The LLENs do not have any mandatory authority but are expected to broker ‘strategic, sustainable partnerships’ to support ‘improved education and transition outcomes’ which includes raising Year 12 (or the equivalent) attainment. The LLENs have networks amongst local employers and with schools and initiate projects aimed to increase awareness of opportunities for young people in transition from school to further education or employment.

Additionally, since 2010, the LLENs deliver the School Business Community Partnership Brokers program, a joint State and Commonwealth Government program under the National Partnership on Youth Attainment and Transitions. Managed by DEECD, the LLEN particularly focuses on programs for young people ‘at risk’ of making a poor transition from school to employment, education or training.

Examples of projects by LLENs are:

**The Pavilion:** An alternative education setting which began in West Heidelberg for 15-19 year olds who are unlikely to finish school in the mainstream setting and for young people who have disconnected from school for some time. The Pavilion model combined personal development and pastoral care through case managed support with academic studies. The Banyule-Nillimbik LLEN was instrumental in setting up the Pavilion. The Pavilion model is now being taken up in several regions as DEECD moves to create alternative school settings as an option for vulnerable students who are likely to otherwise leave school early.
Health Industry Placement Manual Project: The Health Industry Work Placement Manual (see: http://www.centralrangesllen.org.au/partnerships-networks/industry/health-industry-placement-manual/) is a guide for schools, students and health providers to assist young people to establish and undertake work experience and structured workplace learning in the health industry. The project was undertaken by the Central Ranges LLEN in partnership with St Mary’s College and Seymour Health. The health services industry was seen to be facing a significant demand for services and the project sought to support young people to gain experience in the industry as a way of creating pathways to a career. As a result of the project Mercy Health provides a VET program in schools in the Lower Hume area. The CEOs of five local hospitals met in July 2010 to discuss creating more opportunities for young people in hospitals and the project facilitated an industry placement for a local careers teacher at Seymour Health.

Workplace Learning Coordinators Program - The South West LLEN received $600,000 from DEECD to implement the Workplace Learning Coordinators Program over the next four years. The program will run in the Colac-Otway, Corangamite, Warrnambool and Moyne municipalities and aims to build on the success of the former Local Community Partnerships. The program is designed to help address future skill shortages in these local areas by liaising with industry and schools, generating work placements, and generally building and strengthening pathways from VCAL and VET courses into employment.

The Student Mapping Tool (DEECD, 2006b) - Developed by the Brimbank-Melton LLEN, the tool, in the form of an Excel spreadsheet, is a format for recording key research data already available in schools. Authorised staff then have a systematic process for identifying risk factors for students or particular groups of students, mapping program responses against student needs and evaluating the outcomes of these interventions. Extensive documentation is available on the DEECD website. The Student Mapping Tool has been disseminated across the Victorian secondary school system by the Youth Transitions Division of DEECD. There has been uptake, but use of the tool is not mandatory at this point.

The LLENS have proven to be a very flexible and innovative program for working on issues of transition from secondary education into further education, training and employment in Victoria.

On Track

On Track (DEECD, 2006a) has been developed by the Victorian Government to ensure Year 10 to 12 students from both government and non-government schools engage with further education, training or employment after leaving school. Building on the Managed Individual Pathways (MIPs; DEECD, 2006d) program, On Track ensures it contacts and surveys Year 10 to 12 students who have left school to ask them questions in regards to their post-school situation, and to support them and offer advice should they not be engaged in further education or in full-time employment. The On Track initiative also has a research component with the aim of documenting the outcomes for students post leaving secondary school.

In Victoria, every student in secondary school is allocated a student number which radically improves the capacity of the central Department’s capacity to track students from activity to
activity and from school to school. A limitation of this student number is that it is an identifier that only applies when a young person is enrolled in school.

**Flexible Learning Options**

DEECD commissioned the Australia partnership of KPMG to develop a framework (KPMG, 2009) for a consistent and evidence based approach to the education provided to children and young people at risk of or disengaged from school. The ‘Re-engaging Our Kids’ framework offers a four-tier model of educational options to more systematically ensure that the needs of students are met and in order to support them to continue in education.

The Re-engaging Our Kids framework is based on: a shared strategic vision; good practice and appropriate enablers; an integrated educational provision with a focus on good practice models; and a new networked governance arrangement and shared accountability structures. Tier 1 of the strategy (‘Differentiated Provision’) includes a variety of options available across the school networks/regions in terms of program configuration emphasising the interests of the child/young person and aimed at increasing their motivation to engage in learning activities. This first tier is an all-inclusive educational approach not specifically targeting at-risk students.

Tier 2 – ‘Targeted Initiatives’, comprise of complementary supports provided within the classroom to address individual student needs and risks. These can include mentoring programs, tutoring, case management and outreach support from community organisations. The first two tier levels are offered by schools in the first instance.

Tier 3 – ‘Flexible Learning Options Within School Settings’, are short-term intensive supported learning initiatives. Flexible learning options are provided to children and young people experiencing poor concentration or low self-esteem, learning difficulties, behavioural issues, absenteeism and other problems impacting on their ability to remain in the classroom with their peers. These issues also contribute to the increase in disengaging from school which reduces their potential to achieve positive academic outcomes. This tier ensures that the child/young person continues to have a connection with their peers, their teacher(s) and the school.

Tier 4 – ‘Flexible Learning Options Within Community Settings’ becomes an option when all other educational opportunities have been exhausted. The strategies are focused on long-term support outside the school environment because reintegration within the school is no longer possible due to long history of disengagement and exclusion as well as the complexity of needs to be addressed (KPMG, 2009, p. 5).

In 2010, DEECD considered the KPMG policy framework and developed a plan, which has begun to be implemented.

**Managed Individual Pathways (MIPs):**

The MIPs (DEECD, 2006d) is a career and transition program provided to all students 15 years and over enrolled in government secondary schools in Victoria. In addition to ensuring school engagement and completion, it offers individual students an opportunity to plan their
career pathways and identify the related support needed to achieve their goals, including making a positive transition to secondary senior years, further education, training and full time employment. MIPs allows students at-risk of disengaging an opportunity to identify additional supports needed to remain in education and training, or failing that, assistance to access employment. The MIPs program strategy enhances the schools responsibilities to monitor their students’ pathways until successful completion of Year 12 or equivalent. More recently (2009), the MIPs program has been introduced to Koorie students as part of DEECD’s Wannik education strategy (DEECD, 2008a) for Koorie Students with the aim of improving their educational outcomes. The program is used with Koorie students at an earlier point (Year 8 and 9) to enhance school engagement and provide pathway planning and support for students at risk of disengaging early.

Other Relevant Policy Initiatives

The Commonwealth Reconnect program that was rolled out from 1999 onwards has been crucial in delivering capacity for early intervention to assist at-risk and homeless young people. This program continues, although it has experienced a period of uncertainly since 2007. There was doubt about whether it would become part of state and territory service delivery or remain a Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA) program. That was resolved in favour of Reconnect remaining a Commonwealth program. Consideration of expansion, though widely accepted as necessary, has been in abeyance since before the launch of the White Paper on homelessness (FaHCSIA, 2008). However, it must be acknowledged that the Reconnect program funded by the Australian Government provides a major component of early intervention capacity in all jurisdictions. In Victoria there are currently 21 Reconnect services.

More recently there have been Commonwealth policies that have contributed to the current context and directions for vulnerable young people. In 2008, the Commonwealth documented the direction of Australian schooling for the next 10 years and asked each State and Territory Education Minister in collaboration with Catholic and Independent school sectors to contribute to this national plan: ‘Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians’ (MCEETYA, 2008). Also in 2008, the Australian Government presented its White Paper: ‘The Road Home: A National Approach to Reducing Homelessness’ (FaHCSIA, 2008) setting some key priorities achievable by 2020: to halve overall homelessness and to offer supported accommodation to all rough sleepers who needed it.

In 2009, the ‘National Affordable Housing Agreement’ (NAHA) was developed by the Council of Australian Governments with objectives to ensure all Australians have access to affordable, safe and sustainable housing and accommodation. The NAHA subsumes the former Supported Accommodation and Assistance Program (SAAP) under which Australia’s response to homelessness was funded from 1985 - 2009 under a joint Commonwealth/States special purpose program.

Further, in 2009, DHS (Victoria) launched its whole-of-government ‘Victorian Mental Health Reform Strategy’ highlighting that the service response should be based on wellness, early intervention and recovery rather than on the illness. This strategy focused on providing early childhood and schools the opportunity to play a role in prevention, health promotion and early intervention. Prevention and early intervention would be achieved by enhanced efforts
to identify children and young people at an early onset of displayed behaviours associated with mental illness and therefore linking them to appropriate support in a timely manner.

Recently, DHS released the 2010-2020 ‘Victorian Homelessness Strategy’ (DHS, 2009) describing the state’s contribution to the national reduction in homelessness objectives. After the change of government in Victoria, a new plan was formulated, the Victorian Homelessness Action Plan: 2011-2015. There is a good deal of continuity between the former strategy and the new Action plan. The Plan encompasses $76.7m over four years, including $25m for innovations projects. Apart from the innovations projects, three new 40-bed foyers for young people who have been homeless will be developed linking accommodation to education and training. In some respects the new Action Plan strengthens the preceding Victorian Homelessness Strategy, while maintaining the strategic direction of prevention and early intervention.

Lastly, there is a whole-of-government ‘State Plan to Prevent Violence against Women’ in its final development stage, which will provide a ten-year framework for promoting healthy relationships and gender equity across the community.

**Expand Pathways, Improved Transitions (EPIT)**

This is an innovation developed in Geelong (Local Learning and Employment Network, 2010). The EPIT project is steered by a Strategy Group and aims to improve partnerships between schools and their communities to enhance student outcomes by effectively using data to identify good practice in student pathways and transitions. This Strategy Group documents successful practices, addressing barriers, needs and risks to academic achievement, school engagement and participation for vulnerable children and young people. The Geelong Central Pilot has implemented a user-friendly web-based data IT system, *Real-time Student*, in six schools that gathers information relating to student learning and performance from a range of sources and provides real-time data. This information can then be used by teachers to engage in meaningful conversation with students and their parents about their learning and performance progress. This is an innovative approach designed to capture and maintain an accurate representation of available school level data, making it efficiently accessible to users so as to facilitate appropriate and more responsive support to children and young people.

**Youth Partnerships**

As reported by the DEECD (2006c), Youth Partnerships is the direct descendent of the Better Youth Services Pilot (BYSPI) program. The Better Youth Services Pilots were rolled out to investigate issues of coordinated planning, identification of at-risk young people and the more effective delivery of youth services. When the program was expended in 2010, the new demonstration sites were to explicitly build on the learning’s from the BYSP program and to also build on the established partnerships in place. The Youth Partnership projects have been expected to cover a greater geographical area than the BYSPs and are broader in scope. Their stated purposes is: to trial innovative approaches to service coordination, planning and delivery, including processes for tracking of, and tailoring services for, individual young people. They are expected to provide key information to drive wider system
reform including collecting evidence on unmet demand and gaps in current service provision, and on local governance models and possible grouping of services for potential combined funding and delivery.

The new demonstration sites have been based on adjunct clusters of Local Government Areas (LGAs) as follows:

1. **Greater Geelong**, Queenscliff and Surf Coast.  
3. **Frankston** and Mornington Peninsula.  
4. **Swan Hill**, Gannawarra, Buloke and Mildura.  
7. **Wyndham** and Hobsons Bay.  

The highlighted areas were part of the BYSP. The multi-LGA boundaries for the Youth Partnership sites are larger than the single-LGA approach of BYSP, ostensibly taking into consideration the boundaries for Child First, the Primary Care Partnerships and the LLENs. The seven Youth Partnership demonstration sites have been required to trial common assessment and referral practices and coordinated access points to the service system. The governance arrangements both centrally and locally are more robust than the precursor BYSPs. The agenda is more strongly about system reform and tested resources and practices that could be replicated across Victoria.

In an important sense, Youth Partnerships is ‘a whole of Victorian Government initiative’ with representation from the Departments of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD), Human Services (DHS), Planning and Community Development (DPCD), Justice, Health, Premier and Cabinet, Treasury and Finance and Victoria Police. DEECD is the lead Department, but cross-sectoral and cross-departmental representation is on all levels of the governance structure. The rationale for this arrangement was given as follows:

> As most young people attend school most of the time, schools are in a key position to identify young people who may be at risk of disengaging from school and require additional support.  
> The education system is also able to provide the opportunities to re-engage with education and training. Achievement in education leads to greater employment opportunities, economic and social prosperity, community inclusion and participation, and health and wellbeing. That’s why one of the overarching goals of the initiative is to improve engagement with education and training, leading to an increase in the completion rate of year 12 or equivalent.

Projects and activities have not been put out to tender but developed through local, cross-sectoral committees, which determine how funding is expended. Organisations cannot apply independently for funding.

From Policy to Practice: An example of one Victorian community’s efforts to end youth homelessness

The account of The Geelong Project is about one community’s attempt at end youth homelessness. Geelong is a port city some 75 kilometres from Melbourne. It is the second most populated city in Victoria. Compared to individual income levels of the Victorian population, there is a higher proportion of people in Geelong on low incomes (earning less than $400 per week). Also compared to the Victorian average, there is a larger proportion of young people in Geelong who leave school by Year 10 and who do not eventually go on to complete Year 12 or its equivalent.

The historical context of The Geelong Project runs over some fifteen years from the time that early intervention was first raised in relation to youth homelessness, through the recommendations of the Suicide Prevention Taskforce (1997-1999) to a series of initiatives by DHS and DEECD leading to the Youth Partnerships program. The following is a detailed description of the development and implementation of The Geelong Project and highlights how homelessness policy can be operationalised at the community and service level.

The Geelong Project

Beginning in December 2009, Time for Youth, mandated by the Barwon South West (BSW) Creating Connection Steering Group, established an Early Intervention Working Group to attempt to define Early Intervention within the context of Youth Homelessness, to map and identify the roles and responsibilities of those services that are critical to an effective early intervention approach, and to develop a framework and regional model for early intervention including targeting, strategies, referral pathways and related protocols required to put in place an effective system. To achieve these objectives, the reference group conducts themed meetings where specific subjects are discussed.

The Early Intervention Working Group was set up to systematically develop an early intervention framework for Geelong. This was intended to be a standing forum for cross-sectoral collaboration. During 2010 and 2011, the Early Intervention Working Group held a series of regular workshops on specific topics and worked through issues of policy, program delivery and practice for early intervention.

In March 2010, an important discussion took place when Kaye Wright from the Geelong Northern Network (BSW – Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) presented on student support services within the network, and delivered a benchmark account for the 15 primary and secondary schools on 22 campuses attended by 7,768 students. Across the network there were 8.7 staff for student support including a Network Coordinator, Psychologists, Social Workers and Speech Pathologist. This was in addition to the Student Wellbeing Teams in each of the six secondary schools, composed of Student Wellbeing Coordinators, Disability Coordinators, Chaplains and Nurses, Attendance Officers and representatives from the school leadership teams. This might appear to be a significant number of support staff and capacity for student support across the Geelong Northern Network schools, but it is relative to levels of student need and the community is an area of high disadvantage and need. These schools like many secondary schools across Victoria also attempt to develop and maintain a positive relationship with their students.
through Student Managers, Year Level Coordinators, and through peer mentoring programs. The major concern of schools was students who were ‘at risk’ of failing academically, rather than ‘at risk’ in terms of social, emotional and behavioural issues. Schools tend to manage ‘at risk’ students using alternative curriculum, individual learning plans or alternative school setting arrangements. In 2010, the Student Support Services from the Geelong Northern Network had 1,200 students referred for support. On average, the Student Wellbeing Team could deal with some 40 students in a single day.

The first issue was that teachers and community workers have different understandings of common terminology. This would, of course, have implications for the assessments that schools make when a student presents with complex needs. Schools are primarily concerned about the learning attributes and capabilities of their students. On the other hand, the main concern of community services is about the welfare, wellbeing and health of individuals. In the first instance, the complexity of working within a multidisciplinary context comes down to something as basic as the language and terminology used. What was obvious for the community services people was not as clear from the perspective of the school personnel. In the context of ‘early Intervention’, community workers think that the schools are best placed to inform community services of students experiencing difficulties that might lead to homelessness as they see those students everyday and are in a prime position to undertake an initial screening of students’ welfare issues. On the other hand, there are barriers faced by schools around workloads and priorities, included dealing with absenteeism and not always being able to identify the ‘at risk’ behaviours in a timely manner in order to intervene early. Other barriers identified during the working group meeting were:

- The need to develop and enhance trusting relationships between schools and the community
- The need to enhance the schools knowledge of the different systems
- The need for the school to develop a better understanding of the ‘at risk’ issues potentially leading to homelessness
- The recognition that the nature of the issues are becoming more complex
- The accessibility to community services often guided by eligibility criteria
- That there are high demands for services and heavy workloads for available resources
- Teacher’s knowledge and skills is paramount to effective positive outcomes for the ‘at risk’ student group

The internal processes required in schools for students to receive additional support often begins with the identification of a high-level of absenteeism and related behavioural concerns. These students will be referred to the Student Wellbeing Team or the issues may be ‘managed’ by Year Level Coordinators. Student absences are usually followed up by the school after a 2 to 3 days period, when a school will attempt to contact parents and the student to investigate the reasons for non-attendance. Behavioural issues are the most common way through which a young person communicates problems they are facing. Often, but not always, students will come forward to seek assistance from the Student Wellbeing Team. When students present with more complex issues they are referred to the Student Support Services for assessment and counselling, to external welfare/youth agencies for specialist support or to the Department of Human Services (DHS). If homelessness is indicated there may be at some point a referral to Reconnect in Geelong.
An effective early intervention framework from the school's perspective, requires good communication within the School Wellbeing Team and teaching staff so that early identification of ‘at risk’ students happens quickly. This is enhanced by communication and relationships between schools and the families of vulnerable students; strong trusting relationships between the schools and the students; and lastly, schools need to have develop relationships with community service organisations and individual workers so that interventions are targeted and timely.

However, teachers do not necessarily link behaviours to causes, and they are more concerned to manage behaviours rather than understand and act on the causes, resulting in a reactive approach to problem symptoms rather than a response to the underlying problem. In daily practice, the wellbeing of students relies mostly on whether staff members have the skills and knowledge to support them and link them into the most appropriate services. There was also a mention that the old Youth Pathways Program was a valued resource for schools and early intervention program for young people ‘at risk’.

There are a range of policies, guidelines and tools that the schools are expected to be aware of and able to use as required. These include the ‘Student Wellbeing Policy’, the ‘Supporting children, young people and their families affected by homelessness’ guidelines (Student Wellbeing Division, 2009), the ‘Strengthening Outcomes: Refugees in Government schools’ (DEECD, 2008d), the ‘Health and Wellbeing Framework’, the ‘Strengthening Student Support Services Framework’, the different Student Education Plans including the MIPs (DEECD, 2006d), and the ‘Student Mapping Tool’ (DEECD, 2006b). On the ground, the systems in place in schools are generally insufficient in the situations with the highest load of at risk students and disadvantaged families, and often not as effective as could be in schools with less disadvantaged students to support. The question of a more robust and effective model was on the agenda in Geelong.

But a question remained as to what would drive reform or change in schools and how could a cross-sectoral collaboration develop as envisaged under the Vulnerable Youth Framework. By the end of 2010, all the key elements of The Geelong project model were being formulated and documented.

Associate Professor David MacKenzie, joined the Early Intervention Working Party in late 2009 shortly after it had been formed. During 2010, Swinburne undertook preparations for a Geelong Student Needs Survey to obtain benchmark data on risk and resilience. In the second half of 2010 and early 2011, the research component was implemented.. The Geelong Student Needs Study funded by FaHCSIA Homelessness Research Partnerships funding via Swinburne University, is an important foundation for the larger Geelong Project model. The population survey of all secondary students in Barwon combined with follow-up data and other service data from agencies in Geelong will yield new dynamic data on youth homelessness and attempt to provide the best total community picture of youth homelessness ever.

Funding for innovations projects under the Victorian Action Plan for Homelessness provided an important opportunity for resourcing the capacity to undertake ‘early intervention’ in schools with integrated teams of community workers and school welfare staff – another missing foundation stone. Innovations funding under the Victorian Government Action Plan
has provided sufficient resources to test out the model as a research and development project in its entirety.

Funding under the Barwon Youth Partnerships (DEECD) has provided the third foundation for The Geelong Project. Barwon Youth Partnerships will fund project work in formalising the partnerships and pathways between schools and youth service providers. An IT toolkit (e-Wellbeing) containing screening, referral, planning and tracking tools is being developed with Swinburne University to facilitate service responses to young people at risk of homelessness.

The Geelong Project, as proposed for DHS funding by the core partnership of Time for Youth, Barwon Youth and Swinburne University, working in close collaboration with the Geelong secondary schools and other community service providers, is a ‘community of services and schools’ model for accomplishing early intervention for young people at risk of homelessness or who have become homeless recently. The model is constructed as a place-based, coordinated and integrated early intervention system that adopts a ‘whole of community’ approach with promising potential for replication and expansion. It equally encompasses both research and development and has clear objectives for achieving measurable reductions in youth homelessness.

The Action Plan funding provides resources for flexible intensive support by an integrated team of in-school staff and early intervention workers seeking to make a major measurable difference by preventing and radically ameliorating youth homelessness. The full model is arguably innovative on several levels – a whole of community model, rigorous identification of risk and monitoring, clarification about early intervention, needs-based support and clarity about how that will operate in practice, and a robust capacity to measure outcomes.

Reflections on the future

Since the late 1990s, Victorian Governments on both sides of politics have supported a broad agenda to address disadvantage and achieve a more coordinated system of support services for young people. Both DEECD and DHS have demonstrated a continuing interest in addressing the health and wellbeing of children and young people in a more coordinated way and lifting educational and employment outcomes. There is a range of policies and initiatives designed to enhance collaboration and address the complex needs of at-risk students. On the ground, however, there are competing demands and limited resources to respond in a timely and responsive manner.

Since 2008, the ‘Vulnerable Youth Framework’, the Better Youth Services Program, the fledgling ‘Brighter Futures’ agenda and the Baillieu Government’s ‘Youth Partnerships’ program have provided new opportunities for exploring a whole-of-government approach to achieving more effective coordinated cross-sectoral service systems for young people. The rhetoric about ‘collaboration’ has been around for quite a long time, but the realities fall far short. In Victoria, at least, there is a serious effort underway to move beyond rhetoric.

It is too early to make an assessment of the full potential and impact of the Youth Partnerships initiative. The objectives and ambition of the program draw from a long lineage of interest and exploration. The cumulative impact of a range of initiatives has built a level of
cultural capital for addressing issues of disadvantage. A relatively high degree of continuity when Government has changed has been another important factor.

However, over the past 20 years, there have been several program initiatives to better coordinate youth services, but none managed to achieve a lasting impact. The seriousness of cross-sectoral collaboration at all levels in the Youth Partnerships program is promising, but its endurance and whether it can achieve lasting systemic reform is still uncertain.

The Youth Partnerships program consists of seven pilot areas and there is every reason to expect some interesting outcomes from these trials. An evaluation will start in 2012 to assess what works well and what promising ideas have emerged for a wider implementation. The Geelong Project is notable amongst the Youth Partnership pilot areas because of the coherence of its community-based model and the fact that it has achieved significant additional funding from the Department of Human Services to resource early intervention workers in schools according to a well-developed model of community-based early intervention. The Geelong Project’s aspirational horizon is for a new system of local services for young people with tools and structures that are fully implemented across the different service sectors - ‘a community of schools and youth services’.

On the other hand, system change is not easy and does take time. Government departments do not ‘collaborate’ but they do cooperate and at times coordinate their activities. However, cross-sectoral collaboration is something that can be realistically attempted at a community level with the current systems of public administration largely unchanged.

Ultimately, reducing youth homelessness and supporting vulnerable young people depends on effective ‘early intervention’ and long-term investment in ‘prevention’, but these in turn depend on a raft of system-level reforms, at least in terms of how services operate at the local community level. Higher up there will need to be some changes in how funding is provided and how accountabilities are managed. In Victoria, this is on the agenda and there is a significant effort underway to explore how this might best be done in practice.
References


KPMG (2009). Re-engaging our kids: A framework for education provision to children and young people at risk of disengaging or disengaging from school. Melbourne: KPMG


