

26 April 2023

Our Place welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Early Years Strategy Discussion Paper February 2023.

Our Place is a unique cross-sectoral initiative of the Colman Education Foundation, which has a ten-year partnership with the Victorian state government. Our Place's vision is to ensure that all children and families succeed in life, no matter where they live and believes that education is the key to achieving this vision. Our Place takes a holistic place-based approach to supporting the education, health and development of all children and families in disadvantaged communities. Through facilitated partnerships, the universal platform of schools become the central place for supports and services that can overcome many of the barriers to educational achievement. It is currently being implemented in nine sites across Victoria, with the support of government and a significant number of philanthropic partners.

We are encouraged by the commitment to developing a Commonwealth Early Years Strategy that creates a new, integrated approach to the early years and prioritise the wellbeing, education and development of Australia's children. As stated in the Discussion Paper, essential to this will be keeping children and families at the centre of its design. We share the Minister's interest in ensuring that no child or family is held back, or left behind and the recognition that "a strong start in the early years will increase the likelihood of success that can carry children in good stead throughout life".

The following is our submission in response to questions outlined in the Discussion Paper.

What vision should our nation have for Australia's youngest children?

Recommendation: The vision for Early Years must be about delivering positive outcomes for all children and families, regardless of postcode. It should be a shared vision with an ambitious agenda that reflects family and community aspirations.

Our Place's vision is to ensure that all children and families succeed in life, no matter where they live. While the system currently works for many, it doesn't work for all. The Our Place response is to fill gaps, avoid duplication and overcome barriers to access by weaving the system together. We build long-term relationships and coordinate the engagement, consultation and data-informed planning that drives innovation, targeted service development and improved ways of working with families and the community. We achieve this through a holistic place-based approach that uses the universal platform of schools to support the education, health and development of all children and families. Critically, our focus extends beyond the classroom to the broader community environment for children and families, especially those experiencing disadvantage.

We seek to shift power from system leaders to community members over time. This includes consistently amplifying community voice, reporting back to community and being accountable to the community (for ways of working and driving meaningful change) via ongoing feedback loops.

What mix of outcomes are the most important to include in the Strategy?

Recommendation: We encourage a focus on outcomes that make a significant difference to the lives of vulnerable children and families experiencing disadvantage and complex life circumstances and for whom the universal service system is not meeting their needs. To this end, outcomes need to focus on children, families and communities reflecting an aspiration to change the underlying conditions which affect all children, families and communities who experience disadvantage. Specific examples of outcomes are provided below.

To see outcomes for children and families in communities experiencing disadvantage greatly improve, we recommend a focus on the following outcomes:

Long-term outcomes

- Children: happy, healthy and develop well; engage in learning and social opportunities; achieve as learners
- Families: strong self-worth; confident as parents/carers; engaged in their children's (and own) learning; are skilled and employed
- Community: Positive, long-term change to the underlying conditions which affect all children, families and communities who experience disadvantage (for example income, employment, education, health, social inclusion and community infrastructure)

Medium-term outcomes

- The service system is reshaped to be more collaborative and coordinated, building on what currently exists to better deliver for children and families
- Services adapt and tailor their responses to reflect the priorities and health and wellbeing needs of vulnerable children and families
- Increase in the number of services maintaining a continuity of connection with families experiencing disadvantage who have children aged 0-3 years

Short-term outcomes

- Decision makers have a greater understanding of the evidence base around the profound and lasting impact of the first 3 years of life on a child's physical, cognitive and emotional development
- Growing number of families engage (and stay engaged) with education and learning
- Children and families experiencing disadvantage have opportunities to experience pride, self-worth and success
- Families can more readily access a joined up-and integrated range of services from pregnancy

What specific areas/policy priorities should be included in the Strategy and why?

Recommendation: It is critical that the Early Years Strategy takes a broader view of its policy priorities to include a focus on:

- ***High-quality early learning, health and development***
- ***Engagement and enrichment activities for children and families, including adult education***
- ***Wrap-around health and wellbeing services***

The Our Place approach recognises that families must be supported to meet the individual health, developmental and wellbeing needs of their children, and encouraging those closest to the child

(especially parents) to value education and role model learning in ways that support aspirations and realise opportunities, can be transformative for the life trajectory of children.

This is achieved by taking a holistic approach to untapping potential – as reflected in the five elements at the heart of our approach:

- High-quality early learning, health and development
- High-quality schooling
- Engagement and enrichment activities for children and families
- Adult engagement, volunteering, education and employment
- Wrap-around health and wellbeing services

Each element is built on evidence of what actually works to improve life and learning outcomes. A summary of the evidence supporting the Our Place approach is available in the document '*Why Our Place? Evidence Behind the Approach*'.

What could the Commonwealth do to improve outcomes for children—particularly those who are born or raised in more vulnerable and/or disadvantaged circumstances?

Recommendation: At a time of unprecedented focus on and investment in the early years space for 3-5 year olds, we recommend an extension of this appetite to focus on 0-3 year olds.

The critical importance of early childhood development is well established. In particular, we know that the experiences and interactions that occur during their first 3 years of life have profound and lasting impact on a child's physical, cognitive and emotional development. We encourage the Strategy to focus on providing families, caregivers and communities with the knowledge, resources, and supports they need to create nurturing environments that will promote their children's healthy development in their first 3 years.

An additional area of focus is to establish the necessary enabling conditions for children and families to thrive, supported by increased 'continuity' of learning, connection and care across services and systems. These enabling conditions include:

Policy reform that enables:

- collaboration across policy domains and departments through cross-portfolio leadership and cross-collaboration structures (not a super department)
- shared accountability and the joining up across governments in Australia, ideally through agreed legislation that clearly outlines shared responsibilities between the State and Commonwealth Governments
- funding, procurement and commissioning processes that promote partnerships and collaborative ways of working and allow for greater variation and flexibility in implementation due to context
- new approaches to outcomes and evaluation that support a family centred framework and value supporting the family and continuity of connection

Mindset shifts reflected in policy purpose/ development including:

- a shift from parents need 'fixing' to parents needing agency and confidence
- an equal valuing of schooling, early learning, maternal and child health, playgroups and parent groups
- equal respect / recognition and conditions for early years professions and workforces

More specifically, there needs to be a focus on:

- policies / strategies to address the aging maternal and child health workforce that cannot meet demand
- greater investment in universal parenting capacity building programs and other supports for parents and carers to establish positive learning environments (within the home and beyond), including increased funding for playgroups and for new parents groups
- creation of ongoing opportunities for parents and carers to build their confidence and capabilities, including through adult education and training for employment

What areas do you think the Commonwealth could focus on to improve coordination and collaboration in developing policies for children and families?

Recommendation: Focus coordination and collaboration efforts on delivering improved continuities of learning, care and connection across system boundaries. This requires policy alignment and reform as well as the resourcing of the processes, expertise and relationships that enable a joined-up approach for the education, health and development of all children and families in disadvantaged communities.

Increased coordination will not simply be achieved by changing system structures or removing siloes. It is about resourcing ways of working that enable continuities and joining-up of approaches across boundaries that goes beyond co-location.

A key feature of Our Place is a shared commitment by partners to collaborative governance and innovation, to develop solutions that achieve impact. Typically, individual organisations will measure their success individually. There are few organisations which focus on the collective delivery of cumulative outcomes to meet the needs of children and families in a given area. For this to occur, there needs to be a way to bring all organisations together to create a shared vision and joined up approach. This is about more than just resources. It is also about authorisation to work differently and overcome organisational barriers. This also goes to data-sharing between organisations and not duplicating processes such that families tell their story over and over.

Our Place is not a direct provider of services or programs. Rather, Our Place is the 'glue' that facilitates partnerships. We invest in enabling the joining up of different and distinct parts of the system to create an integrated, place-based approach that works effectively as a whole. This includes between the school, local government, early learning service providers and the wider community to enable schools to offer supports and services that will improve the lives and aspirations of children, young people and their families.

The Our Place approach builds long-term relationships and commitment to drive actions and outcomes. It coordinates the engagement, consultation and data-informed planning that drives innovation, targeted service development and a changed way of working with families and the community – including a culture of mutual respect and learning.

What principles should be included in the Strategy?

Recommendation: There is a need to focus on principles for 'ways of working' to strengthen implementation of the strategic vision and enable the aspiration for transformation to translate in to powerful and sustained action.

We endorse the considerations included in the Discussion Paper including taking a strengths-based approach that relies on the positive resources and abilities of children and families as well as being child and family centred.

We believe that principles focused on “ways of working” will strengthen implementation of the strategic vision and enable the aspiration for transformation to translate in to powerful and sustained action.

- **Investment in relationships and sophisticated interpersonal capabilities** – recognition in policy framing and planning of the capacity and sophisticated interpersonal skills required for proactive relationship development and facilitating collaboration.
- **Long-term commitment** – committing to 'the long haul' with structures and approaches that are long-term and survive beyond election funding cycles to create sustainable change in disadvantaged communities and overcome fatigue and disillusionment with short term fixes.
- **Established processes for community engagement** – purposeful processes and pragmatic protocols for community and family engagement help embed engagement in routine ways of working, as do dedicated roles to ensure a consistent approach.
- **An ongoing approach** – community voice and participation is fostered through ongoing, persistent efforts that become part of 'business as usual' rather than one-off activities, pilots or efforts – while at the same time, not asking too much and overburdening the community.
- **Authorisation for working differently** – working differently is required across a range of departments and levels of government to achieve change. The Commonwealth Government can help to build the 'authorising environment' and capability within government to work differently, and helping provide the evidence champions that government need to secure the required funding or flexibility.
- **Openness to learning** – a culture of learning, adapting and improving, with established feedback loops and a commitment to understanding community dynamics, norms and values, histories and demographics.

Our Place appreciates the opportunity to contribute to this consultation and is happy to respond to any questions you may have in relation to this submission. We would welcome our inclusion in any further engagements on relevant matters.

