

2022-23 Federal Budget: Pre-budget Submission from Our Place

January 2022

About Us

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

Our vision is that all children and their families succeed in life. We facilitate partnerships that enable the school to be the central place for learning and support services that overcome barriers to educational achievement. We aim to reshape the service system by influencing changes in policies and practices that address the structural causes of disadvantage.

Our Place was developed from the learnings and outcomes in our original lighthouse site at Doveton College which was founded in 2012. The College is a Victorian Government school, designed in partnership with Colman Education Foundation to holistically meet the needs of children from birth to Year 9. The College incorporated local early childhood and family services which had been struggling to meet the high demand and complex needs of the area's residents. Outcomes from Doveton College show a significant reduction in the number of children identified as developmentally vulnerable (from 55% to 37%) as well as significant improvements in parent and student engagement (see **Attachment A**)

Following on from the success at Doveton College, in 2017 the Colman Education Foundation and Victorian Government signed a landmark agreement to implement the Our Place approach in schools at ten sites across Victoria over a ten-year period. Doveton was joined by schools in Officer, Carlton, Frankston North, Mooroopna, Morwell, Corio, Robinvale, Seymour and Clayton South.

This submission applies our experience and evidence to date to raise systemic issues which we see as integral to supporting Australian children, families and communities. The submission recommends:

- increased funding for universal supported playgroups
- increased delivery of client-centric employment services in school settings, and
- ongoing support for place-based approaches and data sharing.

For further information on the contents of this submission, please contact Sean Cory, CEO at sean@ourplace.org.au

Increased access to universal supported playgroups

Research shows that high quality early learning services and playgroups are of benefit to all young children – directly and by enriching their home learning environments. When it is of high quality, early learning significantly reduces levels of developmental vulnerability and the gap between advantaged and disadvantaged that is evident at school entryⁱ. Unfortunately, in Australia socio-economic status remains a critical determinant of a child’s earliest years. Vulnerable children benefit the most from high quality early learning, but it is these children who are less likely to attend early learning and maternal and child health servicesⁱⁱ. This means that barriers to achievement start before they’ve even begun school.

It is for these reasons that Our Place ensures there are high quality early learning services, playgroups and child health and parenting support available to all families, recognising that a child does not exist in isolation from their home environment and community.

A key finding from the results of Our Place at Doveton College was the critical importance of well-funded, universally accessible supported playgroups in engaging families and bringing communities together. The Foundation regards playgroups, offered in a school with wrap-around services and other engagement opportunities, as the most crucial enabler in producing the results at Doveton. Playgroups accessible for all provided a non-threatening, soft entry point to Doveton College. Parents could become familiar with the school environment (where many had negative experiences in their own childhood) and begin building relationships with site staff and other parents.

When offered in conjunction with wrap-around health and wellbeing services and other services such as employment and volunteering, universal supported playgroups play an important preventive role by assisting families to learn how best to support their children and access the services they need. In doing so, participation in playgroups can reduce the likelihood of greater dependence on secondary and tertiary services, which have a far greater cost for Government and ongoing, inter-generational impact.

An assessment of the current playgroups offered across Our Place sites has identified that the opportunities for families to participate are often limited and restricted. This is largely because of current funding arrangements and eligibility criteria which are reducing the number of available playgroups.

Recommendation: The Federal Government should increase funding for universally accessible supported playgroups with a focus on delivery in integrated service settings such as schools and community hubs.

Increased delivery of client-centric employment services in school settings

Parent education and employment overcomes intergenerational disadvantage. Better outcomes for vulnerable, young children can be achieved by investing in the resources and capabilities of the adults who care for themⁱⁱⁱ. When parents and carers have access to and value education and employment, children do better at school^{iv}.

However, for many families, the feeling of confidence and self-agency in an education context is a foreign concept. Adults who grew up in disadvantaged communities often had a tough time at school and may have difficulties getting or keeping a job. When they do visit their child’s school, they often face more judgement, or tokenistic programs that only reinforce that others do not understand where they are coming from or their needs. They can become socially isolated, which is a danger to children’s development because it is linked to mental health problems, abuse and neglect within families^v.

In this context, being a confident family of engaged learners is a big ask. It will not be fixed by more homework for children or more rules dictated to parents. Child development doesn’t hinge on academic credentials or expensive gadgets. It requires families that are confident as parents and carers who view education as valuable and are willing to engage in their children’s learning. Importantly, when adults engage in learning and training in the same environment as their children, it can increase children’s engagement and aspiration for their own learning^{vi}.

Our Place aims to empower families by building pathways for parents and carers through opportunities to participate in activities that fit their interests and needs, reduce isolation, and promote skill development. Examples include entry-level, pre-accredited learning and volunteering opportunities with the aim of building skills or gaining experience. In addition, Our Place works with job agencies and external training organisations to coordinate the delivery of onsite activities such as certificate and diploma-level courses, and work experience placements. Finding the right opportunities for parents involves working with families' own goals and aspirations, for themselves and for their children. This holistic approach has led to significant improvements in parent engagement and confidence in the school setting and, in turn, connection to training and employment opportunities.

Recommendation: The Federal Government should prioritise funding for client-centric employment services which are delivered in universal settings, such as schools, to build parental engagement and confidence in these environments.

Ongoing support for place-based approaches and data sharing

Communities with complex needs often face multiple, interdependent challenges in their local area that are complex to resolve. By focusing on place, rather than responding to each issue individually, governments and communities can work together to tailor local responses. An effective place-based approach is a collaborative, long-term commitment to responding to complex issues and is characterised by partnering and shared design, stewardship and accountability for outcomes and impacts^{vii}.

Place-based approaches involve various stakeholders playing different roles, more often than not with competing or different organisation objectives. This is why convening, facilitation and building positive relationships around a shared vision of the future state of the community is so critical^{viii}. Our Place's backbone role as 'the glue' demonstrates the crucial importance of resourcing collaboration to address priorities in ways that best fit the needs and aspirations of the community.

While there is a long history of place-based approaches being supported by government, their success is often dependent on the skills and tenacity of individual people and teams^{ix}. Ongoing commitment is required to ensure that commissioned services and funding are designed in a way which supports place-based approaches. Importantly, there is a need to support existing place-based initiatives to build on existing knowledge, lessons and data collected by government. Our Place has had recent success working with the Victorian Government to access appropriate state-held data to inform local assessment. This experience has shown the value of sharing data assets, as well as the importance of a strong authorising environment for increased data sharing to take place.

Recommendation: The Federal Government should continue its progressive support of place-based approaches to supporting children and families including through increased sharing of government-held local data with local agencies and communities.

Attachment A



EVIDENCE FROM DOVETON COLLEGE

Children achieving as learners

A key result of the Our Place approach is that children are better prepared for school and ready to learn. Analysis of 2017 data suggests children attending Doveton Early Learning Centre have achieved significantly higher performance on Preparatory School entry testing in reading than those that did not attend. These children also achieved significantly higher performance on reading and numeracy measures at Year 3 level.

Importantly, students are spending more time in school and have a more positive view of school. More than 90% of Year 7-9 students report feeling that learning is stimulating and feel motivated and interested in learning putting them in the top quartile of students in Victoria. This is a major improvement from 2013 where they were below the state average.

Children having the chance to develop well

The Our Place approach at Doveton college has also contributed to a material reduction in the number of children identified as developmentally vulnerable on one or more domains as measured by the Australian Early Development Census of nearly one-third since 2012 (from 55% to 37%).

Children engaging in learning and social opportunities

Children are developing social skills and discovering broader opportunities such as art, music and technology through activities outside regular school hours.

For example, at Doveton College, more than 60% of children undertake at least one activity, while nearly half undertake at least two activities. This is up from 7% in 2015.

Educational attainment and meaningful work

Adult attendees from the Doveton College community have completed more than 150 courses at Certificate III, Certificate IV or Diploma level since 2013.

Almost 100 parents that completed study or were provided with career/job support from the Our Place community team have now transitioned into sound employment; many for the first time.

Families learning together

At Doveton College, more than 100 parents volunteer each week in classroom and after-school. This significant participation level has arisen as result of a coordinated approach and open school philosophy.

Attachment B – References

- ⁱ GOLDFELD, S., O'CONNOR, E., O'CONNOR, M., SAYERS, M., MOORE, T., KVALSVIG, A. & BRINKMAN, S. 2016. The Role of Preschool in Promoting Children's Healthy Development: Evidence From an Australian Population Cohort. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 35, 40-48.
- ⁱⁱ SYLVA, K., MELHUISH, E., SAMMONS, P., SIRAJ-BLATCHFORD, I. & TAGGART, B. 2009. Effective Pre-School and Primary Education 3–11 (EPPE 3–11). Final report from the primary phase: Pre-school, school, and family influences on children's development during key stage 2 (Age 7–11). London: Institute of Education, University of London
- ⁱⁱⁱ SHONKOFF, J. P. & FISHER, P. A. 2013. Rethinking evidence-based practice and two-generation programs to create the future of early childhood policy. *Development and Psychopathology*, 25, 1635-1653
- ^{iv} BAXTER, J., GRAY, M. & ALEXANDER, M. 2007. Mothers and Fathers With Young Children: Paid Employment, Caring and Wellbeing. Canberra: Australian Government Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs
- ^v ZUBRICK, S. R., SMITH, G. J., NICHOLSON, J., SANSON, A. & JACKIEWICZ, T. A. 2008. Parenting and Families in Australia, FaHCSIA Social Policy Research Paper. Australian Government Department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs
- ^{vi} BARKER, B., & HARRIS, J., 2020, Parent and Family Engagement: An Implementation Guide for School Communities, Based on work by the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth, commissioned by the Australian Government Department of Education
- ^{vii} DART, J. 2018. Place-based Evaluation Framework: A national guide for evaluation of place-based approaches in Australia. Clear Horizon: Commissioned by the Queensland Government Department of Communities, Disability Services and Seniors (DCDSS) and the Australian Government Department of Social Services (DSS).
- ^{viii} BURNS, T., & BROWN, P., 2012, Lessons from a National Scan of Comprehensive Place-Based Philanthropic Initiatives, Urban Venture Group, Washington D.C
- ^{ix} VICTORIAN GOVERNMENT, 2020. A framework for place-based approaches: the start of a conversation about working differently for better outcomes. <https://www.vic.gov.au/working-together-place>