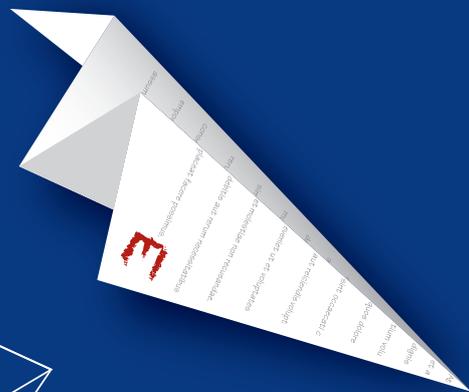


OUR TWEENIES: ARE THEY FLYING ALONG OR FALLING THROUGH THE CRACKS?





Acknowledgements

This report has been prepared by The Centre for Community Child Health, at the Royal Children's Hospital and the Murdoch Childrens Research Institute on behalf of Lentara Uniting Care and the Hume Whittlesea Local Learning (HWLLEN) and Employment Network Inc.

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We would also like to take this opportunity to thank the project steering committee, who were a great sounding board and very supportive of the project. The members were representatives from: Lentara Uniting Care, HWLLEN, Australian Government Department of Human Services, Travancore School and Meadow Heights Primary School.

We would also like to take this opportunity to thank the Middle Years Working Group who offered advice, expertise and support in the production of this report and who have agreed to act as one of the advocates for the recommendations contained in this report.

Other advocates for the recommendations contained in this report are: Hume Early Years Partnership, Hume Youth Commitment, Parent Advisory Group, Hume Principals Network, the Hume Hubs working group and the Hume Schools.

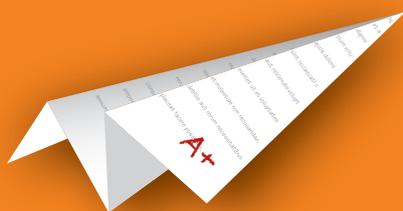
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Executive Summary

Introduction

In 2012, the Hume Whittlesea Local Learning and Employment Network (HWLLEN) commissioned the Murdoch Childrens Research Institute Centre for Community Child Health at the Royal Children's Hospital (CCCH) to undertake the Our Tweenies: *Are they flying along or falling through cracks?* Research Project (Our Tweenies), with funding from Communities for Children, FaCHSIA.

The project aims to determine the impact of and causes for school disengagement among children aged 6 to 12 years in the Hume City as well as propose recommendations that will help maintain or re-engage children and families in education.

Context

The Our Tweenies project developed from the findings of a research project undertaken in 2012 - The Hume Under 16 Project: *Out of School, Out of Sight* - which investigated school disengagement in the high school years and found this was linked to school disengagement in the primary school years.

Specifically the *Under 16 Project* found approximately 5.8% (283) of young people in Hume are missing school at least an average of one day a week; a further 112 young people were reported as not attending school. A range of complex factors were found to contribute to school disengagement for youth in Hume City. These included:

- Expulsion or asked to leave school;
- Transitioning from primary to secondary school;
- High family mobility;
- Disability;
- Ineffective parenting and family dysfunction;
- Negative school experience of parents;
- Young person remaining at home to act as a carer to family member; and
- On-line bullying.

Given the significance of these findings, it was decided that further investigation into when and how patterns of non-attendance are established in Hume was required in order to develop appropriate and timely interventions. This included scoping the level of parent and community engagement and participation in the education sector as well as child and school factors.

Methodology

A series of consultations with a range of stakeholders were undertaken in early 2013 to canvass the impact of and causes for school disengagement. The consultation process included:

- Focus groups with:
 - Principals (n=8);
 - Parents (n=5); and
 - Local service providers working with families and children (n=24).
- An online survey open to staff at all local primary schools and local service providers working with families and children (n=41); and
- A series of interviews with 13 children, conducted by local agencies.

While school disengagement is a multifaceted construct, a key indicator of disengagement from school is poor attendance at school. The extent of disengagement in Hume City was measured via school attendance data; all primary schools in Hume City were asked to provide de-identified data on the number of students aged 6 to 12 years that were not attending school at least one day a week or two or more days a week. A total of 21 schools provided attendance data.

A total of 25 schools, both public and Catholic, contributed to the research either through participating in a focus group/ the survey or through the provision of school attendance data. This represents 59% of all primary school in Hume.

Findings

School attendance data

There are a total of 42 primary schools in Hume; 28 are government and 14 are private, catholic or specialist schools. In 2012 a total of **16,371** children were enrolled in primary schools in Hume¹. Data on non-attendance from 2012 was provided by 21 local primary schools; this represents 50% of primary schools in Hume City.

The data collected from the schools showed:

- A significant number of children aged 6 to 12 are not attending school regularly, with **525** students missing on average one to two days of school a week and an additional **123** missing on average more than two days a week of school. As exactly half the schools in Hume City provided data, doubling these figures provides an estimate for absenteeism across all schools in the area. **This translates to an estimated 6.4% of primary students in Hume City missing one day to two days of school a week and an additional 1.5% of students missing more than two days a week of school, or an estimated combined total of around 8% of children attending school irregularly across the Hume area.**
- Over a quarter of the children with at least one day of non-attendance per week (n=166) are aged between 6 and 8 years old, indicating that patterns of non-attendance start early in primary school.
- Over 60% of children with at least one day of non-attendance per week whose language backgrounds were recorded were from non-English speaking backgrounds (n=313). (Please note: this does not include the 149 children whose language background was not identified).

Combined, the school attendance data shows that **648 students attended school irregularly** by missing an average of one or more days per week of school. Because only half of the primary schools in Hume provided data, doubling the number of children found to be attending primary school irregularly provides a closer estimate of the total number of children attending primary school irregularly in Hume. In raw numbers this would equate to 1,296 children.

In addition:

- Three children were expelled or asked to leave government schools in 2012
- A total of 22 students from the 21 schools that provided data were in part-time or dual enrolment.
- Patterns of non-attendance reported by survey and focus group participants included:
 - Chronic tardiness and leaving early were identified as path ways to regular and unexplained absences;
 - There was some agreement that the issue of absenteeism was escalating;
 - While truancy did occur in some schools, it was not considered a common form of absenteeism; and
 - Complete disengagement was uncommon during the primary years (no child was reported as un-contactable).

¹ As the exact number of children enrolled was not available for many of the primary schools in Hume, this number is an estimate.
Data sourced from <http://www.myschool.edu.au>

Factors contributing to disengagement and supporting engagement

Multiple complex and interacting factors contributing to school disengagement were identified by focus group, survey and interview participants. See table below:

	Factors contributing to disengagement	Factors supporting engagement
Community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lack of affordable and practical transport options 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> School bus reduces the burden on parents and increased child independence Support services contributing to the development of relationships between families, schools and community Local policy frameworks can guide and motivate action
School	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Punitive and arduous school policy and processes for responding to non-attendance act as a deterrent for children and families Early benchmarking and lack of flexibility in the curriculum Lack of support and information during school transitions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> School policy and process focusing on encouraging attendance. Communication between schools and families and development of connection to the school Offering additional support and information to families around school transitions e.g. parent forum/ discussion session The role of teacher in developing the relationship between teacher, parent and child as well as acting as an advocate for children's needs Engaging school activities worked to encourage timely arrival at school as well as attendance throughout the day
Family	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The complexities associated with disadvantaged families and lack of support within the school system to support these families. Parents having a poor experience of education or lack of experience engaging in educational institutions Parent capacity to engage and support education hindered by parent mental illness, organisational difficulties, parenting practices, separated families Family holidays result in children being absent from school for long periods Cultural practices conflicting with school attendance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provision of support to families that is tailored to their needs. Parent involvement the child's education
Child	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mental health issues including school refusal, separation anxiety and childhood trauma Negative school experiences such as bullying Late nights and fatigue increase tardiness/ non-attendance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Friends and support networks at school Experiencing enjoyment and success at school Families valuing education

Recommendations

Recommendations have been developed based on feedback provided by stakeholders throughout the consultations. Recommendations are proposed for the community/ service provider level, the school level, the family level and the student level. Each of these tiers contains broad, macro-level recommendations to support systemic change, with micro-level examples provided in some instances for consideration and guidance in the development of specific courses of action.

It is suggested that the Hume Middle Years Working Group be responsible for advocating for and driving the recommendations contained in this report. The Hume Parent Advisory Group and Students'/ Children's Advisory Group (if re-established, as per recommendation 13 of this report) could also play a role in the implementation of recommendations from this report.

Community/service provider focused

6.1.1 Data collection and use

Recommendation 1: Resource and make available the regular collection of clear and consistent school attendance data to better monitor patterns of school disengagement.

6.1.2 Policies, framework and strategy review and implementation

Recommendation 2: Implement a local response to school disengagement using best practice and policy frameworks

Recommendation 3: Implement recommendations of the *Under 16s* report

Recommendation 4: Advocate for implementation of recommendations in the *Building the Scaffolding* report

6.1.3 Collaboration

Recommendation 5: To obtain partnerships and agreements for coordinated reforms across schools

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School level focused

6.2.1 School transitions

Recommendation 6: Strengthen transition points

6.2.2 Resourcing

Recommendation 7: Build capacity of schools

Recommendation 8: Improve and align processes across schools to target disengagement

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Family level focused

6.3.1 Empowerment and engagement

Recommendation 9: Increase parent empowerment

Recommendation 10: Increase parent engagement

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Student level focused

6.4.1 Empowerment and engagement

Recommendation 11: Increase student empowerment

Recommendation 12: Improve student engagement

Recommendation 13: Reinststate Children's Advisory Group in Hume

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Introduction

In 2012, the Hume Whittlesea Local Learning and Employment Network (HWLLEN) commissioned the Murdoch Childrens Research Institute Centre for Community Child Health at the Royal Children's Hospital (CCCH) to undertake the *Our Tweenies: Are they flying along or falling through cracks?* Research Project (Our Tweenies), with funding from Communities for Children, FaHCSIA.

The project aims to determine the impact of and causes for school disengagement among children aged 6 to 12 years in the Hume City as well as propose recommendations that will help maintain or re-engage children and families in the education sector.

1.1 Context

The Our Tweenies project developed from the findings of a research project undertaken in 2012 - The Hume Under 16 Project: *Out of School, Out of Sight* - which investigated school disengagement in the high school years and found this was linked to school disengagement in the primary school years.

Major findings from the *Under 16 Project* included:

- 4.5% (215 young people) are missing one day of school each week on average;
- 1.3% (68 young people) are missing more than two days of school each week; and
- As a result, a total of 5.8% (283 young people) in Hume are missing from school at least an average of one day a week (or 40 days per year) which is more than three times the average student.

From information provided by services working with disengaged youth, the *Under 16 Project* found an additional number of young people under 16 years were completely disengaged from school. Specifically:

- 172 young people in the age group were reported by agencies operating in Hume as having been in contact during 2011;
- Of these 172 young people, 112 (2.4 % of the school enrolment) were reported as not attending school;
- The young people accessing the services were predominantly male and from English-speaking backgrounds; and
- Government schools reported having expelled 26 young people under the age of 16, and a further 3 had been still enrolled but were unable to be contacted.

A range of complex factors were found to contribute to school disengagement for youth in Hume City. These included:

- Expulsion or asked to leave school;
- Transitioning from primary to secondary school;
- High family mobility;
- Disability;
- Ineffective parenting and family dysfunction;
- Negative school experience of parents, therefore placing less importance on their child's attendance and engagement with school;
- Young person remaining home to act as a carer to family member; and
- On-line bullying.

Due to the limited services available to disconnected youth under the age of 16, for example, ineligibility to Youth Allowance, inability to gain legal employment (unless granted exemption at age 15), inability to qualify for enrolment into VCAL programs, and lack of available support services, the lack of options contributed to the invisibility of this group of disengaged young people.

In total the Hume *Under 16 Project* reported that there exists a total of 395 known young people under the age of 16 in Hume that are completely disengaged or at risk-of disengagement from school. These young people who are marginally engaged or have become completely disengaged need some form of access to alternative learning options rather than what is being offered at conventional school. Though young people have reported a preference for less formal education settings, flexible options, and hands-on learning, the number of mainstream secondary schools has a limited capacity to respond to the needs of these students. Furthermore, it has been recognised that these young people require a holistic approach to re-engagement which also includes acting upon their welfare needs as these students often carry a myriad of obstacles that effect their ability to learn, including family issues, drug and alcohol issues, mental issues, and intergenerational low education attainment and unemployment.

Given the significance of these findings, it was decided that further investigation into when and how patterns of non-attendance are established in Hume was required in order to develop appropriate and timely interventions.

The *Our Tweenies* project is influenced by the 2008 National Family–School Partnerships Framework, which recognises the primary role families play in their child’s education and highlights the importance of a collaborative approach to enhance student engagement and learning:

“Research demonstrates that effective schools have high levels of parental and community involvement. This involvement is strongly related to improved student learning, attendance and behaviour. Family involvement can have a major impact, regardless of the social or cultural background of the family².”

Accordingly, the project has been interested in scoping the level of parent and community engagement and participation in the education sector as well as child and school factors.

1.2 Rationale

The project arises in recognition of well-established research demonstrating that once children fall behind in their learning, they are likely to remain behind³. North American economist and Nobel prize winner James Heckman argues that it is more effective to implement preventative measures and/or

interventions early in a child’s life, before problems become entrenched and intractable. In addition, Heckman has identified an ever-diminishing return on investment in human capital, with the greatest cost-benefit ratio occurring from investment in the early years. The earlier the investment, the greater the potential to increase income earned, taxes paid, national productivity and Gross Domestic Product (GDP) by improving the skills of the workforce, reducing poverty and strengthening global competitiveness. By contrast, as has been noted by the Victorian Auditor General:

“Students who are absent from school are at the greatest risk of dropping out of school early, becoming long-term unemployed, being caught in the poverty trap, depending on welfare and being involved in the justice system.⁴”

The *Our Tweenies* project acknowledges that understanding the occurrence of disengagement during primary school is especially significant given that the middle years, particularly the transition from primary to secondary school, are often a crucial period of school disengagement for young people⁵.

“The primary to secondary school transition represents a weak link in the transition process for vulnerable and partially disengaged young people. In some instances, students commence secondary school but have started to completely disengage within a matter of weeks or months before they form any solid relationship with staff or other students. The existing mechanisms that link these students and families in the crossover from primary to secondary are insufficient to maintain their involvement.⁶”

Providing further impetus for the *Our Tweenies* project, a significant amount of research has demonstrated the negative impact disadvantage has on educational achievement and engagement in Australia:

“Disadvantage amongst young people is both a predictor and a result of low engagement and achievement at school.⁷”

The findings and recommendations proposed in the 2013 *Building the Scaffolding: Strengthening Support for Young People in Victoria* report align with those from the *Our Tweenies* project⁸.

³ Heckman, J.J. (2013). *Return on Investment: Cost vs. Benefits*. Retrieved from: www.heckmanequation.org

⁴ Auditor General Victoria (2004) *Managing school attendance*. Melbourne: Auditor General Victoria

⁵ Butler, H., Bond, L., Drew, S., Krelle, A., Seal, I. (2005). *Doing It Differently: Improving Young People’s Engagement with School*. Melbourne: Brotherhood of St Laurence

⁶ *The Hume Under 16 Project: Out of School, Out of Sight*.

⁷ Black, R. *Crossing the Bridge: Overcoming entrenched disadvantage through student-centred learning*. Retrieved from: <http://www.fya.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2009/05/black2007crossingthebridge.pdf>

⁸ Victorian Council of Social Service & Youth Affairs Council of Victoria (2013) *Building the Scaffolding: strengthening support for young people in Victoria*.

The report identifies a lack of specialist services for young people, critical service and policy gaps for the 'middle years' (children aged 8 to 12 years), and ongoing funding challenges for services and programs catering to young people in Victoria. In identifying solutions or actions to address youth support service needs, the *Building the Scaffolding* report advocates for systemic change:

“
The provision of a holistic system of support for young people... built from a number of supports including families, social networks, schools, youth services and other community services.
”

The report suggests five key elements critical to creating a strong service system for Victoria's young people. These include:

- Support across the life course;
- Early intervention at every age and stage;
- Services working collaboratively;
- Accessible and inclusive services; and
- Supporting improved outcomes.

A number of the report's recommendations are relevant to the *Our Tweenies* project. For example, the report recommends the Victorian Government take a life course approach to service provision for young people that incorporates policy, programs and partnerships inclusive of and targeted to the middle years. In addition, the report advocates for the strengthening of early intervention through effective and flexible education and the resourcing of community sector partnerships. These recommendations provide direction and further impetus for the recommendations of *Our Tweenies* research.

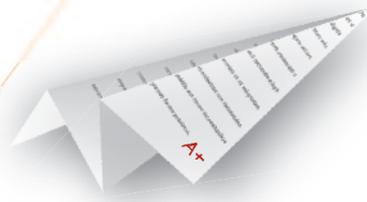
Lastly, the *Our Tweenies* project recognises there has been significant Commonwealth investment towards improving outcomes for families and children in Hume City. Hume City has been identified as a priority area for the Commonwealth Government under the place-based initiative, *Better Futures, Local Solutions*. This initiative aims to support families develop skills, find employment and increase opportunities for children in the area, with local priorities focused on improving “transition for early school leavers and disengaged youth through early intervention, mentoring and better connection to education and employment”. Similarly, the *Family Support Program* and *Building Australia's Future Workforce Initiative* together fund *Communities for Children* (Broadmeadows and Hume) to deliver placed based early intervention and prevention programs for vulnerable families.

Profile of the City of Hume

Hume City is a Local Government Area (LGA) partially located on the urban-rural fringe north-west of Melbourne. It has an area of 503 square kilometres and is bounded by the shires of Macedon Ranges, Melton and Mitchell and the Cities of Whittlesea, Moreland and Brimbank. It includes the disadvantaged neighbourhoods of Broadmeadows, Campbellfield, Coolaroo, Dallas, Jacana and Meadow Heights. The city is a vibrant multicultural centre, with many strong and well-established community groups that are articulate, skilled and active in working for and with their communities.

ABS 2011 Census data indicated the total residential population of Hume City is 167,560. Children and youth make up higher proportions of the population compared to benchmark trends in each age category. For example, children and youth aged 0 to 15 years make up 22.7% of the population, compared to greater Victoria at 18.6%.

It should be noted that transience and homelessness are issues affecting the accuracy of population estimations and projections. Along with other issues related to socio-economic disadvantage, such as high levels of unemployment, homelessness has been identified as a significant issue in the Hume area that is closely linked to domestic violence and Child Protection involvement.



2.1 Cultural Diversity

Hume City has high cultural diversity with over 140 nationalities speaking 125 languages other than English. Residents born overseas represent 32.2% of the population with 27.9% from non-English speaking backgrounds. Dominant migrant groups were born in Iraq, Turkey and India (ABS 2011 Census data).

Table 1. Age structure of Hume City

Age	Hume (C) %		Victoria %		Australia %	
0-4 years	12,586	7.5	344,733	6.4	1,421,050	6.6
5-9 years	12,522	7.5	326,121	6.1	1,351,921	6.3
10-14 years	12,976	7.7	327,939	6.1	1,371,054	6.4
15-19 years	13,123	7.8	345,339	6.5	1,405,798	6.5

Source: 2011 ABS Census data

Table 2. SEIFA index of disadvantage - Hume City small areas

Hume City's small areas and benchmark areas	
Area	2011 index
Dallas	770.2
Airport - Rural	1,048.10
Attwood	1,066.40
Broadmeadows	771.8
Campbellfield - Somerton	811.7
Coolaroo	804.6
Craigieburn	990.1
Gladstone Park	985.3
Greenvale	1,059.40
Jacana	889.7
Meadow Heights	821.3
Roxburgh Park	924.1
Sunbury	1,039.00
Tullamarine	973.2
Victoria	1,009.60
Westmeadows	992.6
Hume City	951.8
Greater Melbourne	1,020.30
Australia	1,002.00

Source: Hume Council (2013). *Hume City Community Profile: SEIFA - disadvantage (SEIFA by small areas)*. Retrieved from <http://profile.id.com.au/hume/seifa-disadvantage?es=1>

2.2 Disadvantage in Hume

The Socio-Economic Index for Areas (SEIFA) is a relative measure of disadvantage produced by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS). It uses ABS Census data and serves as a proxy measure of Socio-Economic Status (SES) for areas of various levels or sizes. The 2011 SEIFA index of disadvantage for Hume is shown in Table 2.



In the most recent⁹ SEIFA IRSD (Index of Relative Socio-economic Disadvantage), Hume was ranked as the third most disadvantaged LGA¹⁰ in the Greater Melbourne area¹¹. However, there is great variation in SIEFA scores across suburbs and other small areas levels in Hume: from well below the state average to above the state average (ABS, 2006). The lower the SEIFA score, the greater level of disadvantage.

2.3 High Refugee Numbers

Of all migrants eligible for settlement services in 2013 to 2014, Hume is expecting 2,797 total arrivals of a humanitarian nature, with 374 being between the age of 6 and 11 years. The majority of these are expected to settle in Broadmeadows.

Table 3. Hume City Migration Stream 2008-2013

LAG	Family	Humanitarian	Skilled	Total
Hume City	3,841	3,005	3,429	10,280

Source: Department of Immigration and Citizenship (settlement reporting), 2013

Table 4. Hume City: Migrant age on arrival 2008-2013

Age of Arrival	Number	Percentage
0-05	1,005	11.1%
Primary school age (06-11)	694	7.6%
12-15	414	5.6%
16-17	204	2.2%
High school age total (12-17)	618	7.8%
Children and adolescents total (00-17)	2,317	25.5%
18-24	1,672	18.4%
25-34	2,848	31.4%
35-44	1,237	13.6%
45-54	488	5.4%
55-64	320	3.5%
65+ 192	2.1%	
Total	9,074	100%

Source: Department of Immigration and Citizenship (settlement reporting), 2013

⁹ ABS. SEIFA (2011)

¹⁰ Caution is required here as the ranking system is relative (for example, all of the top 10 disadvantaged areas have similar levels of socio-economic disadvantage)

¹¹ There are a total of 31 LGAs in the Greater Melbourne Statistical Division

2.4 Indigenous Population

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Census population of Hume City in 2011 was 1,059, with children aged 5 to 11 years making up 16.2% of the Indigenous population.

2.5 Level of Educational Achievement in Hume

ABS census data for 2011 indicates that Hume City has lower than average levels of post-compulsory educational attainment when compared to Melbourne Statistical Division (see figure 1).

Hume City educational attainment

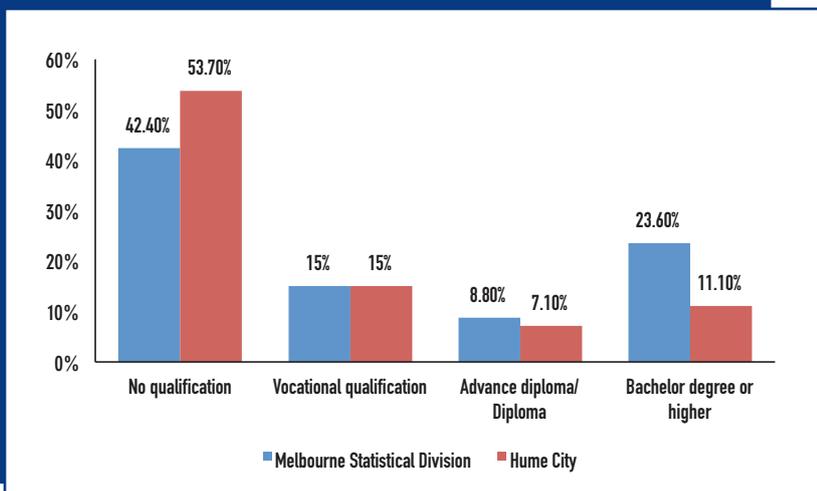


Figure 1. Hume City educational attainment



2.6 Australian Early Development Index

The 2011 Australian Early Development Index results indicated 27.2% of children from Hume City were developmentally vulnerable on one or more domains and 14.3% were developmentally vulnerable of two or more domains. As can be seen this is below the state and national average.

Table 5. 2011 AEDI results for Hume

	Proportion of children developmentally vulnerable (%)					
	Physical Health & Wellbeing	Social Competence	Language and Cognitive Skills	Communication and General Knowledge	Vulnerable on 1 or more domains	Vulnerable on 2 or more domains
Australia	9.3	9.3	6.8	9.0	22.0	10.8
Victoria	7.8	8.1	6.1	8.0	19.5	9.5
Hume	11.4	11.3	10.4	13.3	27.2	14.3

Source: AEDI at <http://www.rch.org.au/aedi/>

When compared to 2009 data, children had improved on the domains of emotional maturity, social competence and communication skills and general knowledge; however, the domains of language and cognitive skills and physical health and wellbeing had not improved.

Overall the AEDI data show children in Hume are starting school dis-advantaged and vulnerable in a number of areas.

3. Methodology

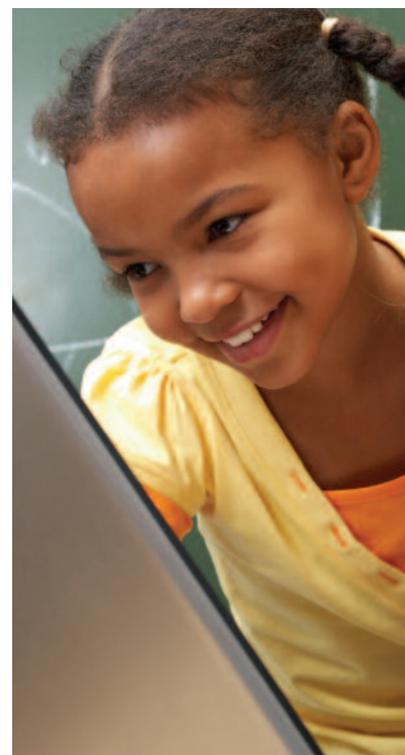
To canvass the impact of and causes for disengagement, a series of consultations with a range of stakeholders was undertaken in early 2013. The consultation process included:

- Focus groups with:
 - o Principals (n=8);
 - o Parents (n=5); and
 - o Local service providers working with families and children (n=24).
- An online survey open to staff at all local primary schools and local service providers working with families and children (see figure 2 for response rate); and
- A series of separate interviews with eight children, conducted by local agencies already working the child and family.

To canvass the extent of disengagement in Hume City, all primary schools in Hume City were asked to provide de-identified data on the number of students aged 6 to 12 years at risk of disengagement in the form of attendance rates. A total of 21 schools provided attendance data,

representing 50% of all Hume primary schools. A total of 25 schools contributed to the research overall, through the provision of data or participation in a focus group/survey, representing 59% of Hume primary schools.

To scope the number of children completely disengaged from primary school as well as demographic factors contributing to disengagement, data was also requested from a range of agencies and services. While the North-Western Regional Office, Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) provided regional attendance data, the majority of local agencies and the Department of Human Services (DHS) were unable to provide requested data for reasons of data unavailability or privacy concerns. The data and findings discussed below therefore largely apply to children and families who are ‘flying along’ in the education system, rather than those who are ‘disappearing through the cracks’.



School & service provider survey response rate (n=41)

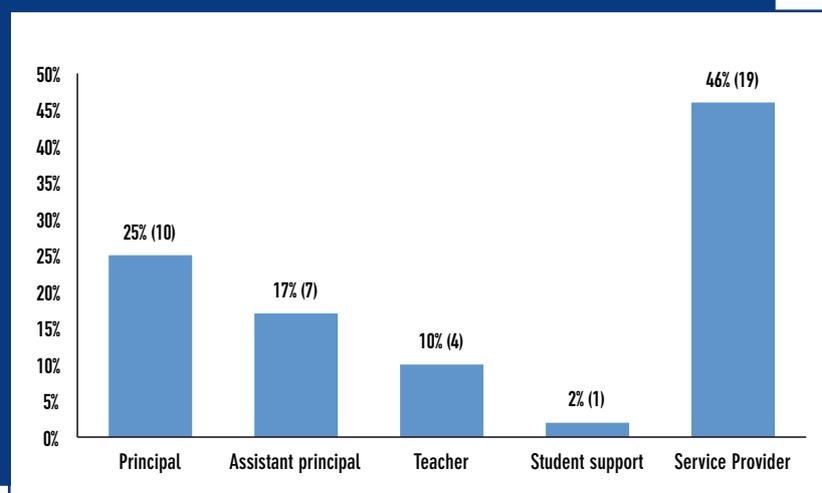


Figure 2. School & service provider survey response rate (n=41)

4. Findings

4.1 Attendance at School in Hume City

While school disengagement is a multifaceted construct, a key indicator of the problem is poor school attendance. Occasional short-term absences that can be explained, such as those due to illness, are expected and rarely of concern. However, non-attendance in the form of chronic, habitual and unexplained absences is alarming, as it disadvantages the student both socially and academically; impacting on long term outcomes (for more information see <http://www.education.vic.gov.au>).

Given the high rate of school disengagement reported in the *Hume Under 16* Report, in addition to anecdotal evidence suggesting patterns of non-attendance are established during primary school, the current research has aimed to determine the rate of school non-attendance in Hume City.

It is also important to consider variations of non-attendance. For example, “**truancy**” occurs when the student attempts to conceal the non-attendance from parents and is more common in the secondary years. By comparison, “**absenteeism**” is non-attendance that is condoned or allowed by the parent, including school refusal, general unexplained absences, absence due to family holidays, tardiness/lateness, and leaving school early.

Understanding the motivations behind and factors contributing to school absences is important when

considering appropriate responses to the problem. The *Our Tweenies* project has therefore enquired about all forms of non-attendance, to ensure the issue is accurately scoped.

4.1.1 School attendance data

There are a total of 42 primary schools in Hume; 28 are government and 14 are private, catholic or specialist schools. In 2012 a total of 16,371 children are enrolled in primary schools in Hume¹².

In order to assess the extent of school disengagement in the primary years, data on non-attendance from 2012 was provided by 21 local primary schools. This represents 50% of the primary schools in Hume City. The researchers requested non-attendance data from schools including the initial, date of birth and language spoken at home of children:

- Who attended school less than three days a week (more than 40% non-attendance);
- Who attended school less than two days a week (between 20% and 40% non-attendance);
- Who had been expelled;
- Who were uncontactable; and,
- Children who were enrolled part-time.

Anecdotal evidence from schools suggested the attendance data requested was burdensome and time-consuming to compile because schools had not recorded or collated the details requested by the *Our Tweenies* project prior to the request; as such, there was lack of aggregate or analysed data available and limited resources with which to collect or compile information. The

form of attendance data and level of detail requested by the *Our Tweenies* project was therefore a barrier to schools providing data on attendance rates. Please note; two schools provided attendance data from January to June 2013 only.

The data collected from the 21 primary schools showed:

- A significant number of children aged 6 to 12 are not attending school regularly, with **525 students missing on average one day to two days of school a week and an additional 123 missing on average more than two days of school a week**. As exactly half the schools in Hume City provided data, doubling these figures provides an estimate for absenteeism across all schools in the area. This translates to an estimated **6.4% of primary students in Hume City missing one to two days of school a week and an additional 1.5% of students missing more than two days a week of school, or an estimated combined total of around 8% of children attending school irregularly across the Hume area**.
- Over a quarter of the children with at least one day of non-attendance per week (**n=166**) are aged between **6 and 8 years old**, indicating that patterns of non-attendance start early in primary school.
- Over 60% of children with at least one day of non-attendance per week whose language backgrounds were recorded were from non-English speaking backgrounds (**n=313**). (Please note: this does not include the 149 children whose language background was not identified).

¹² As the exact number of children enrolled was not available for many of the primary schools in Hume, this number is an estimate.
Data sourced from <http://www.myschool.edu.au>

Table 6. Non-attendance more than two days per week (2012/ 2013)

School	Aged 6 – 8 years	Total aged under 12	English spoken at home
School A	4	6	2 out of 6
School B*	Not reported	0	Not reported
School C	2	7	5 out of 5
School D	Not reported	48	Not reported
School E	2	4	3 out of 4
School F	3	6	2 out of 6
School G	0	0	0
School H	2	4	4 out of 4
School I	7	12	4 out of 12
School J	4	9	2 out of 9
School K	1	2	2 out of 2
School L	0	0	0
School M	Not reported	2	2 out of 2
School N*	Not reported	1	Not reported
School O	0	1	0 out of 1
School P	1	4	4 out of 4
School Q	8	10	0 out of 10
School R	4	7	6 out of 7
School S	0	0	0
School T**	0	0	0
School U**	0	0	0
Overall total	38	123	34 out of 72 (51 not accounted for)

* Data reflects attendance rates from January – June 2013 rather than throughout 2012

** School is private or specialist school

Table 7. Non-attendance than one to two days per week (2012/ 2013)

School	Aged 6 – 8 years	Total aged under 12	English spoken at home
School A	5	16	6 out of 16
School B*	Not reported	8	Not reported
School C	13	36	22 out of 35
School D	Not reported	166	Not reported
School E	7	19	2 out of 19
School F	6	15	5 out of 15
School G	7	25	15 out of 25
School H	12	27	26 out of 27
School I	30	69	11 out of 69
School J	3	14	3 out of 14
School K	10	36	26 out of 36
School L	0	2	2 out of 2
School M	7	18	10 out of 18
School N*	Not reported	13	Not reported
School O	14	25	4 out of 25
School P	4	14	13 out of 14
School Q	6	8	3 out of 8
School R	0	0	0
School S	2	6	Not reported
School T*	0	2	2 out of 2
School U**	2	6	Not reported
Overall total	128	525	150 out of 427 (98 not reported)

* Data reflects attendance rates from January – June 2013 rather than throughout 2012

** School is private or specialist school

Responses to the survey were consistent with the above findings, with all schools and service providers indicating non-attendance was at least 'somewhat' of an issue (see figure 2). Respondents commented that there is a core group of students that are consistently absent from school.

4.1.2 Expulsions

Of the 21 primary schools that provided data, three schools reported that one child from their school had been expelled or asked to leave. Each of these three different children was male, from an English speaking background, aged between the age of nine and twelve years and attending a government school.

4.1.3 Un-contactable

No school reported that any child or family was un-contactable; however, one school commented when providing attendance data:

“ 25% of our families at any given time are difficult to contact – mobile phone providers/ numbers continually change. ”

4.1.4 Part-time enrolment

A total of 22 students from the 21 schools that provided data were enrolled part-time or in a dual enrolment program.

Service providers explained that children with special needs or behavioural problems were most likely to be enrolled part-time or dual-enrolled with another school. One service provider attributed part-time enrolment to students enrolled in English Language Schools as well as their mainstream school.

4.1.5 Patterns of non-attendance

Focus group and survey participants were asked to report on the extent to which non-attendance was an issue for children aged six to twelve years and to identify any common patterns of non-attendance that occur.

While part-time enrolment was not considered an issue for the majority of respondents, **absenteeism was perceived as significant and problematic for children of all ages.** Common forms of absenteeism included tardiness and lateness as well as missing full days of school. Principals and service providers identified chronic tardiness and leaving early as pathways to regular and unexplained non-attendance. There was some agreement that the issue of absenteeism was escalating, with children less likely to be late/leave early and more likely to not attend at all. Although truancy did occur in some schools, it was not considered a common form of non-attendance.

Several schools reported that children were often absent for several days or even weeks in a row; however, for some schools the issue revolved around students either sporadically or consistently missing one day a week of school. Principals reported **absenteeism** occurred

across all grade levels however **tended to peak in grades 5 and 6.** Schools agreed that complete disengagement was uncommon during the primary years. Some principals noted that their school lost contact completely with around two students a year.

“ Children pressure the parent to pick them up at lunch time. ”
- Principal

“ Currently we have a strong focus on 'Getting to school on time'... Also we need to better educate our families about the importance of getting to school on time for improved learning. ”
- School staff member

“ We have a number of families that bring their children to school up to an hour after the school day starts. ”
- Service provider

The extent to which tardiness/ lateness is perceived as common in primary schools in Hume according to survey respondents (n=41)

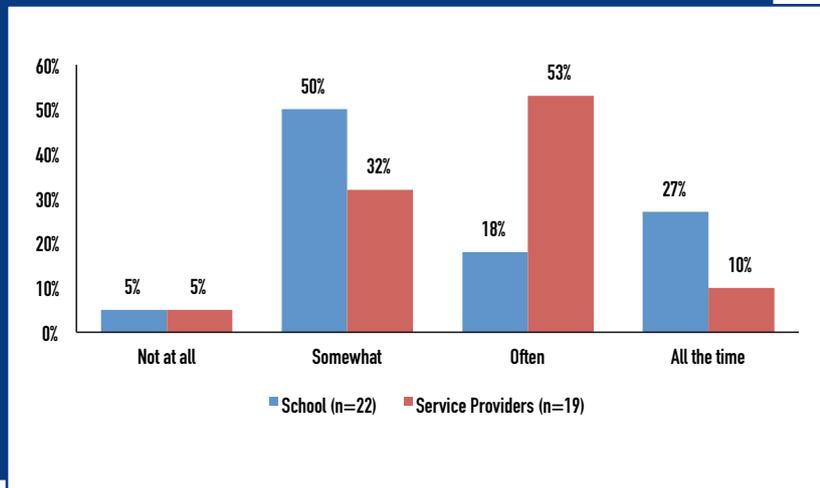


Figure 3. The extent to which tardiness/ lateness is perceived as common in primary schools in Hume according to survey respondents (n=41)

IMPORTANT FINDINGS REGARDING PRIMARY SCHOOL ATTENDANCE IN HUME CITY

- An estimated 8% of Hume primary school children attend school irregularly
- Chronic tardiness and leaving early are pathways to regular and unexplained absences
- Long-term absences for weeks or months at a time are a significant issue for schools
- Absenteeism occurs across all ages, but tends to peak in Grades five and six
- More than 25% of Hume primary school children with regular absences are aged six to eight years old
- Data collection on absenteeism is currently inconsistent and burdensome for schools

4.2 Factors contributing to disengagement

Focus group, survey and interview participants identified multiple complex and interacting factors contributing to school disengagement. While principals, service providers and parents consistently reported a number of factors, the importance and relevance of each factor varied considerably according to each group.

Causes of school disengagement and absenteeism according to survey respondents (n=41)

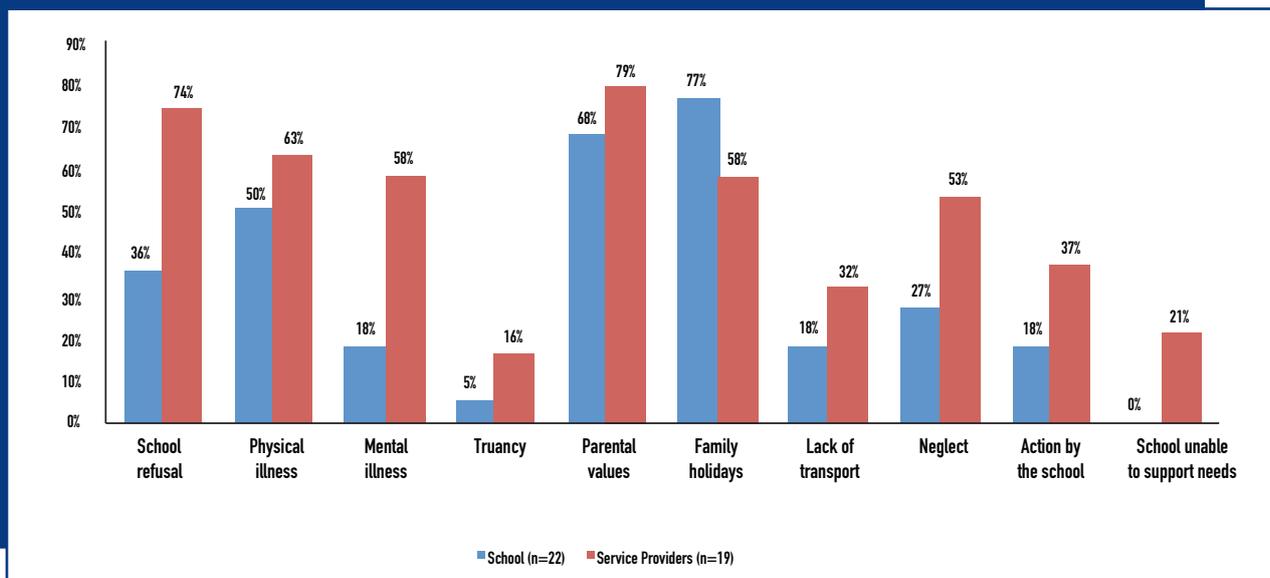


Figure 4. Causes of school disengagement and absenteeism according to survey respondents (n=41)

Given the widespread occurrence of non-attendance in Hume, all principals and service providers agreed non-attendance had an impact on many levels, however concern was predominately focused on the impact for the child. This included social, educational and developmental outcomes that are associated with disengagement:

“
If absent for long periods when travelling overseas, this can lead to learning difficulties when they return and subsequent disengagement
– Service provider”

“
Students suffer as they are more unsettled and miss out on crucial instruction. – Service provider”

“
When the child is away for long periods of time, the child has problems with social interaction, they become loners – Principal”

“
If there is something wrong at school and it's not talked about and addressed, the child ends up at secondary school disengaged – Service provider”

From the perspective of schools, non-attendance has impacts for the whole school, including administration, teachers and students. Principals expressed concern in regards to staffing and funding, reporting that a lack of enrolments and inconsistent attendance impacts their ability to employ and manage staff.

Teachers and school staff reported absenteeism and lateness:

- Disrupted student learning, as teachers have to repeat instructions and late comers disrupt class on arrival;
- Resulted in children missing important social, physical and academic opportunities;
- Impacted student connectedness to learning; and
- Caused students to fall behind and lack certain skills, making it difficult to manage and organise the class.

While most service providers reported that school absenteeism had no impact for their own work with families, some respondents reported an increased workload due to meetings with schools to address the issue as well as increased responsibility to support the child's learning. Some reported that this work sat outside of their job description and was beyond their capacity.

Although part-time enrollment is uncommon, service providers reported that when it occurs, it requires considerable advocacy, organisation and coordination on behalf of the service, parents and teachers to ensure its success. Despite these impacts, many service providers agreed this was a beneficial approach for some children.

4.2.1 Community level factors

Transport

Physically getting the child to school was reported to be a consistent and key challenge to attendance identified by principals, service providers and parents. This was due to:

- The logistics of dropping multiple children off at different schools and on time;
- Lack of affordable transport options, e.g. parents' inability to afford petrol for the car, or no school bus/public transport in proximity;
- Parent capacity and illness rendering them unable to drive their child to school; and
- Work/employment demands.

“ We picked [the child] up from school every day for a term. We tried to encourage the parent to get up and give this child breakfast and be ready for school – Principal ”

“ Most families drive their children, giving precedence to the older child in secondary school. We need to better educate our families about the importance of getting [all children] to school on time for improved learning. – Principal ”

“

Parents not having access to public transport or a private vehicle to get children to school if the school is not within walking distance. – Service provider ”

4.2.2 School level factors

School policy

While school policy is put in place to ensure attendance is monitored, stakeholders perceived many school policies and processes responding to absenteeism as barriers to school attendance. Principals, parents and service providers all agreed in particular that punitive approaches and processes relating to non-attendance deterred children from attending school. An example provided was that children who do not have a positive perception of school may feel uncomfortable or anxious about needing to get a 'late slip', and so will not attend at all once they are late.

Another policy that some considered ineffective is a letter being sent to the family from the regional director explaining the legal requirements of the family in regards to school attendance. Principals and service providers reported parents tended to perceive this approach as punitive and did not respond well to feedback in this form.

Service providers were concerned the school system had a poor understanding of family circumstances and responded inappropriately to families in regards to absenteeism. Service providers explained that some parents felt interactions with school were scary and intimidating, and as such perceived attempts to re-engage them as punitive.

“
How do you implement the policy for kids that don't fit? – Principal
”

“
Punitive processes create barriers for families to engage and children to attend – Service provider
”

Curriculum

School staff noted that the provision of an interesting and stimulating curriculum in schools was important for retaining children's engagement. Parents also noted that a lack of interest in the curriculum offered was a contributing factor to school disengagement:

“
Doesn't like the work at school, not interesting – Parent
”

In addition, staff noted that early benchmarking (such as through the NAPLAN in grades 3 and 5) put pressure on children to succeed academically, reduced the amount of flexibility and dynamic, interesting content in the curriculum and accordingly contributed to school disengagement for some students. Accordingly, the focus on benchmarking was perceived as a barrier to some children experiencing success and enjoyment at school.

“
Kids need to feel success and the curriculum sometimes does not cater for it – Principal
”

Some parents spoke of how they were keen for their children to study specific subjects such as their home language as this was important in their culture, but reported that their children's disinterest in the subject had a negative impact on their school engagement. This may reflect a broader issue related to tensions between parents and their children in maintaining cultural traditions and assimilating with local (Australian) cultural norms.

School transitions

The *Our Tweenies* project did not explore school engagement as a result of experiences during the transition to primary school in grade prep, due to the focus of the project on children in the middle and upper primary school years, when school disengagement is more likely to become a major issue. However, given the developmental vulnerabilities highlighted in the AEDI results section of this report for

children on the cusp of entering primary school, as well as research showing that educational trajectories are substantially established and consolidated in the first five years of life¹³, this is an issue worth exploring further in future.

The transition from primary school to secondary school was explored in some detail within the context of this report. Although this transition point may be considered less relevant to school disengagement during the primary school years, due to it marking the end of primary school, the impetus for the *Our Tweenies* project is the contention that serious school disengagement in the secondary school years commonly has its roots in school disengagement in the primary school years. *As such, the experience of school transition from primary school to high school is a critical factor in the trajectory of educational experience.*

Parents cited poor experiences in relation to the transition to high school as a key issue of concern for them in regards to their child's educational experience. *Specifically, parents reported that they felt ill equipped to support their child's transition to secondary school; that orientation opportunities were insufficient or lacked quality; and that there is a lack of quality secondary schools available in Hume.* One parent from a CALD background spoke of experiencing additional difficulty negotiating the transition to high school, given their lack of experience with the Australian and local school systems. Parents also reported that the close proximity of one of the local secondary schools to a major shopping centre encouraged truancy. Service providers agreed that there was poor communication from schools with families and services around key transition times.

¹³ Heckman. Return on Investment.

4.2.3 Family level factors

Feedback from schools, service providers and parents suggested that family plays a crucial role in school engagement and attendance during the middle years. According to this feedback, family factors vary on a case-by-case basis and can result in competing priorities and needs that impact parents' capacity to support their children's education. Family level factors are explored below.

Disadvantage

Schools and service providers reported that children from vulnerable and disadvantaged families were most at risk for school disengagement. Common vulnerabilities were noted to be:

- Low socioeconomic status;
- Refugee or newly arrived;
- Transience;
- Homelessness; and
- Neglect.

Vulnerabilities were reported to impact the parent's ability to provide children with basic needs such as food, shelter and clothing, let alone transport to get the child to school and on time. Furthermore, given the history of trauma that some of these families have experienced, children who were attending school often had behavioural and mental health issues that limited their ability to fully and effectively engage with school and to attend consistently.

Principals spoke of a lack of resources within schools and appropriate external community support services to support such families, which contributed to their children's non-attendance and disengagement. In addition, it was noted that such families often do not have the skills, language or knowledge to access the support services that are available to them.

“
Parents don't have the money for petrol. – Principal
”

“
If parents had a poor experience of education themselves and/or are not educated – they tend to value education less. – Service provider
”

“
Parents can't afford lunches and are embarrassed to send children to school without lunch, so keep them home – Service provider
”

Minimal experience engaging with educational institutions, especially for CALD and newly arrived groups who have not experienced similar services and institutions, was also reported to be a barrier to parents being able to engage with and support their children's education. For example, one parent told of how her own education in another country was so vastly different to that of her child's in Australia, that it impeded her ability to support their educational experience.

“
New to school in Australia, difficult to simultaneously settle into community in a new country and settle into a new school – Parent
”

Parental capacity

A number of family level issues were reported to impact on parents' capacity to engage with and support their child's education.

Parental mental health was reported as a key factor hindering parents' ability to support school engagement and attendance. Furthermore, both schools and service providers gave anecdotal evidence of parents keeping their children home for comfort and support when they themselves were feeling isolated, ill or depressed.

Parental disorganisation was reported to hinder children getting ready for school effectively and on time. Examples provided included difficulty getting the child to school dressed appropriately and fed; juggling the differing needs of multiple children at different schools; and negotiating child behaviour problems.

Parent's experience of education

Schools and service providers agreed that school disengagement was often an intergenerational issue; with parents' own experiences of education having a significant impact on their ability to support their child's education. Parents' poor experience of education or lack of education was also associated with a compromised understanding of the importance of education.

“

Sometimes parents have difficulties implementing morning routines adequately – Service provider

”

“

It's about what's going on at home. – Principal

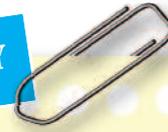
”

Other factors associated with parent capacity included:

- Dysfunctional families, such as those experiencing family conflict and domestic violence;
- Separated families and single parent families that were potentially at greater risk of disengagement, although this was noted to depend on the family; and
- Parenting practices and a lack of parental discipline.

Risks of disengagement were noted to be increased for children whose families are experiencing a number of the above issues, particularly if the child is also experiencing behavioural problems or school refusal problems.

CASE STUDY: BARRY



Barry is a ten-year-old boy, born in Australia and living with his mother. Barry reports to enjoy school but his attendance at school has been poor since the beginning of primary school. He currently attends school one-to-two days every week, sometimes less depending on family circumstances.

Barry's mother attributes Barry's low school attendance to her general lack of motivation, lack of structure and routines within the home, sleeping difficulties for her and a reliance on Barry to wake her in the mornings as some of the main factors impacting on Barry attendance at school.

When Barry stays home from school, he watches television, plays with his toys, watches DVD's or plays outside with the occasional trip to the shopping centre with his mother.

Barry's mother thinks that having someone to drive Barry to school would increase her motivation to get up on time and have Barry ready to be picked up. Barry's mother suggests that this is probably the greatest impediment to Barry's regular attendance at school but also suggests support with routines/structure in the home would also possibly contribute to Barry's increased attendance at school.

Family Holidays

Schools reported that family holidays were a significant problem, as these sometimes resulted in children being absent from school for prolonged periods of time. This was particularly relevant for some families from multicultural backgrounds who took their children out of school to visit their home country for several weeks or months at time. This resulted in a significant gap in their children's education and required schools and teachers to compensate for the child's missed days at school.

There was also a concern noted that low-income families tend to take holidays during school times, due to work constraints, limited opportunity to take leave during school holiday periods and affordability of flights. That is, families tended to take holidays when it was affordable and at off-peak times, rather than during school holidays.

“Sales on flights also influence when children are away. – Principal”

Cultural Practices

A number of cultural norms and practice were reported to impact school attendance. One example commonly cited by schools and service providers was the expectation of the child to have a carer role in the family and look after their siblings or ill parents.

“Jason has missed about three or four days of school this term, mostly due to being ill. On some of the days he was home he had to look after his mother and baby brother, as his mother was sick too. – Child case study”

A number of traditions that conflict with school attendance were also described. For example, one principal told of how in Iraq the family eats lunch when they get home at 4pm and have dinner later in the evening. The child then sleeps in and is late to school. Another example provided was Ramadan, with one school citing very high rates of absence due to the ethnic background of the students at the school:

“During the holy month of Ramadan - we have 2,500 absentees over this period. We had more staff at the school than kids one day last year. – Principal”

Some families also expect or find it difficult to deny children participating in family events that conflict with school.

“Marion missed a few days of school because relatives came from over-seas and she went to the airport. They also had some weddings and parties where she went to bed late and couldn't get up in the morning. When she has family visiting from overseas she wants to go to the airport with her parents. If they don't take her, she gets angry and cries. – Child case study”

Given the diversity that characterises Hume City, the cultural practices described above have a significant impact on attendance at school.

Despite this, parents who participated in the focus group did not make any comments regarding their perceptions of cultural practices impacting on school engagement and attendance.

4.2.4 Child level factors

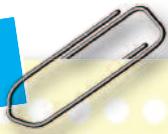
Mental Health Issues

School refusal, separation anxiety, and child trauma related mental health issues were reported by service providers as contributors to school absenteeism. These issues were described as complex and requiring a unique and tailored response coupled with ongoing resources to effectively engage the child in school.

Schools also acknowledged that many children with engagement issues, especially those who completely 'drop out' have a complex background with a mixture of mental health issues and family disadvantage. These children along with the disadvantaged and vulnerable were described as the most complex and high need cohort.

“Reluctance of the child to get themselves ready – Principal”

CASE STUDY: DAVE



Dave is eight years of age. He lives with maternal grandmother, father and aunt. Dave attends a local school about a ten-minute walk away. Dave is in grade one and severely delayed both socially and academically, however no formal diagnosis has been made regarding his development. Dave has Type 1 Diabetes, which the family does not manage well. Dave's mother and siblings have a history of non-engagement at school and absenteeism throughout the course of their education. Dave's maternal grandmother, grandfather and aunt suffer from depression, while his maternal grandfather works 9am to 5pm most days and leaves the family home between 8 and 8.30am.

The family caseworker and Dave's school have been liaising weekly about strategies to support getting Dave to school. The creation of a later timetable to support Dave's grandmother getting him ready was put into place and worked for a short period of time. The worker liaised with the family on a daily basis and offered transport to school two days a week, however this was only intermittently successful. The school aide offered to walk Dave to school, which also helped, however was unsustainable as the child was not always ready to leave in time to arrive at school punctually. The school and caseworker now meet on a monthly basis and the worker checks in with the school every two days. A counsellor is seeing Dave at school to support him with his anxiety about coming to school. Dave is also now attending a Therapeutic Kidz Club weekly to support his social and emotional development and some improvements have occurred in his attendance record.

When the caseworker asked Dave if he liked school, he responded 'I like it a bit but the work is hard' and 'I like playing and seeing my friends'.

When asked 'Why don't you go to school every day?' Dave responded 'I was sick, I had a stomach ache, then a scratch in my eye, I was sick. Most times I'm sick. I sometimes go a lot but then sometimes I'm sick'.

When Dave is not at school he: sleeps, plays on his play station, watches TV and sometimes plays with his toys.

Dave reported that being able to play more with his friends, having easier school work and not being sick would help him go to school more often. During the interview, Dave drew a picture of himself with two friends and spoke about playing with them at school.

Dave's grandmother, who cares for him, has on numerous occasions requested the school to not punish Dave for being late or not attending school, as it is not his fault. She struggles to get up early in the morning and get him ready for school, due to feeling unwell herself. When she has been asked what she hopes for Dave, she struggles to respond and often simply replies, "to be happy". Dave's family members appear not to appreciate the benefits of education, which may be due to their own negative experiences of school.

Negative school experiences

Parents reported children's negative experiences at school, such as bullying, as a major reason for their child not wanting to attend school. One parent spoke of how her child had experienced bullying due to not being fluent in English. The parent requested the child start English classes to support their language development, but felt the school did not support this process.

“

Last year Alice came to school late once, because she slept in. Alice doesn't want to go to school 'every day', because she feels tired as she goes to bed late. "I like to watch TV and stay up. – Child case study

”

“

Casey spoke of other children who had missed school because they went to a party or engagement. Others had missed school because they woke up late; Casey has done this too. – Child case study

”

Fatigue

Case studies derived from child interviews highlighted fatigue as an issue affecting attendance for some children. Although not cited by either parents or schools as a factor commonly influencing school engagement, for some children this may be a significant cause of tardiness or absenteeism.

IMPORTANT FINDINGS REGARDING FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO DISENGAGEMENT

- Absenteeism, particularly tardiness, has a significant impact in the classroom
- Punitive measures for being late and absent appear to deter children from attending school
- Children need to experience success at school in order to remain engaged
- Parents' ability to physically get children to school is a consistent and key challenge to attendance
- Families would benefit from further supports during the transition to high school
- Supports are needed to assist vulnerable families in maintaining their child's engagement
- Mental health issues for both parents and children are contributing factors to school absenteeism and disengagement
- Family holidays cause children to be absent for prolonged periods of time, resulting in significant gaps in their education
- Cultural factors such as religious holidays, relatives visiting from overseas and traditional practices or expectations can impinge on school attendance
- Fatigue and experiences of bullying are factors affecting some children's school attendance and engagement

4.3 Factors supporting engagement

4.3.1 Community level factors

Role of services

Service providers who participated in the focus group told of how they work with the school and specific families on the issue of school disengagement and accordingly have frequent contact with all stakeholders involved. They agreed support services were required to use a different approach when working with different schools and families, however their role in addressing absenteeism was highly focused on the development of relationships, including to:

- Act as a conduit to between schools and families;
- Facilitate the family/school connection (e.g. if parent has had a poor experience of school authority then need to work with parents to be able to attend the school);
- Build families capacity to be independent in building relationships with schools;
- Build school's capacity to better support and engage with families;
- Advocate for families (e.g. if need to travel overseas) and negotiate for them;
- Work with school staff as first point of contact;
- Work with the child at the school (therapy); and
- Share information (schools may not be aware of family context e.g. if family was too embarrassed to send child to school without food, so kept them home instead).

Services found the most effective approach was the use of family centred practice:

“
Start with the family and then think about who else you can involve to support them, for example medical provider, psychologist, or social worker.
– Service provider
”

Parents spoke of how they had drawn on support and early intervention services for their children as needed and found the services they had used helpful. It is important such services remain available, to prevent children and families from becoming disengaged from school.

Local policy frameworks

Service providers and schools highlighted the need for a local policy framework to motivate and guide action in response to school disengagement and absenteeism.

It was also noted that in regard to indigenous students, the Wannik unit and Koorie Engagement Support Officers (KESOs) are important for policy success.

Parents did not provide commentary regarding policies or frameworks beyond the school level, however they did contribute thoughts regarding policies and frameworks schools can put into place to support children's attendance and engagement, as highlighted in the following sections on transport and school level factors.

Transport

Transporting children to school was reported to be a crucial aspect of supporting attendance:

“
If you can get the child to school it helps – Service provider
”

Parents spoke of the advantages of their children taking the bus to school and attributed this to:

- Supporting their child to develop independence;
- Allowing them time to spend with their friends before school; and
- Taking the burden off parents to transport their child to school.

One school attributed low rates of tardiness to the common use of the school bus provided by DEECD:

“
Our students are rarely late as they travel by buses provided by DEECD
– Principal
”

For families who have significant vulnerabilities and limited capacity to transport their child to school, some services reported organising transport to get the child to school or the service itself would take the child to school. While this was effective and broke patterns of non-attendance, it was not seen to be a sustainable approach to overcoming such problems.

4.3.2 School level factors

Relationship with school

“What’s important is the authentic relationship with schools – someone to know their story, someone in school who connects with them – Principal”

All stakeholders agreed that the development of a relationship and connection between parents and the school is imperative when tackling disengagement. Parents agreed it was important they felt comfortable at the school, but did not elaborate on their relationships with individual schools. Schools reported several communication strategies and factors that have been effective in engaging the family and curbing patterns of non-attendance:

- Ensuring the teacher is accessible to the parent;
- A strategy used by Hume high school involving sending text messages to parents was viewed positively, as it allowed parents to respond immediately on the day;
- Schools phoning parents on the day if a child is absent or known to be unwell; and
- A phone call from the teacher made after three days of absence, because if this does not happen by day three, absenteeism continues to the end of the week and in some cases beyond.

Given services currently see their role as actively brokering the relationship between schools and families; it is important this work continues on behalf of the school community.

Teachers

Principals felt that teachers played a key role in engaging children in education. In particular, the relationship between the teacher, the child and the parent was considered imperative to maintaining and strengthening engagement. Principals told anecdotes of teachers acting as an advocate for vulnerable children and how this translated to increased their school engagement.

“Kids want to come to school when the teacher develops a genuine interest in them. – Principal”

Parents did not provide considerable feedback about the role of teachers but felt it was important they were approachable and accessible. All parents reported their child’s teacher was readily available; the option of making an appointment with the teacher was also open to most parents.

School policies and processes

School policies that focus on encouraging children to attend rather than taking a punitive approach were seen as a successful approach to addressing non-attendance. Examples provided by principals and service providers included:

- Having someone with the time to dedicate one-on-one attention to the child/ family. It is important that this relationship-building role and process is valued by the school leadership and broader school community;
- Schools providing guidance or strategies to maintain children’s learning if they will be absent for extended periods, regardless of the reason;

- Making positive (and preventative) phone calls to families to build the relationship and reward the family for helping to create a positive impact;
- Making a phone call if the child is away for consecutive days. It is important this call is made prior to the fourth day of absence to encourage the child back to school before the weekends;
- Schools taking the time to ‘check in’ on families and children;
- Providing teachers with ‘space’ to think and reflect on what works for individual children and for the school as a whole. For example, one assistant principal reflected on the needs of a student at risk of disengagement and starting having a hot chocolate with a student every morning to ease them into the day; and
- Having an advocate at school to support children with attendance issues.

School activities

A number of school activities were highlighted by teachers and parents as effective in encouraging children to attend school. **All participants agreed that providing reward programs was a preferable approach to punitive measures.** School respondents reported that the following activities and programs had been effective:

- Children coming to school to be involved in lunch activities, with this work decreasing absenteeism at one school;
- Offering sports and games in the morning. For example, one class used to do silent reading from 9am to 9.15am; when this was changed to morning activities, children were more likely to come on time as they didn’t like being late for the games;

- Providing certificates for attendance;
- Grade of the month award, where a trophy and ribbon is awarded for best attendance;
- Encouragement from fellow students to attend, with principals noting many children did not want to let their class mates down, especially when a reward system is in place;
- Focusing the curriculum on fun, rather than achievement;
- Creating a 'Community Classroom' where parents are welcome and encouraged to be involved in their child's education, to support relationship building between parents and the school; and
- Placing an emphasis on attendance from the beginning, including talking about the risks of non-attendance in prep and grade one and establishing support networks to assist parents to get children to school when their siblings are unwell.

Parents agreed with schools in regards to creating a community at school so parents can be more involved. They also suggested providing programs and extracurricular activities that children enjoy so the school environment is not focused solely on academics, for example a school orchestra; organising football players to attend schools; encouraging participation in sports; and developing a school garden.

“
Balance and prevention is the best model. – Principal
”

School transition

It was clear from the findings that additional support and information are needed regarding the transition to secondary school. While parents whose children were soon to undertake this transition reported having received sufficient information from both the primary and secondary school, none felt confident in their ability to support the transition for their child.

Accordingly, all parents were keen to participate in a group discussion/forum on the transition to high school. The same group of parents reported being aware that their children were also nervous about starting high school. More orientation visits for children and parents were requested so parents and children felt more prepared. Parents suggested a buddy/mentor system could also be implemented to support students commencing high school.

Little was noted on transitions into primary school and whether additional supports were required around this period. School transition experiences for children transferring from other schools during their primary school years may also warrant exploration to determine impacts on educational engagement. Further research in these areas is recommended.

4.3.3 Family level factors

Family Support

The provision of support services catering to the needs of families was considered important in addressing the issue of school disengagement, especially given its association with disadvantage.

While effective support services were available in the community (for example, speech pathology and early intervention services), and used by parents who were engaged in their child's education, the success of such services appears to be dependent on:

- What service is available, as many services target disadvantage and vulnerability rather than school engagement; and
- Getting families to physically transport their children to the service and engage with the service, which often involves numerous challenges.

Suggestions for family support strategies that may specifically address the issue of disengagement included:

- A support network with teachers, parents and other relevant services present;
- Individualised support, through parents meeting with the teacher to discuss the problem/strategies;
- Services that address parenting strategies and styles; and
- Workshops for children with attendance issues.

“
As an organisation, we require families to provide regular copies of their children’s school reports. This is a useful tool as it assists workers to monitor attendance/ lateness/ school disengagement and to work with parents to determine reason(s) behind absenteeism. From there, we can work to address absenteeism. – Service provider
”

Parent involvement

Parents who participated in the focus group felt it was important for their children to know their parents were involved in the school. They described their presence at school during school hours as ‘comforting and reassuring’. A number of parents reported participating in the child’s school in different ways, such as through cooking classes, gardening classes and reading groups.

4.3.4 Child level factors

Several of the child interviews conducted as a part of the *Our Tweenies* project provided information around the factors that contribute to school enjoyment and regular attendance. The interviewed children were mostly quite engaged with school. Key themes from the interviews indicated that the following factors may be contributing to this high level of engagement among the interviewed children:

“
The importance of friends and support networks
”

Children spoke of the importance of having friends at school with whom they enjoyed playing and were able to identify adults at the school who they could turn to for support.

“
Parents insisting and supporting children to attend school
”

Children reported that their parents had an expectation for them to attend school regularly; this ‘normative’ expectation appeared to be a key factor in supporting engagement and attendance from the perspective of the children interviewed.

“
Experiencing enjoyment at school, compared to boredom at home
”

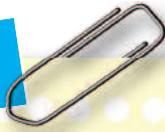
While children spoke of enjoying spending time at home, the majority noted that they found this ‘boring’ after some time as they preferred to be at school with their friends.

“
Families (including parents and siblings) valuing education
”

Most children spoke of their parents and siblings valuing education and the opportunities a solid education provides.



CASE STUDY: CASEY



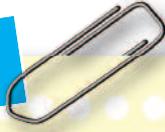
Casey is an eleven-year-old girl in grade five. She has two sisters, one in high school and one who goes to university.

Casey has missed two or three days of school this term because she was sick: *"I had to go to doctors one time and the two I can't remember."* On the days she stayed home from school, Casey's mum challenged her with her times tables and she watched TV or sat around.

When asked what she likes about school, Casey listed: education, being around people and lots of friends – *"Teachers and friends are always helpful when I am stuck and need help to understand."* She feels like she belongs at school because people are welcoming and say "hello". Casey says being at home is boring and that she can't think of anything she doesn't like about school. When she is on holidays, Casey misses school and her friends.

Casey said that she is able to talk to her teacher from last year *"about anything"* and that *"she is always very helpful."* She also has many friends at school and reports that everyone is friendly to her: *"We play and talk."* Casey feels safe at school, as everyone is welcoming and caring.

School is important to Casey because: *"When you grow up you can have a career and school encourages you to go to university."* Casey wants to go to university and be a teacher or researcher and research about people's lives.

CASE STUDY: JASON

Jason is an eleven-year-old boy in grade six. He is the middle child, with three brothers and two sisters.

When asked what he likes about school, Jason said he likes being with his friends and hanging out at lunch time: *"I like talking about things with friends."* He also likes sport and getting an education. He doesn't like school when the class is being disruptive, *"I can't learn like that."*

If he has any worries, Jason says he can talk to the school principal. He has spoken to her in the past about not liking the emergency teacher and the class being disruptive and she has fixed the problem: *"If anyone annoys me she has a meeting with us and talks to us. We go away being better friends."*

Jason has 15 friends at school. None of them are girls. He describes his friends as welcoming and friendly, which makes him feel he belongs at school. His friends also help to make him feel safe at school, because they protect him and stick up for him. But when his friends are unfriendly, Jason gets annoyed.

Jason thinks school is important for learning so he can get a good job: *"So you don't end up on the streets. It's important to get a job and earn money and get a house."*

When Jason is not at school he misses his friends, but he prefers holidays over school days because he gets to relax and play his Playstation 3 shooting game, 'Call of Duty'. Jason also enjoys the times he stays home from school on school days, but says *"it gets a bit boring."*

CASE STUDY: ALICE



Alice is seven years old and in grade one. She has been diagnosed with autism. Alice has a four-year-old sister.

On public holidays when she can't go to school, Alice goes to the Zoo. On the weekend when there is no school, Alice gets "bored, bored, bored."

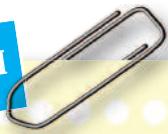
Alice talks to her teachers about her feelings and things that worry her. She can also talk to the teacher on yard duty. She has done this many times when other children have been rude and the teacher has given them time out.

Alice says she likes school because she gets to be student of the week sometimes: "Dad said if I get student of the week, he will buy me things." She also likes her teacher, although sometimes her teacher gets angry at her - "I got time out once".

Alice doesn't like school when people are rude to her; boys hit her; and people say she can't play with them. When people ask Alice not to play with them, Alice says 'fine' and goes away.

Alice has four friends; together they ignore rude people.

Alice feels she belongs at her school because of the jobs she does at school and at the office, like shredding paper. She also feels safe at school because there is a fence around the school and the teachers protect the students.


CASE STUDY: CALLUM

Callum is twelve years old and in grade six. He has two older sisters.

Callum missed two days of school this year and left school early on two days. He says it is because he was feeling sick but can't remember why.

On the days he stayed home from school, Callum played on the computer and ate.

He likes school because of the jobs you can do at school and because there are lots of play activities:

"The oval, each term we do different things/study."

He also likes school because he is the Vice Caption and gets to be leader, *"I talk to other children if they are having problems."*

When he has a problem he talks to his friends first and then his sisters, then parents and finally teachers, but only if it is really important. When he was younger, he got teased for wearing glasses. He told his parents and they had a meeting with the teachers and the other students were told off. This makes him feel he belongs at the school.

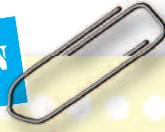
Callum doesn't like that he has to wake up early to go to school. His Mum helps to wake him up in the morning by turning the lights on and pulling the sheets off.

Nearly all the grade six students are Callum's friends and he has one special friend.

Callum says school is important because you learn about things, it is fun and it helps you go to university and get job. Callum wants to be doctor and has a cousin who is studying to be a doctor.

On holidays, Callum gets bored and wants to go back to school. To pass the time he plays on the computer or eats. But when he is at school, Callum wants to go on holidays: *"Maybe I prefer holidays."* If he is sick, his parents take care of him, but they always encourage him to go to school.

CASE STUDY: MARION



Marion is nine years old and in grade four. She has three older brothers.

Marion talks to teachers at school and her parents or cousin when she is at home about her feelings and things that worry her, like when she gets scared or falls over.

When Marion started school she would cry all the time because she was used to staying at home with her mum. Now she likes her teachers, friends and classroom; everyone is friendly.

She doesn't like school when people tease her, as it makes her cry. She also doesn't like getting up early in the mornings for school.

Marion has lots of friends at school - more than 15 - as well as special friends. She plays with them at school and they go to each other's houses. They also help each other with homework: "We take care of each other." She feels like she belongs at school because everyone takes care of her and is friendly.

School is important to Marion because she learns English and other languages: "I speak five languages: Assyrian, Arabic, Kurdish, English and Turkish."

When she is not at school, Marion misses her teachers, friends and school work: "School is fun and I get to play with friends. I learn new things and like my teachers."

CASE STUDY: AYDA



Ayda is ten years old and in grade four. She has five sisters.

Ayda hasn't missed school this term. She wants to come to school all the time because when she is at home she misses reading, maths, her friends and playing. She gets bored when she is home from school and usually watches TV shows and takes care of her nephew for her sister.

Ayda said she likes school because she gets to try new things like cooking, gardening, excursions, choir and special excursions. She also likes showing new children around when they come to the school.

She doesn't like school when it rains and they have to stay inside or when the teachers yell: "I feel sad because they lose their voice from yelling." She also doesn't like when kids fight. This happens sometimes.

When she has a problem Ayda talks to her sisters or her teachers, especially her health teacher.

She feels she belongs at the school and whenever she has a problem other children cheer her up.

Ayda wants to go to school all the time; not going to school is boring for Ayda. Her family feels sad for her when she doesn't go to school, but sometimes it feels normal.

IMPORTANT FINDINGS REGARDING FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO DISENGAGEMENT

- Service providers can play a key role by facilitating the relationship between family, school and community and advocating for families
- Checking in with families by text message or phone call when non-attendance occurs can be an effective communication strategy
- Local policy frameworks are needed to guide and motivate action
- Support services are valued by families and important for maintaining and increasing engagement
- Teachers play a key role in fostering school engagement
- Effective policies include having advocates and mentors at school; supporting children's learning while absent from school; effective communication between school and family; and responding to children's needs individually
- Transport assistance can support attendance for some families
- Implementing reward systems and offering enjoyable activities at specific times of the day may increase attendance
- Parents would welcome the availability of group discussions/forums on the transition to high school
- Welcoming and involving parents in school life can support their engagement with their children's education



5. Limitations

The *Our Tweenies* research project aimed to canvass the issue of primary school disengagement in Hume City. While the above findings indicate the extent of, causes for and possible strategies to address school disengagement, there are a number of limitations to the findings.

Firstly, parents who participated in the focus group were all highly engaged in their children's education and schooling. Likewise, the majority of children who provided feedback via the child interviews were either already engaged in a service that supported their school attendance or were highly engaged students. **The feedback provided by parents and children is therefore not necessarily representative of disengaged children and families.** Further consultation is recommended to understand the experiences of disengaged families in regards to primary school education.

Secondly, data on school attendance was only provided by half the primary schools in Hume. Reported attendance rates therefore only consider children who are enrolled in primary schools in these schools. No data returns were provided by the Department of Human Services (Victoria) or other local services working with disengaged children and their families. The lack of disengagement data makes it difficult to determine how many children between the ages of six and twelve are completely disengaged from school, as it is support services, rather than schools, that are likely to be in contact with this cohort of children and their families.

While qualitative information was sought on the cause for and strategies used to address primary school disengagement, the extent of disengagement was largely measured via school attendance rates (or non-attendance). It is important to note that school disengagement is a multifaceted construct that can manifest in various ways.

6. Recommendations

Recommendations have primarily been developed based on feedback provided by stakeholders throughout the *Our Tweenies* consultations. The recommendations are proposed for the community/ service provider level, the school level, the family level and the student level. Each of these tiers contains broad, macro-level recommendations to support systemic change, with micro-level examples provided in some instances for consideration and guidance in the development of specific courses of action. Please note that recommendations are provided in this order to maintain consistency with the structure of this report. **An implementation order is not suggested, with the exception of Recommendation 13: to reinstate the Children's Advisory Group.** It is suggested that this recommendation be implemented first, as children are likely to have the greatest understanding of why school disengagement occurs and what strategies will be most effective in supporting school engagement. **In complement to this, it is suggested the Hume Middle Years Working Group, in consultation with the Parent Advisory Group and Children's Advisory Group (if reinstated), be responsible for advocating and driving the recommendations contained in this report.**

6.1 Community/service provider focused

6.1.1 Data collection and use

Recommendation 1: Resource and make available the regular collection of clear and consistent school attendance data to better monitor patterns of school disengagement.

As covered in the Hume *Under 16* project, key data to establish how

many primary school aged children in Hume are disengaged from school would assist in providing a more complete picture of the extent and nature of educational disengagement. While data on school attendance is currently provided by all primary schools, the data is largely inconsistent and incomplete, thus offering little utility. To better understand, monitor and respond to patterns of school disengagement, school attendance data that provides consistent information on the reasons for non-attendance needs to be collected and reported regularly and provided in aggregated form at the regional and school district levels, to allow easy comparison across jurisdictions. Such data would also support the tracking of students at risk of disengagement as well as the provision of timely intervention.

In accordance with the DHS Out-of-Home Care Education Commitment (a 2010 Partnering Agreement between the Department of Human Services, Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, Catholic Education Commission of Victoria and Independent Schools Victoria), it is important the collection and reporting of data is resourced by DEECD, in partnership with the Catholic Education Sector and Independent Schools sector. **All stakeholders need to work together to design and agree upon consistently formatted reporting templates to facilitate easy collation of intelligible data, for example through the use of consistent and clearly understood categories of absenteeism.**

It would be helpful if ACARA also provided aggregated and easily intelligible data on student assessment results. At present, data is only available at the school, state and national levels and is extremely complex to understand.

Accountability: DEECD, ACARA, Hume schools, Hume Principals Network

6.1.2 Policies, framework and strategy review and implementation

Recommendation 2: Implement a local response to school disengagement using best practice and policy frameworks

A local response to school disengagement is required. In implementing such a response, services providers and schools highlighted a need for policy frameworks to motivate and guide action in response to school disengagement and absenteeism. A non-exhaustive list of policies, frameworks and initiatives at the national, state and local levels that may assist in supporting school engagement is provided in this report. While such policy may work to motivate a response to effectively address school disengagement and non-attendance in Hume City, infrastructure and resources are required for their implementation.

➤ Example:

- 2008 National Family–School Partnerships Framework

Accountability: Hume Whittlesea LLEN in partnership with Hume Principals Network

Recommendation 3: Implement recommendations of the Under 16s report

A list of recommendations was provided in the Hume *Under 16s* report that preceded this report. While specific recommendations have been implemented, many have not. For example, the collection of consistent and accurate data on school absenteeism and disengagement (see recommendation 1) is yet to be actioned. The full list is provided in Appendix 2 of this report.

Accountability: Hume Schools, Hume Whittlesea LLEN, Hume Middle Years Working Group, Hume City Youth Advocacy group

Recommendation 4: Advocate for implementation of recommendations in the Building the Scaffolding report

It is recommended that stakeholders be aware of and advocate for the findings and relevant recommendations from the 2013 *Building the Scaffolding* report (see Appendix 3).

Accountability: Hume Schools, Hume Whittlesea LLEN, Hume Middle Years Working Group, Hume City Youth Advocacy Group, Hume Youth Commitment and relevant local service providers

6.1.3 Collaboration

Recommendation 5: To obtain partnerships and agreements for coordinated reforms across schools

Models and processes for addressing attendance and disengagement issues need to be developed for use by all schools in Hume City. However an integrated response requires a collaborative approach including gaining agreement and establishing strong relationships and partnerships across schools. The implementation of such a recommendation also presents an opportunity for a pilot project that DEECD could explore and support.

Accountability: Hume Schools, Hume Whittlesea LLEN, Hume Middle Years Working Group, relevant local service providers, Hume Principals Network, DEECD

6.2 School level focused

6.2.1 School transitions

Recommendation 6: Strengthen transition points

Findings from the Hume *Under 16* Report in conjunction with the current study **show the transition from primary school to secondary school is a key disengagement period for young people in Hume.**

It is important a local strategy take into account the critical nature of such transitions when responding to the issue of disengagement. A pilot project resourced by DEECD would be an opportunity to investigate and communicate the efficacy of transition strategies in Hume.

➤ Examples:

- Establish parent forum/discussion focusing on the transition to secondary school; and
- Advocate for re-activation of the Transition from Primary to Secondary School Network.

Accountability: Hume Middle Years Working Group with involvement from School Hubs and Hume Principals Network

6.2.2 Resourcing

Recommendation 7: Build capacity of schools

Building the capacity of schools to respond effectively to the issue of school disengagement is an integral part of any local response. Hume schools gave examples of best practice and strategies that were effective in responding to absenteeism however limited sharing of information takes place across schools.

➤ Examples:

- Showcasing ‘best practice’ transition models, ensuring cross sector information sharing;
- Recognition of difference;
- Teachers valuing and understanding students’ and parents’ needs;
- Student connectedness and engagement in learning – flexible;
- Supportive environments; and
- Student centred learning.

Accountability: Hume Middle Years Working Group with involvement from School Hubs and Hume Principals Network

Recommendation 8: Improve and align processes across schools to target disengagement

An important part of improving and aligning processes across Hume schools to respond to disengagement will be establishing a definition, in collaboration with DEECD, on what the issue of disengagement is locally.

This recommendation will also be supported by the implementation of consistent data collection on school absenteeism and disengagement.

➤ Examples:

- Agreement from schools to work together in strategies to reengage families;
- Develop, implement and agree upon consistent policies for approaches to re-engage families and tackle absenteeism, e.g. phone call after three days absence;
- Develop, implement and agree upon innovative policies for approaches to maintain or increase children’s engagement in school and education, e.g. through fun activities and interesting curriculum content;
- Respond to long absences associated with travel e.g. travel education packs and follow-up when students return. Further research is required to determine how schools do this and the impact on students’ learning;
- Advocacy for joint case management – some work on this has already started but could be built on. E.g. advocate for a Transition Broker Model: A support worker in or across a number of schools working with students who are already or at-risk of becoming disengaged (and their families) through a holistic approach; and
- Emphasis on whole-of-school approach and providing supportive environments for students and families, in addition to recognition of difference, culture and responding to the individual needs of students.

Accountability: Hume Schools (requires coordination across schools), Hume Youth Commitment, Hume Principals Network, DEECD, ACARA,

6.3 Family level focused

6.3.1 Empowerment and engagement

Recommendation 9: Increase parent empowerment

Increasing parental knowledge on the importance and value of primary education/early engagement through a community-wide education strategy is recommended.

➤ Example:

- Education, school and community communication strategy regarding:
- Importance of education in the early and primary years
- Impacts of long absences from school to visit home country on child’s educational trajectory.

Accountability: Hume Parent Advisory Group, Hume Hubs Working Group, Hume Schools, Hume Youth Commitment

Recommendation 10: Increase parent engagement

Providing strategies to support and empower families during transition points will assist parent engagement.

➤ Examples:

- Parent Tips Sheets
- In Transit DVD resource

Accountability: Parent Advisory Group, Hume Hubs Working Group, Hume Schools, Hume Youth Commitment

6.4 Student level focused

6.4.1 Empowerment and engagement

Recommendation 11: Increase student empowerment

Encouraging student independence, accountability and sense of achievement will empower students in their educational experience. It is important to note that some schools already have effective strategies in place to support student empowerment.

➤ Example:

- Student self-assessments, reported to parents in written form

Accountability: Hume Schools

Recommendation 12: Improve student engagement

Student connectedness and engagement in the primary years will be improved by providing alternative/ flexible learning options via 'hands-on activities' that encourage learning beyond classrooms to capture and sustain the interest of students.

➤ Examples:

- Pilot modified versions of the Try a Trade event, Finding My Place Program or Hands On Learning method to suit the needs of primary school students:
- **Try a Trade:** An event that offers a hands-on trade experience to local youth, this activity aims to increase students' knowledge of trade industries using a 'hands on' approach. It caters for differ-

ent age groups from Year 7-12 students and showcases a wide range of trade areas presented by training providers.

- **Finding My Place:** The Finding My Place program is a series of eight to ten motivation and information workshops aimed at encouraging students to remain in a learning environment. The workshops' main focus is to give students a better appreciation for learning. However, the program also includes preparing students for entry into the workforce, with the provision of information regarding where to get help in preparing a resume, how to find an apprenticeship and how to access work experience. Traineeships and apprenticeships are strongly promoted as an alternative option for students who do not want to remain at school. The program also tackles important life issues such as:
 - o Social skills and the importance of being prepared for life after school;
 - o Financial matters and the traps of mobile phones and credit cards; and
 - o The consequences of using drugs or getting involved in antisocial activities and the impact this can have on the students' adult lives.
- **Hands On Learning:** Hands on Learning is a targeted engagement method that builds self-esteem and supports vulnerable students to achieve and get the most out of school. While traditionally working with students in years 7-10, Hands On Learning

has trialled a grade 5 and grade 6 student program that has successfully helped ensure students transition successfully from primary to secondary school.

Accountability: Hume Middle Years Working Group (using funding for pilot project), DEECD, Hume Principals Network, Hume Youth Commitment

Recommendation 13: Reinstate Children's Advisory Group in Hume

To work towards preventing school disengagement and increasing engagement it is important children are empowered and given the opportunity to provide input into relevant decisions.

➤ Example:

- Draw on primary and secondary school hubs to encourage participation in the Hume Children's Advisory Group once reinstated (especially if transition issues are evident).

Accountability: Hume Middle Years Working Group, Hume Reference Group of Secondary School Hubs

OUR TWEENIES: ARE THEY FLYING ALONG OR FALLING THROUGH THE CRACKS?

APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Policies and frameworks and initiatives to support school engagement

Early Childhood Development

Key policy directions

- National Partnership Agreement on the National Quality Agenda for Early Childhood Education and Care (2008)
- National Partnership Agreement on Early Childhood Education (2008)
- National Partnership Agreement on Indigenous Early Childhood Development (2008)
- National Early Childhood Development Strategy – Investing in the Early Years (2009)
- *Supporting parents, supporting children: A Victorian Early Parenting Strategy (2010)*
- *Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework (2009)*
- Community Health Service Child Health teams
- The State of Victoria's Children Report (2011)

Victorian government initiatives

- \$62.7m over four years for free Universal MCH services and \$16.3m to sustain Enhanced MCH
- \$8.3m to provide ECE for 3 year-olds known to Child Protection authorities
- Small rural kindergartens funding and Kindergarten Inclusion Support Services improvements
- \$16.5m for Supported Playgroups, the *smalltalk* program and the E4Kids longitudinal study
- \$19m to expand ChildFIRST and Integrated Family Services in areas of high demand
- Cradle to Kinder: 10 new programs, including two Aboriginal specific programs
- \$29m for *Stronger Families* program delivered in four Child FIRST catchments across Victoria, with services to be established in two additional locations in 2012–13
- *Victorian Government Indigenous Aboriginal Affairs Report 2010–11*, tabled in Parliament in March 2012
- *The Victorian Aboriginal Affairs Framework 2010–2013*

Programs

- Maternal and Child Health (MCH) and Enhanced MCH services
- Early Parenting Services
- *Cradle to Kinder and Aboriginal Cradle to Kinder*
- *Healthy mothers, Healthy Babies*

- Regional Parenting Services
- In-Home Support for Aboriginal families; the Aboriginal Home-Based Learning Program
- Best Start and Aboriginal Best Start
- *Smalltalk* program, delivered by the Early Home Learning Study, and E4Kids
- Languages Support Program for Young Children
- Early Start Kindergarten
- *Transition: A Positive Start to School*
- Early Childhood Intervention Service (ECIS)
- Out-of-home care placement prevention

Educational attainment, aspirations and post-school destinations

Key policy directions

- MCEETYA, *Melbourne Declaration of Educational Goals for Young Australians* (2008)
- National Partnership Agreement on Literacy and Numeracy (2008)
- National Partnership Agreement on Low SES School Communities (2008)
- National Partnership Agreement on Youth Attainment and Transitions (2009)
- Australian Government, *Skills for All Australians* (2012)
- *Securing Jobs for Your Future – Skills for Victoria* (2008)
- Wannik Education Strategy for Koorie Students (2008)
- Victorian Training Guarantee (2008)
- *Towards Victoria as a Learning Community* (2012)

Victorian government initiatives

- Primary mathematics and science specialists
- School specialisation grants
- Boosted support for vulnerable children
- Promoting Youth – Opportunities for social and economic participation (\$8.2m)
- Promoting Youth Pathways – regional and rural community radio training workshops
- \$1m for Zero-fee TAFE places for children leaving out-of-home care
- *Victorian Government Indigenous Affairs report 2010–11*, tabled in Parliament in March 2012
- *Victorian Aboriginal Affairs Framework 2013–2018*
- Children, Youth and Families and Disability Services Operating Framework – Supporting integrated practice (2012)
- More integrated Education Services in Youth Justice Custodial Centres

- Youth Connection – Custodial Post-Release Education, Training and Employment Services
- *Springboard* – Intensive education and employment support for young people leaving care

Programs in place

- Student Mapping Tool (SMT) and Managed Individual Pathways (MIPs)
- Senior Secondary Re-engagement Programs
- Flexible curriculum for senior secondary students: VCAL, VETiS, apprenticeships, traineeships
- Local Solutions Year 12 Retention Fund and Partnership Facilitation fund (rural/regional)
- Local Learning and Employment Networks (LLENS), including Regional Youth Commitments
- Access and Equity Indigenous education and training projects
- Koorie Transitions
- Youth Mentoring and Capacity Building Initiative (MCBI)
- Workplace Learning Coordinators and Careers Mentoring Network Initiative (CMNI)



Appendix 2: *Under 16s* Project report information/ recommendations:

The primary to secondary transition process is a transition point at which some young people who are already marginally engaged at primary school cease regular school attendance before any significant relationships with secondary school staff have been developed. These young people can regularly be identified by their previous patterns of irregular attendance across the primary school years.

The transition involves a move to what is usually a much larger secondary school. Establishing a strong relationship with one or more key school staff members takes time and some students are gone before this occurs. In Hume the importance of re-establishing the Transition Net would help alleviate and address some of these issues.

The relationship between families and schools is a key factor that influences patterns of school attendance and engagement for younger students. Development of a pilot project with a small number of primary and secondary schools in Hume would assist the development of an appropriate model that could address some of the key welfare and outreach requirements for re-engagement identified in Section 6 of this report.

The Hume Middle Years Working Group has identified the need to develop a number of pilot projects with schools to build effective school community partnerships to support parental engagement in young people's learning. Schools need to be central to development of such a pilot, but critically need the assistance of a variety of community service agencies to assist them to create an effective and sustainable approach.

The Family – School Partnership Framework developed in 2008 by the national parent bodies in Australia – Australian Council for State School Organisations (ACSSO) and the Australian Parents Council (APC) and the Australian Government provided a model for this work.

“High levels of parental and community involvement is strongly related to improved student learning, attendance and behaviour. Family involvement can have a major impact on student learning, regardless of the social or cultural background of the family. Family involvement in schools is therefore central to high quality education and is part of the core business of schools.”

The aim of the Family-School Partnerships Framework is to encourage sustainable and effective partnerships between all members of the school community, including teachers, families and students¹⁴

There are various models that could assist the development of more effective relationships between schools and parents.

These include:

- Building on the DEECD's extended Hub based model in Secondary School
- Hume has 10 Community Hubs located within primary schools in the City of Hume.

This is a proven successful model.

Using a variety of engagement tools including, the Family-School Partnership Framework, the Hume Middle Years Working Group has identified the need to employ a Community Liaison Officer (CLO) based at a secondary school in Hume who would target Years 7 -9 and work collaboratively with students, parents and the school through a Community Hub model.

The CLO position is a school/community based approach to improve social inclusion and learning outcomes for young people and their families. This approach will enable schools to work collaboratively with community agencies to share resources and expertise to support parents and young people from Years 7 to 9. It will prompt new systemic ways of supporting and resourcing parents and young people's education and wellbeing through a Community Hub model. This model will increase opportunities for parents and young people, especially those experiencing high levels of disadvantage to engage in all aspects of community life and support educational attainment.

¹⁴ DEEWR (2008). Family School Partnership Framework

Schools need strong support from community agencies to develop the processes and skills required to establish relationships with some of the families who will need to be engaged. To assist this process the HWLLEN will be conducting a series of Educational summits that will promote parent engagement at a continuum from primary to secondary school and ensure families and young people are supported in their middle years.

The educational summits will highlight the school/community based approach to improve social inclusion, learning outcomes and aspirational thinking for young people and their families. This approach will encourage schools to work collaboratively with community agencies to share resources and expertise to support parents and young people. It will prompt new systemic ways of supporting, resourcing and increasing opportunities for parents and young people, especially those experiencing high levels of intergenerational disadvantage to engage in all aspects of community life including social and workforce participation.

For Hume's local secondary schools the Community Hub model is a shift in thinking and practice to the provision of services and engagement of families in an inclusive way. Hume has high levels of youth disengagement, long term unemployed families with significantly low attainment rates at school. The continuum of relationship with parents between primary school to secondary school is critically important to successful engagement at secondary school, which has long term ramifications on student outcomes and Year 12 attainment rates.



Appendix 3: Relevant recommendations from Building the Scaffolding report

Recommendations:

1. That the Victorian Government incorporate a ‘life course’ approach — from birth to adulthood — into policy development beginning with the development of the Vulnerable Children, Young People and Families Framework.
3. That the Victorian Government develops a policy framework for the ‘middle years’ — 8 to 12 years — which incorporates new program development and specific funding for services to support children in the middle years.
4. That the Victorian Government resources a partnership between the early years, family services, youth and academic sectors to address workforce skills and development in relation to the middle years.
5. That the Victorian Government extend the Best Start program statewide and expand the scope of Best Start to 12 years to better respond to the health and wellbeing needs of children in the middle years.
6. That the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development increase the assessment of health and wellbeing of children and young people through primary and secondary school based on research about the critical ages to undertake assessment.
7. That the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development develop transition planning for children moving between primary and secondary schools.
11. That the role of partnership brokers between schools and community sector organisations, incorporating the strengths of the School Focussed Youth Service program, be retained in future models of support for vulnerable young people developed by DEECD.
13. That the Victorian Government work with community sector organisations and schools to develop and resource more flexible models of education across Victoria.
18. That the Victorian Government, in partnership with the community sector, local government and schools, develop measurement tools to monitor the health, development and wellbeing of young people and children in the middle years building on the Victorian Child and Adolescent Monitoring System (VCAMS).



Notes:

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