



# The Whittlesea Under 16 Project

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## Contents

### Executive Summary

1. Introduction
2. Project Aims
3. Project Scope
4. Research Findings
5. Contributing Factors
6. Data Collections Issues
7. Re-Engagement – What Works
8. Recommendations

### Main Report

1. The Whittlesea Under 16 Report
2. Profile of the City of Whittlesea
3. Attendance at School
4. Disengagement from school
5. Case Studies
6. Factors contributing to disengagement
7. What would help young people re-engage?
8. Services to support young people in Whittlesea
9. Summary of Findings
10. Recommendations
11. References

Attachment 1  
Non School Agency Data Collection

Attachment 2  
School data Collection

Attachment 3  
Structured Interview Format Young Parents and Parents

## Executive Summary

### 1. Introduction

The Whittlesea Under 16 Project is a joint initiative between the Hume Whittlesea Youth Connections Program (NMIT is the Lead Agent), the Hume Whittlesea LLEN, and the Whittlesea Youth Commitment (WYC).

The City of Whittlesea covers the suburbs of Thomastown, Lalor, Epping, Mill Park, Bundoora, South Morang, Doreen, Donnybrook, Wollert, Beveridge, Woodstock, Yan Yean, Eden Park, Humevale, Kinglake West and Whittlesea. Young people in the City of Whittlesea aged 10-19 years make up 13.5% of the Whittlesea population, which is higher than the average youth component of the total population across other Melbourne LGAs. (In Hume it is 15.5%.) Just over one third of the population of Whittlesea was born overseas.

Whittlesea has low levels of educational attainment among young people under 16 years. The 2006 census figures show that 35.2% of students in Whittlesea had left school in Year 10 or below, which is much higher than the Melbourne Statistical Division (MSD) average of 27.9%.

The implementation of the Youth Connections Program from 2010 and information gathered by the Whittlesea Youth Commitment reinforced concerns in the community about the extent of poor educational outcomes and engagement for young people in this age group. The Whittlesea Under 16 Project was undertaken to gain an understanding of the extent of disengagement in Whittlesea, and to develop informed responses to the issue.

### 2. Project Aims

The Whittlesea Under 16 Project aimed to:

- identify the number of young people under 16 years of age in the City of Whittlesea who are disengaged from school, education and training;
- assess the forms of support available to these young people; and
- develop recommendations for a strategy to re-engage them.

This report has been developed to provide this information to key government departments (particularly Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD), Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) and Australian Government Department of Human Services, school staff (particularly principals and senior managers) relevant community organisations, and to local government.

### 3. Project Scope

The project focussed on young people in Whittlesea aged between 10 and 16 years who were either:

- completely disengaged; or
- whose school attendance did not exceed three or four days a week, indicating a potential for disengagement.

## 4. Research Findings

The research is based on 2011 data collected from local schools, agencies, young people and families in Whittlesea using a combination of existing studies, surveys and interviews.

The data relates to government sector schools in Whittlesea involving seven government secondary schools. One Catholic sector school also provided a data return.

The research findings summarised below are detailed in the body of the report.

A total enrolment in government secondary schools in Whittlesea for those under 16 years in 2011 is estimated at 4583 young people. Of this group research indicates that:

### **Many young people under the age of 16 attend school on an irregular basis.**

Schools reported that:

- 7.6% (348 young people) are missing one day of school each week on average
- 1.3% (63 young people) are missing more than two days of school each week
- As a result, a total of 8.9% (411 young people) in Whittlesea 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.**

### **An additional number of young people under 16 years have completely disengaged from school.**

- 40 young people in the age group were reported by agencies operating in Whittlesea as having been in contact during 2011.
- Of these 40 young people, 25 (0.5 % of the school enrolment) were reported as not attending school.
- Males and females were evenly represented in the group of those not attending school. (In other northern LGAs, males generally strongly outnumber females).
- Government schools reported having expelled 19 young people under the age of 16, and a further 10 had been still enrolled but were unable to be contacted.

### **In total there were 436 young people aged under 16 in Whittlesea attending school irregularly or not at all.**

### **The majority of those young people completely disengaged from school appear to be aged 14 and 15 years old.**

- This is consistent with Victoria Police and Juvenile Justice data where the majority of contact occurs from age 13 onwards.
- A few are completely disengaged at 12, but it is at 14 years of age that the numbers begin to increase.
- Patterns of irregular attendance often commence early in primary school years.
- A standard period of complete school disengagement in this age group lasts between 12 to 18 months
- Multiple instances of school disengagement in the one family are not uncommon.

### **There are few alternative education / school re-engagement options available for those aged under 16 in Whittlesea.**

- With the exception of the Pavilion, current programs offered are generally only available for those aged 15 years and over.
- Teaching Units and other re-engagement programs offer only short term assistance.
- The main alternative school program in the Whittlesea region (the Pavilion School) had 10 students under the age of 16 on the waiting list for entry.

## 5. Contributing Factors

Interviews with young people indicated that the following factors increased the likelihood of disengagement:

**Expulsion / asked to leave school:** Being expelled from school, then commencing at a new school for a month or two, before ceasing to attend altogether;

**Transition:** Transitioning from primary to secondary school. Attending the new school for a short period and then disengaging altogether.

**High mobility:** Families relocating due to housing rental changes resulting in young people changing schools, losing contact with peers or requiring longer travel.

**Disability:** High levels of disability and in particular young people with low IQ who are also just ineligible for additional support or special school education.

**Ineffective parenting and family dysfunction:** Parents lacking the ability to set limits and establish routines around school and work leading to young persons' inability to make it to school on a regular basis.

**Negative school experience of parents:** Parents who themselves have had unsuccessful or unsatisfactory school experiences finding it difficult to relate to and engage with schools, placing less importance on their child's attendance and engagement with school.

**Acting as a carer:** Young people remaining at home to act as a carer to family members, particularly where a parent has a mental illness and /or drug and alcohol dependence.

**On-line bullying:** Young people are increasingly disengaging from school for lengthy periods due to on-line bullying.

## 6. Data Collection Issues

- The data used to inform research findings does not include data from Independent schools or some Catholic schools in Whittlesea. The project was also unable to source data from the Victorian Department of Human Services.
- There is extremely limited capacity to track young people who are not enrolled in or attending school, or to quantify the numbers engaged in non-school based programs.
- The lack of options available to those under 16 contributes to their invisibility, as they are ineligible for many alternative education programs or for income support.

- The focus of Government data collection on school disengagement commences at 15 years of age, when there is evidence that some young people of that age have not been going to school for several years.
- As with the education services, some welfare and community organisations indicate that their client group are predominantly of English speaking backgrounds. This may suggest that those from linguistically diverse backgrounds are less likely to access mainstream services and therefore may be underrepresented in the data collection.
- Research findings are considered to significantly understate the actual extent of disengagement in Whittlesea. In addition to the lack of incentive for young people under 16 to contact services for assistance, young people interviewed for this research all indicated that they personally knew of other individuals under the age of 16 who were also not attending school. This suggests that the extent of disengagement may be even larger than has been identified by schools and agencies.

## 7. Re-engagement – What Works

Research suggests that there are four key requirements to assisting young people under the age of 16 to re-engage with education and training:

- Making real and enduring connections
- Meeting their welfare needs
- Providing learning opportunities relevant to needs; and
- Providing pathways that link learning to practical future opportunities

Young people interviewed in Whittlesea indicate that there are a number of enablers that helped them re-engage with education.

### **Supportive Relationships:**

The importance of having a supportive relationship with staff involved in the re-engagement process. This reflects a need to feel connected to one or more people involved in the re-engagement process.

### **Applied Learning Options:**

Access to a curriculum that provides diverse applied ‘hands on’ learning opportunities such as a VCAL prior to Year 10.

### **Flexible Learning Environments:**

Opportunities to combine part-time school with other activities can assist some young people on the edge of disengagement. Some young people find it difficult to cope with full-time school, and start to absent themselves rather than having a structured opportunity to combine school with other activities which could also assist in developing skills.

### **Parental Involvement:**

The relationship between family members and schools can influence patterns of school attendance and engagement. The Family-School Partnership Framework provides supporting structures to assist and improve parent engagement in a young person’s learning.

## 8. Recommendations

The following recommendations are made to the WYC. Some recommendations will be able to be delivered through the development of partnerships by its members. Others will require advocacy to procure additional funding sources.

### School Based Community Hubs

*The School Community Hub model serves to provide an answer to the practical and structural barriers by providing a range of social services either in a school or in collaboration with a school. The hub calls on services to ensure access to necessary support and services are readily available to all, with a focus on children who are at a disadvantage and at risk.*

[Definition for Schools as community hubs sourced from *Primary schools as community hubs: a review of the literature*. Prepared for The Scanlon Foundation, by The Royal Children's Hospital Centre for Community Child Health and the Murdoch Children's Research Institute, July 2012.]

- Advocate for support for primary and secondary schools to develop school based community hub models.

### Flexible Learning

- Develop increased applied learning options for years 7 to 9 that include appropriate support for participants by encouraging schools and community agencies to work collaboratively together.
- Packaging programs for disengaging students that might combine schools with other supports (such as Trade Training Centres, U3A, Neighbourhood House programs or local government services).
- Further develop the Transition Broker model to support students in identifying individual flexible learning options.
- Investigate the causes and make recommendations on the issue of disengagement by students at upper primary level.

### Transitions & Parent Engagement

- The ongoing development of a comprehensive primary to secondary school transition process for Whittlesea.
- Review and strengthen the transition processes to identify at risk students and the development of partnerships with external agencies where appropriate in support of this.
- Increase parental consultation to ascertain their needs with regard to transitions from primary to secondary school. Promote the opportunities available for schools to work with external agencies to comprehensively carry out and respond to the outcomes of these parental consultations.
- Investigate and implement best practice models that will engage parents of 'at risk' young people.

### Data

- Improve local data collection processes to enable more accurate identification of young people under the age of 16 who are not attending school. This should include:
  - Developing an agreed data collection approach with Principals from Government, Catholic and Independent schools and Community Agencies in Whittlesea.
  - Identify and collect data on attendance and level of engagement of all students living in Whittlesea on an annual basis in partnership across Primary and Secondary Schools, Community Agencies and Youth Connections brokered by the Hume Whittlesea LLEN.
  - Promoting a co-ordinated systemic approach in collating and analysing under 16 disengagement data across the northern metropolitan region and responding where systemic issues are identified.

### Community Consultation

- The ongoing development of school / community forums focussing on the issues of responding to 'at risk' students' needs through increased applied learning options and strengthened support / welfare services.

# The Whittlesea Under 16 Project

## 1. Introduction

The Whittlesea Under 16 Project was developed to identify how many young people under 16 years of age in the City of Whittlesea are disengaged from school, education and training, assess what form of support were available to these young people, and develop recommendations for a strategy to help re-engage them.

The project was commissioned by the consortia partners of the Hume Whittlesea Youth Connections program and by the Hume Whittlesea LLEN.

The new 2012 State Government Youth Statement “Engage, Involve, Create” provides relevant policy context for the project<sup>1</sup>. The Statement supports the use of partnerships to deliver the aims and priorities including “ensuring young people are engaged in education and training, further education and training pathways, and employment”.

This will increase opportunities for young Victorians to be engaged in:

*“Education and training that is accessible, flexible and relevant; that empowers them with choice and provides transferable skills like adaptability, responsiveness and lateral thinking.”<sup>2</sup>*

The Statement notes that difficulty in finding a job; low school attainment and health and wellbeing issues are often intergenerational. As a result, schools are encouraged to engage parents in their child’s learning and provide a platform for greater support to young people and their families. Government and communities will help vulnerable young people and their families to access education, training and community participation programs and funding.

The project originated in the concern of staff in the Youth Connections program operating across the northern region of Melbourne that there may be significant numbers of disengaged young people who were under the age of 16. These concerns were strengthened by reports from local agencies such as Brunswick Youth Services that they had increasing waiting lists from young people under the age of 16 for entry to their support program.

The project was interested in young people aged between 10 and 15 years who were both completely disengaged, as well as those whose attendance record at school was poor.

An initial scoping report on educational disengagement among under 16 year olds commissioned by Youth Connections across the northern region of Melbourne in 2010 had found that there was evidence of quite large numbers of disengaged young people under 16 years of age when the whole of the northern region was considered.<sup>3</sup>

Of particular concern are the limited options available to young people under the age of 16 if they become disengaged from school. They are not eligible for support through Youth Allowance, they are unable to gain legal employment (unless granted an exemption at age 15), are too young to

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<sup>1</sup> *Engage Involve Create – Youth Statement* Victorian Government, Melbourne, April 2012

<sup>2</sup> *ibid*

<sup>3</sup> *Report on educational disengagement of young people under 15 years of age in the Northern region*, Combined Northern Region Youth Connections Consortia 2010

qualify for community based education programs such as community VCAL, as well as many support programs available to those aged 16 and over.

The lack of options contributes to the invisible nature of this group of disengaged young people. Since they are ineligible for many support programs as well as for income support, they can remain largely invisible to the education system and to other agencies unless they come into contact with human services workers and others dealing directly with their families.

This is reflected in how government collects data on disengagement. ABS statistics on *Educational Attainment: Early School Leavers* provides data only on those aged 15 and older. There is extremely limited capacity to track young people who are not enrolled in or attending school, or to quantify the numbers engaged in non-school based programs.<sup>4</sup>

## **Methodology**

The project was based on a series of data sources. It commenced with a desktop review of key documents including *The Report on educational disengagement of young people under 15 years of age in the Northern region (2010)* and various reports of the Hume Whittlesea LLEN.

Interviews with staff from five local agencies and seven government schools were used to map the service system, canvass issues and develop agreement on a format in which consistent and comparable data could be collected from schools, local agencies and key government departments. Separate interviews with six young people contacted through local agencies were arranged and used to identify key issues and develop the case studies included in this report.

## **Data availability**

A primary focus of this project was to try to discover as precisely as possible how many young people in the 10-15 year age group were not attending school.

To achieve this, the project was designed to obtain data from all schools within the City of Whittlesea on young people at risk of disengagement, and on those in the process of becoming disengaged. Government schools and the northern regional office of the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) were all highly co-operative and provided the requested data in de-identified form.

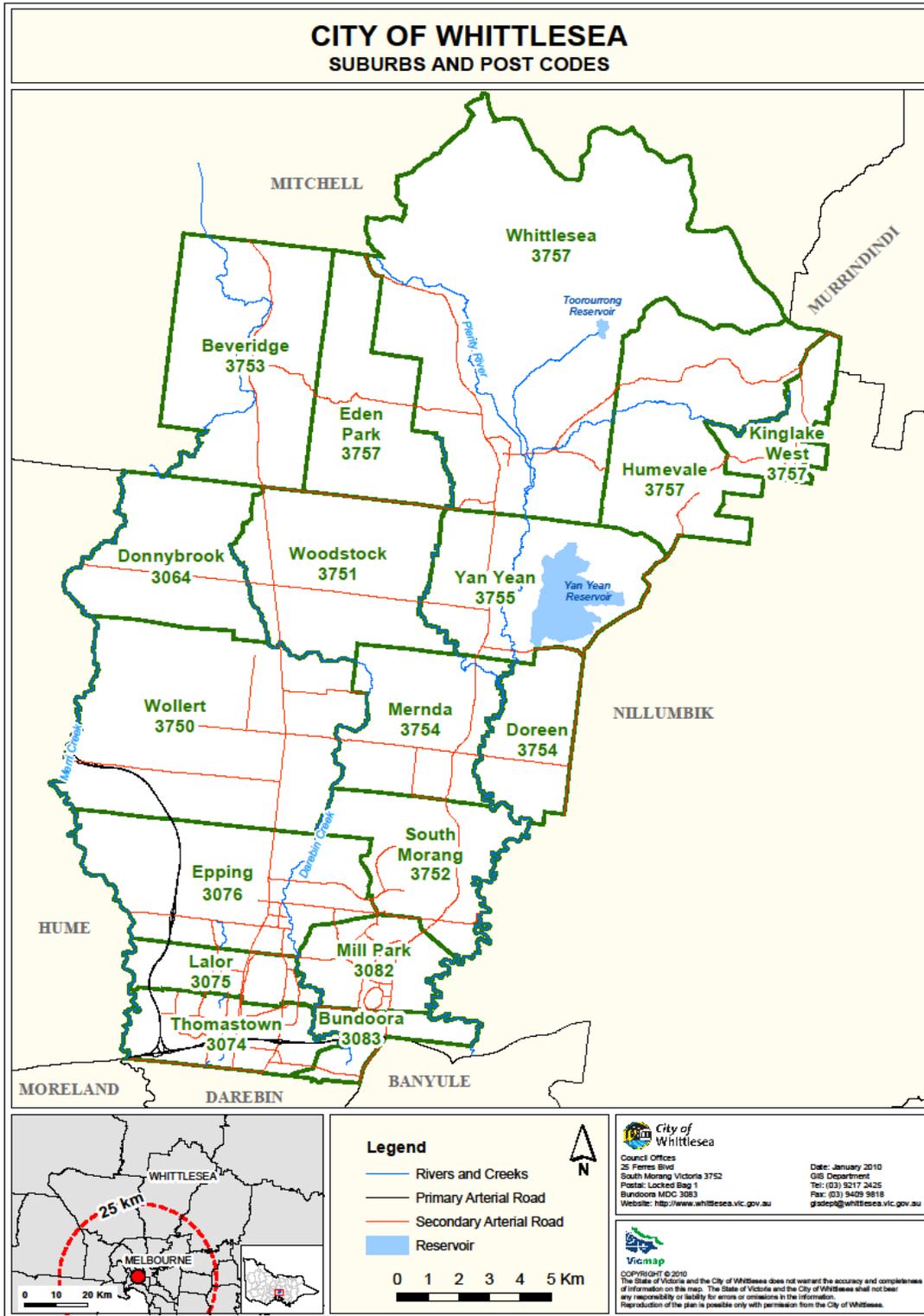
To identify the number of young people in the under 16 age group who had completely disengaged from school, data was sought from all government and not for profit organisations that might come into contact with this group of young people.

Unfortunately, while most local agencies provided data in the format requested, the Victorian Department of Human Services which holds key data on vulnerable young people in this age group who may not be attending school, declined to provide data, citing the requirements of the Privacy Act. As a result, the number of young people in the age group able to be identified through their engagement with local services may be much lower than the actual numbers. Interviews with young people and agencies indicate frequent instances of multiple members of the 10-15 age group within one family who are all not attending school, or attending on an extremely irregular basis.

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<sup>4</sup>KPMG, *Re-engaging Our Kids Framework for Education Provision to Children and Young People at Risk of Disengaging or Disengaged from School*, DEECD 2009

## 2. Profile of the City of Whittlesea



Source: City of Whittlesea

The City of Whittlesea is located on the metropolitan fringe, approximately 20kms north of Melbourne, covers 490 square kilometres, and encompasses both urban and rural areas, while still developing much of the social and physical infrastructure found in the older, inner city suburbs.

Rapid growth characterises the municipality, with its current population of 162,067 (2011) expected to effectively double to 295,440 by 2030. This growth however, is being achieved without the associated growth in community and human service infrastructure, which means that 'capacity is stretched across the range of service provision, particularly where families, children and young people have complex needs (City of Whittlesea, 2004). Transport has consistently been identified as a barrier for Whittlesea residents, in their ability to access services and participate in the community.<sup>5</sup>

Between the 2007 and 2011 Census over 32,000 people moved into the municipality and approximately 10,000 dwellings have been built. It is the second fastest growing municipality in Victoria, with around 100 people moving into the municipality each week. Much of this population increase consists of families with children and adolescents.<sup>6</sup>

### **Culturally diverse**

The City of Whittlesea is a highly diverse municipality. Just over one third of residents of the City of Whittlesea were born overseas (the average across the Melbourne metropolitan area is 29%). Of those born overseas, 57% were born in non-English speaking countries; which again is higher than the Melbourne or Victorian average.<sup>7</sup>

Of the city's population, 47.1% speaks a language other than English at home, higher than the state average of 24.5% (ABS, 2006). There is equally linguistic diversity, with 35 different language categories within Whittlesea. Additionally, only 53% of Whittlesea residents state that they speak English well, with 8.5% identifying that they speak English 'not well or not at all' (ABS, 2006), indicating that language is a barrier for many in Whittlesea.

### **SEIFA Index of Socio-economic Disadvantage**

According to the SEIFA Index of Socio-economic disadvantaged, Whittlesea has an overall moderate to low ranking (SEIFA 978.4) when compared to all Local Government Area populations across Australia. Suburbs within the Whittlesea LGA experience a broad range of socio-economic outcomes, from less advantaged Lalor to the more advantaged Whittlesea. Within the City of Whittlesea, the Lalor and Thomastown SLAs have significantly lower levels of educational attainment when compared to the metropolitan Melbourne Statistical Division (MSD)<sup>8</sup>.

### **Level of Educational achievement in Whittlesea**

ABS 2006 Census data demonstrates that the City has below average levels of post-compulsory educational attainment with only 9.3% of the working age population having completed a bachelor or higher degree, compared with 19.6% for the Melbourne Statistical Division (Whittlesea City Council profile.id 2011). Overall, 57.4% of the population has no post school qualification (compared with 45.8% across all Melbourne LGAs).

### **Large Youth Population**

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<sup>5</sup> Baseline: City of Whittlesea Youth Services 2012

<sup>6</sup> *ibid*

<sup>7</sup> *ibid*

<sup>8</sup> Whittlesea Local Government Area – Service Map & Background Information February 2012

The City of Whittlesea already has a relatively young age profile, with a higher percentage of young people in both the age brackets of 10-14 and 15-19 than the average across the Melbourne Statistical Division.<sup>9</sup> Current estimates indicate that there is close to 22,000 people aged 10-19 years (or 13.5% of the population). It is estimated this number will rise to over 30,000 by 2020 and to nearly 40,000 by 2030.<sup>10</sup>

Based on 2011 estimates, Mill Park has the highest number of young people aged 10-19 (3,966 or 15.3% of the population), followed by South Morang (2,812, 14.4%), Thomastown (2,769, 12.6%), Epping (2,767, 13.8%) and Lalor (2,518, 12.5%)<sup>11</sup>

A particular challenge for the municipality is the rate of youth disengagement. There are a significant number of disengaged youth in the region. The Hume Whittlesea Youth Connections tender (2009) stated that the latest Whittlesea youth disengagement rate was 3,000, or 16.9% (compared to the Melbourne Statistical Division rate of 7.4%). At 16.9% this is more than double that of the Melbourne Statistical District (MSD) at 7.4%.<sup>12</sup>

It has been found that:

- a large percentage of teenagers, 15 to 19 years old, and young adults 20 to 24 years of age, are disengaged from education and employment
- there are fewer young people attending university or post-secondary education.<sup>13</sup>

The key youth demographics are summarised in the following table.

**Table 1: Profile of Young People in the Whittlesea region**

Estimated total population 2011		<b>162,067</b>
	Aged 10-14	<b>10,863</b>
	Aged 15-19	<b>10,987</b>
Indigenous population	(2006 Census)	<b>843</b>
Indigenous youth aged 12-17	(2006 Census)	<b>139</b>
Young migrants (aged 10-19) arriving in 2010	(DIAC 2011)	<b>68</b>
Young humanitarian migrant arrivals (aged 10-19) arriving 2010	(DIAC 2011)	<b>14</b>

Sources: City of Whittlesea Forecast.id 2011; City of Whittlesea profile.id 2011; DIAC 2011

## Refugee Numbers

Whittlesea also has the 9th highest proportion of humanitarian youth arrivals of all Greater Melbourne LGAs. These young people are from a number of places including Iraq, Central and Western Africa.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>9</sup> City of Whittlesea forecast.id, 2011; Hume Whittlesea LLEN Environmental Scan 2011.

<sup>10</sup> City of Whittlesea forecast.id, 2011.

<sup>11</sup> City of Whittlesea forecast.id, 2011; Hume Whittlesea LLEN Environmental Scan 2011.

<sup>12</sup> Hume Whittlesea LLEN Environmental Scan 2011

<sup>13</sup> Baseline: City of Whittlesea Youth Services 2012

<sup>14</sup> ibid

## Indigenous population

The City of Whittlesea has a relatively large indigenous population. Although indigenous people make up a small proportion of the total population, the number of indigenous persons measured by the Census increased by 24% between 2001 and 2006, to a total of 844 persons. Many of these are young people 25 and under.<sup>15</sup>

### 3. Attendance at school

A key indicator of growing disengagement from school is a long term pattern of poor attendance at school. High levels of poor attendance over an extended period indicate elevated levels of risk of subsequent disengagement from school.

In order to assess the extent of potential school disengagement, data on patterns of school non-attendance in 2011 were collected from secondary schools across Whittlesea. The data collected shows that there are significant numbers of young people between the ages of 10 and 15 in the City of Whittlesea attending school on average less than 80% of the time, and a smaller but still sizeable group attending less than 60% of the time.

The following table indicates the total enrolment in government schools in Whittlesea by the four year levels that cover the age range of 12 to 15 year olds. These are as follows:

**Table 2: Enrolment in government schools in Whittlesea 2011**

	Year 7	Year 8	Year 9	Year 10
Government schools	1320	1357	1290	1231

**Source: DEECD Northern Regional Office unpublished data**

In 2011 there were 5199 students enrolled in government schools in Years 7 to 10. Assuming that half of the Year 10 cohort will turn 16 at mid year, it is estimated that around 4583 will have been aged between 12 and 15 in 2011.

Data provided by government secondary schools indicates there are at least 61 young people in this age group attending school on average less than 3 days a week, and a further 348 attending less than 4 days a week. A total of over 409 young people across Whittlesea attending government schools are missing at least one day of school on average each week.

Based on the data reported by the government schools, 7.6% of this age group are missing an average of one day of school each week, and a further 1.3% is missing more than 2 days of school each week on average.

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<sup>15</sup> *ibid*

**Table 3: Average 2011 school attendance less than 3 days a week (over 40% non-attendance)  
Government sector**

	<b>Aged 12 -14</b>	<b>Total aged under 16</b>	<b>Female</b>
School A	10	13	9
School B	7	10	4
School C	0	1	0
School D	5	15	8
School E	6	9	4
School F	1	4	3
School G	2	9	2
<b>Sub Total</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>61</b>	<b>30</b>

**Other sectors**

	<b>Aged 12 -14</b>	<b>Total aged under 16</b>	<b>Female</b>
School H	0	2	2
<b>Overall Total</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>63</b>	<b>32</b>

Nearly all these students are reported to have an English speaking background. The 12 to 14 age group comprise more than half of those averaging less than three days of school. Females comprise half the total.

**Table 4: Average 2011 school attendance less than 4 days a week (over 20% non-attendance)**

	<b>Aged 12 -14</b>	<b>Total aged under 16</b>	<b>Female</b>
School A	61	91	41
School B	31	44	31
School C	4	8	4
School D	31	59	27
School E	3	42	24
School F	14	20	8
School G	33	84	40
<b>Sub Total</b>	<b>177</b>	<b>348</b>	<b>175</b>

**Other sectors**

	<b>Aged 12 -14</b>	<b>Total aged under 16</b>	<b>Gender</b>
School H	0	0	0
<b>Overall Total</b>	<b>177</b>	<b>348</b>	<b>175</b>

The 12-14 year old age group comprise roughly half of those averaging attendance between 3 and 4 days each week. Again, they predominantly come from English speaking family backgrounds.

**Expulsions**

There were 19 expulsions reported by government schools in 2011. Of these, 17 of those expelled were male and 2 were female. More than half those expelled were aged 14 or under. There was also one expulsion from a catholic sector school.

## **Uncontactable**

A further 10 students were reported as still enrolled at government schools in 2011, but were also reported as being “unable to be contacted” for a various reasons.

Patterns of irregular school attendance commence early in primary school years. Principals of local primary school report patterns of late arrival or non-attendance commencing from Grade 1 and continuing through the early years of school., establishing a pattern of intermittent attendance with associated learning issues. This occurs across both the primary and the secondary school years.

## **4. Disengagement from school**

There are a smaller number of young people in this age group who cease attending school altogether for periods ranging from one to three years. Interviews with a sample of young people indicated that the following transitions sometimes led to young people ceasing to attend school.

- Some who had been expelled or asked to leave school, may or may not have commenced at a new school for a month or two, and then ceased to attend altogether
- Some who had transitioned from primary to secondary school, attended the secondary school for a short period and then stopped attending altogether
- Some who had families that experienced relatively high mobility through short term rental changes, and in the process ceased attending school.

This suggests that the transition involved when a young person moves between schools (either through expulsion, a request to voluntarily leave, or in the move from primary to secondary school) is a time when they have a much stronger likelihood of becoming disengaged.

### **Primary to secondary transition**

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.

### **High mobility**

The third trend (that of ceasing to attend due to mobility resulting from high rates of rental and housing instability) is particularly a factor with some families. Both peak bodies and service agencies indicate that this is a contributing factor to lengthy periods of non engagement with education, and this was confirmed through several of the interviews.

### **Family Breakdown**

School wellbeing staff report that a high number of disengaged students reside in homes where parents no longer live together. In one school, staff indicate that more than half of students considered at risk of disengagement are living in households in which parents have separated. This profile was reinforced by the case studies undertaken for this report, where the majority of young people indicated they came from single parent households.

## Length of disengagement

A standard period of complete disengagement for those who cease attending schools appears to be between 12 and 18 months. Evidence for this is found not only in the interviews conducted with families and young people, but also in the experience of support services such as Project Edge whose clients have typically been out of school for such periods prior to enrolling with their programs.

The Victorian Department of Human Services is a key agency with whom disengaged young people are likely to come into contact. However, DHS Victoria did not make data available to this project. Therefore only general estimates can be made of the extent of those completely disengaged from education, training and employment in Whittlesea. Six young people aged between 10 and 15 who were interviewed for this project were disengaged from school for periods of between two years.

Each of the young people interviewed for case studies in this project indicated that they personally knew anywhere up to six other people of the same age who were also not attending school at the same time period that they were out of school.

## Contact with support services

There were 5 Youth Connections services that reported young people from Whittlesea being assisted in this age group in 2011.

**Table 5: Agencies reporting Whittlesea clients under the age of 16 assisted in 2011.**

Kildonan Uniting Care	Epping
Mission Australia	Preston
NMIT Youth Unit	Heidelberg
The Salvation Army	North Coburg
Whittlesea Community Connections	Epping

Females	Males	Total
17	23	40

## Age of those disengaged

The extent of school non-engagement increases as young people reach 14 and 15 years of age, but there are some 12 and 13 year olds in Whittlesea being assisted by agencies focussed on disengagement. There were three 13 years olds, and one 12 year old being assisted by these agencies. Predictably, the largest group were 15 year olds. Once students have ceased attending, they report being out of school for several years.

**Table 6: Client age of actual numbers of under 16 year olds supported by Agencies**

Age of client	Number
11 years or younger	0
12 years old	1
13 years old	3
14 years old	12
15 years old	24
<b>Total</b>	<b>40</b>

Not all of these 40 young people are entirely disengaged from school – but the majority are. The agencies were asked to indicate how many of the under 16 year olds from Whittlesea they were

assisting were known to be not attending school at all. They collectively indicated that 25 of the 40 young people aged 10-15 year olds that they were assisting were ‘out of school.’

**Table 7: 2011 Agency Clients under the age of 16 reported to be not attending schools**

Females	Males	Total
13	12	25

**When the 25 not attending school in 2011 are added to the 409 who were attending school less than four days a week on average across the year, there are over 434 young people identified as either partially or completely disengaged from school in Whittlesea.**

### **Australian Government Department of Human Services**

Centrelink primary payments require applicant to be 16 years of age. Prior to that age few young people contact Centrelink for assistance, although there are some exceptional circumstances. As soon as young people turned 16 however, significant numbers apply for assistance through Youth Allowance, Disability Support Payment, and Low Income Cards.

### **NMIT TAFE Youth Unit**

NMIT also provided data on the number of young people under 16 years of age enrolled in 2011. This data includes young people studying pre-apprenticeships, VCAL and possibly VCE programs, but does not include VET in Schools (as those young people would still be enrolled at a school) or short courses. The 126 students reported by NMIT Youth Unit for 2011 were almost entirely aged 15 when they enrolled. Two thirds were male,

**Table 9: 2011 NMIT enrolments under the age of 16.**

	Females	Males	Total
NMIT	41	85	126

\* excludes VET in Schools and Short Course enrolments

To put this in perspective, there are more than 120 students who live in Whittlesea that were enrolled in TAFE in 2011, while there were approximately 2,500 students who were enrolled in Year 9 or Year 10 in all government schools in Whittlesea in the same period.

### **Department of Human Services (Victoria)**

No data returns were provided from the Department of Human Services (Victoria) which includes young people in Residential Care. The lack of information available from this Department makes it difficult to determine how many more young people under 16 might be disengaged from school, as it is services such as Juvenile Justice, Child Protection and Residential Care that have a higher likelihood of being in contact with young people in this situation.

Research highlights that many children and young people who have been in out-of-home care leave formal schooling at a relatively young age, with 47 per cent of young people surveyed leaving school before the age of 16.<sup>16</sup>

**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,

<sup>16</sup> Children in Out-of-Home Care in Victoria: Numbers in Care and Educational Outcomes Achieved, Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare, May 2008

Catholic Education Commission of Victoria and Independent Schools Victoria) **outlines the requirements and responsibilities of all parties to work in cooperation to improve the educational experience and outcomes of children and young people in out of-home care**

Amongst other things, this provides a framework to monitor educational engagement and achievement more closely in order to improve outcomes related to student enrolment, attendance, achievement, case planning, retention and school completion. As the Partnering Agreement notes:

*“Regular attendance at school is essential if children and young people are to engage with education and actively participate in learning. It is important that children develop habits of regular attendance at an early age. Students who are regularly absent from school are at risk of missing out on fundamental aspects of their educational and social development, and disengaging from schooling”*(p.13)

**Key data that to establish how many young people under 16 in out of home care in Whittlesea are disengaged from school would assist in providing a more complete picture of the extent and nature of educational disengagement.**

## **5. Case Studies**

### **Case Study 1.**

**Michael is aged 14. His parents have separated and he lives with his mother and a younger sister aged 12. There is also an older brother who has left home. He spends half the week with his mother and the other half at his father’s house.**

**In Year 7 during first term he was expelled from school for being what he termed “disrespectful”.**

**Teachers from his secondary school referred him to Lynall Hall school, which he went to for a time, but after another term there he says that he ... “just stopped going”. He thinks that neither of his parents were happy about him not going to school, but they did not say anything about it. For most of the following year he did not attend school.**

**He spent his time at home on Play Station or going to a friend’s house. He says that he knew up to 10 other students that he hung out with, most of whom had been expelled from the school he attended or other local schools.**

**He says that he would like to be an electrician (which is his father’s trade).**

**After some months of not attending school at all he heard about the Pavilion School and participated in Project Edge while waiting for a place to become available.**

## Case Study 2.

Leah is aged 14. She lives with her mother and a 17 year old sister.

In Year 7 she was already only going to school a few days each week, as she didn't like school and felt that many or most teachers were singling her out for blame. She feels that she *'struggled a bit at school, but the work was not too bad.'*

Then she hurt her foot and had to go to have surgery. She subsequently never went back to school. She stopped going to school in Year 8 when she was 13 years old.

Her mother knew that she wasn't going to school, but *"she knew I didn't want to go back and she couldn't make me."* She spent a couple of months not attending school at all, and says she knew three other young people her age who were also not attending at that time (but have all gone back to school since). Sometimes they would all go shopping together; other days she just spent at home.

After a time she became bored at home and wished that she could go back to school. Leah began going to an Adult Community Education Centre in Reservoir where there were some other young people in an education program, but she found it difficult to get there, so she soon dropped out of that as well.

However, one of the teachers from ACE offered to give her tutoring sessions in the local library one day a week. She also went to see a counsellor a couple of times at Berry Street, and through that was referred to Youth Connections ending up on the waiting list for the Pavilion school.

On reflection, she wishes that she had just tried another school rather than deciding to stop going because of her dissatisfaction with the school she was at. In the long term she thinks that she would like to do interior design or photography.

## Case Study 3.

Brett is a Year 7 student at a local secondary college. He lives with his father.

Brett has a very short attention span and needs one to one attention to be able to cope with school. He comes to school most days, but then jumps the fence and disappears to the local shopping centre.

He gets on well with some school staff who describe him as a "likeable person who is very disorganised". One of his teachers says of him... *"he is typical of a lot of kids we have. We can't get them to sit still and stay in the classroom. They want to hang around the school, but they are just unable to stay in a classroom."*

## Case Study 4.

**James is a Year 5 student at a local Primary School. He is finding it difficult to fit in and the school is trying to find alternatives to keep him engaged. He transferred from another Primary School about 18 months ago.**

**He does not have a stable home life and lives with his single mother who is struggling to get him to school.**

**At night he roams the streets. If the school suspends him for his aggressive and volatile behaviour, he also spends his day on the street, so the school does not consider that an option.**

**For a time he went to Baltara which he really liked and appeared to produce positive results as a result of the hands on activity they provided and the low staff student ratio. However, the time that he could spend at Baltara was limited and he has had to return to the Primary School.**

**The school principal reports that James is a ‘*a terrific kid if you can work with him one to one*’, but he is very concerned about what will happen to him once he has to go to secondary school.**

## Case Study 5

**Steve is a 13 year old who was in Year 8 at a local secondary college.**

**His parents are separated, and he spends time moving between their two households. He has a younger brother who has autism, and an older sister living at home who attends TAFE.**

**He says that he was bullied all through Year 7 and 8 by a particular student at the school (and that they both subsequently got into trouble at school as a result of the issues between them). He stopped going to school in Year 8 as a result.**

**Also says that he is quietly “*a bit lazy*”, has bad handwriting, and was not good at maths and didn’t like doing it. He says that he found it hard to work at school, finding the environment “very noisy.” He prefers quietness.**

**When he stopped going to school, he was ‘*just sitting around doing nothing.*’ But at the same time he was having difficulty sleeping. This went on for a couple of months. When staying with his father, Corey pretended to go to school, but would then travel into the city during the day. When at his mother’s house, he was more open about the fact that he was not going to school.**

**Through a youth worker he began to explore the option of alternative school and eventually was referred to Project Edge in Mill Park**

## Case Study 6

**Mike is 14 years old.**

**He lives with his nanna and an older brother aged 19. His grandpa died some time ago. His parents are still alive, but he and his brother have been raised by the grandparents for the past 6 or 7 years. The brother dropped out of school around Year 10, but went to TAFE and is now doing VCE there.**

**In 2011 when Mike was in Year 7, he began to only attend school one day a week, when he would go for a few hours and then return home again.**

**There was generally no-one else there when he went home during the day. His nan tried to get him to go to school and would sometimes drop him off at school herself, but he would just wait for an hour or so and then go home again.**

**He says that he felt uncomfortable at school and he just decided to stop attending in Year 8. The secondary school followed up about his absence, and suggested that he could be supported by an aide at school, but this idea just annoyed him so he didn't go at all after that.**

**According to Mike he knew another student in Year 7 who was also just going home from the school early in the day, as well as several other in Years 8 and 9.**

**He spent about a month not going to school at all. Through a Youth Connections case worker he was referred to the Pavilion school and commenced with Project Edge while he waited for a place in the program.**

## **6. Factors contributing to disengagement**

There is a combination of factors that contribute to school disengagement among younger students: some are to do with the personal circumstances and skills of the individual, more often to do with their family context, and also the nature of the school system in which they find themselves.

In 2008 a literature review investigated the disengagement of young people from secondary education in the northern region and identified the support and pathways necessary for young people to succeed in school (Drummond 2008).

Drummond noted that there are many reasons that young people become disengaged and that the key school years between Year 5 and Year 9 is when students need to experience success in their studies, be challenged and engaged in things that are of interest to them. The literature review identified a number of factors that contributed to disengagement and include:

- Negative feelings about the value of their continued involvement in schooling
- Lack of parental support
- An under-valuing by parents, teachers and community of vocations that are not academic
- Lack of awareness of all education and work options and pathways
- Lack of engagement with the community
- Poor literacy and numeracy skills at the time of transition to secondary school
- Experience of failure with study, which causes a lack of future motivation.

Interviews with local youth service and support providers and with school staff identified a series of factors particularly prevalent in their experience in Whittlesea.

### **Students with Additional Learning Needs**

One important contributing factor to school disengagement is the high level of learning disability among students that mainstream schools are unable to effectively deal with. Testing of young people provides results that frequently score just over the cut off point on eligibility for special school education. (For example young people demonstrating autism related disorders such as Aspergers which result in challenging behaviour but where IQ levels may be above the level required to access services at special schools).

### **Mental health issues**

Higher rates of poor mental health are reported among young people in the Whittlesea region. A Victorian Department of Human Services (DHS) study (Bond, Thomas et al. 2000) showed that risk factors as associated with poor mental health were overrepresented in the Interface municipalities. (Access Economics (2008)). In particular, depressive symptoms were generally higher in youths living on the fringe compared to youths living in other local council areas in Melbourne.

### **Family poverty and dysfunction**

Family poverty and dysfunction are reported as key contributors to educational disengagement both by school staff and by Family Services teams. Parents in some cases lack control over their children. In other instances the absence of a regular household routine based around school and work makes it extremely difficult for young people to make it to school on any regular basis.

An additional factor is the number of parents who have themselves previously had unsuccessful and unsatisfactory experiences with their own schooling, who as a result find it difficult to relate to and engage with schools, and place less importance on their children's regular school attendance and

engagement. Families who are themselves not well connected don't tend to see education as an important option.

### **Acting as family carers**

Some young people are encouraged to remain at home to act as carers for family members, sometimes when parents have issues with drug or alcohol addiction, but in other cases due to the psychological dependency of the parent on the child.

### **Young people who are in Care**

An "at risk" group are young people who are in Care. While this group are particularly at risk of disengaging before the age of 16, the impact of partnering arrangements between schools and DHS case managers on patterns of school attendance continues to be difficult to obtain.

### **On-line bullying**

A developing trend causing increased rates of non-attendance is the occurrence of on-line bullying between students. Both school staff and workers in some agencies noted this as an increasing cause and was leading otherwise academically capable students to refuse to attend school for periods of varying duration.

## **7. What would help young people re-engage?**

Recent national and international research on models of effective re-engagement for disengaged learners has identified four key requirements that are also applicable to assisting young people under the age of 16.<sup>17</sup>

- **Find some way of connecting** with disengaged young people who may be socially marginalised in order to identify their needs and inform them of available options. This variously involves providing easily accessible information, bringing learning to the learner, targeting high needs groups, and establishing lasting meaningful relationships.
- **Addressing their welfare needs** is crucial for any successful intervention. Successful interventions recognise that they are often dealing with young people who have a variety of obstacles that affect their capacity to participate in learning. Intensive support through guidance, counselling, monitoring and follow-up, taking a client sensitive approach to well-being, developing beneficial relationships within the community, delivering services within a hub, and providing whole community or familial intervention are five essential strategies in addressing learner needs associated with well-being.
- **An appropriate approach to learning** that takes account of young people's previous negative experiences of learning, failure at school, and avoidance of formal teaching and learning. Disengaged learners require acknowledgment of their learning interests and building upon their pre-existing knowledge and skills. Four core strategies identified for effective programs are: making learning applied or hands on, providing flexible learning options, addressing literacy and numeracy skill development needs and offering programs that integrate technologies.

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<sup>17</sup> Davies M, Lamb S, and Doecke E, Strategic Review of Effective Re-engagement models for Disengaged Learners, University of Melbourne 2011 p6

- **Creating and presenting relevant pathways** for learners that provide links to other study and to work and career development opportunities.

### **What young people are saying?**

Within this project, young disengaged people were asked what would have helped them remain at school or made returning more viable. Their responses echoed some of the themes identified in the research:

#### **Supportive relationships with staff**

The benefit of having a supportive relationship with staff involved in the re-engagement process is important to young people. This reflects a need to feel connected to one or more people involved in the re-engagement process and is more viable in small scale programs. It is usually in contrast to their previous educational experience where relationships were not seen to have been sufficiently supportive.

#### **More practical applied options earlier in the school curriculum**

A strong theme in the opinions of those we interviewed was an interest in applied learning that was not available to them in Years 7 to 9. The curriculum available to them seemed boring and appeared to them to emphasise what they could not do rather than what they could. This was particularly the case if they found the required levels of reading and numeracy challenging. A curriculum that provided diverse applied 'hands on' learning opportunities was attractive to many of those interviewed, and was a factor in the strong interest in enrolling in various VCAL options once they were old enough to do so.

#### **Opportunities to combine part-time school with other activity**

The flexibility of blending part-time school with other community engagement and support activities would assist some young people teetering on the edge of disengagement. Some find it difficult to cope with full-time school, and start to absent themselves rather than having a structured opportunity to combine with other activity that might also be usefully developing skills. Part-time schooling is already an option with the approval of the DEECD Regional Office and the take-up of part-time options combined with other appropriate programs could and should be encouraged.

#### **Building on the value of peer relationships**

Some school staff report that a percentage of their younger students who leave school subsequently return after one or two terms as they miss their friends. Several of the disengaged young people interviewed for case studies reported that the main thing they missed about school if they left were their school friends. Greater use might be made of these relationships in pro-actively encouraging students to return to school.

## **8. Services to support young people in Whittlesea**

### **Alternative Education Programs**

Young people who are marginally engaged at school, or who have become disengaged need access to alternative options for learning to the mainstream secondary schools. The large mainstream secondary schools are limited in their capacity to respond to the particular needs of these students. Teaching and learning environments that are most likely to be able to help these students re-engage are relatively small in scale (compared to normal secondary schools), have the capacity to develop learning programs that meet the needs of the individual, and provide significant social and emotional support in conjunction with the curriculum.

Research and practice has identified the following approaches to teaching to be essential elements for re-engagement.

- Making learning less formal
- Providing flexible options
- Addressing literacy and numeracy skill development needs
- Making learning applied or hands-on

### **Meet welfare needs**

Identifying and acting upon the welfare needs of disengaged young people are also required for any successful intervention. Best practice delivery interventions recognise that they are dealing with people who have a variety of obstacles that affect their ability to learn. The factors that impact on their wellbeing are complex including mental-health, drug and alcohol issues, family violence, and no history of people working in the family.

### **Provide holistic approach**

Many programs adopt a holistic approach that simultaneously develops supports for addressing personal wellbeing needs while helping the young person access the learning program appropriate to their needs.<sup>18</sup> A holistic approach developing a range of partnerships within a program can assist in meeting the needs of disengaged learners.

### **Provide sustained approach**

The other element required is a sustained approach. If young people have been disengaged from education for several years, then short term 10 or 12 week programs are unlikely to be sufficient to provide a longer term re-engagement option.

There are limited alternative education options available to young people under 16 in Whittlesea that combine these elements. The options that have been identified are as follows:

#### **Teaching Units**

Teaching Units at Coburg, Heidelberg and Brunswick West provide short term interventions in an attempt to re-engage the students over a term before transitioning them back into regular secondary schools. The Teaching Units offer temporary intensive assistance (12 weeks) for students experiencing learning, social or emotional difficulties at school. Teaching Units aim to re-integrate students back into their schools after their period of placement in the intensive Teaching Unit. The Units typically provide intensive

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<sup>18</sup> Davies M, Lamb S, and Doecke E, Strategic Review of Effective Re-engagement models for Disengaged Learners, University of Melbourne 2011

language, literacy, numeracy and social programs. Students are accepted from all secondary schools. Students attend four days a week, and on the other day attend their original school to maintain contact and establish a re-integration plan.

### **The Island**

The Island is located in Coburg and is a small ‘hands on’ educational provider that offers work preparation education and training programs for 15-18 year olds through VCAL options at Foundation and Intermediate level. In August 2011 the Island had 21 enrolments. Analysis of their 2011 enrolments found one student under the age of 16 who came from Whittlesea. The majority of their enrolments either come from western region LGAs or are aged over 16.

### **The Pavilion**

The Pavilion School campus in Mill Park provides for young people aged 14 to 20 years old. The Pavilion started with 20 students in 2009, and has since expanded to 150 students across the two campuses in Mill Park and Preston. Its aim is to re-engage students who have been outside of any education and training for a minimum of 3 months by creating a positive relationship with the student as a basis for change.

The school is designed as a transition and/or re-integration centre for young people who access educational support tailored to individual needs in small classes of 6 to 12 people. Social work support is provided to each student and can include counselling, advice and referral if required. Learning is based on the Victorian Essential Learning Standards and the VCAL.

The Pavilion offers the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL) program within a targeted curriculum that tackles individual learning deficiencies over a shortened-time period, while meeting the requirements of the certification. The school staff have extensive experience in both social work and education. Each student’s initial contact point is with the school counsellor, who instigates one-on-one therapeutic sessions to talk to students and their families, to identify the support structures they need to have put in place to recommence their studies and start at the school.

They have approximately 160 students enrolled, with most referrals from schools and other agencies in either Whittlesea or Darebin.

### **Northern Metropolitan Institute of TAFE Youth Unit**

The Youth Unit at NMIT provides both VCAL and VCE programs for early school leavers, as well as pre-apprenticeships and other VET Certificate courses.

### **Analysis of Education Programs to support re-engagement**

It is apparent from this listing of education re-engagement programs in Whittlesea that there are very few options for those aged under 16. At 15 there are at least some options (e.g. The Island, the Pavilion), but for anyone under 15 there are almost none.

Teaching Units offer only short assistance for a term; and then students have to return to their mainstream school and the same environment which they previously found problematic.

As a result, the pattern that appears to develop for young people who become disengaged from school in Years 7, 8 and 9 is a “waiting game”. If they decide that they do not want to attend one of the mainstream secondary schools, they wait out the period of one, two or three years until they are

eligible for less-formal, flexible and applied learning programs (such as VCAL) at the age of 15 or 16.

In the meantime, they are largely invisible to both education and other support systems.

### **Other Services supporting re-engagement for those under 16**

There are a variety of youth services that address particular barriers to educational and community engagement such as mental health services, disability services, and services for the homeless that can be accessed in the region. However, in this section we have confined the analysis to those services that have some focus on engagement and re-engagement with education and training.

#### **Youth Connections**

The main initiative established to support young people in the younger age group is the Commonwealth funded Youth Connections program that provides support for 13-19 year olds who are disengaged or at risk of disengaging.

Northern Melbourne Institute of TAFE is the lead agent for the Hume Whittlesea Youth Connections consortia, and many of the main agencies in the LGA that provide youth services are also members of the consortia. These services are provided by Kildonan Uniting Care, Mission Australia, The Salvation Army, Whittlesea Community Connections, and the NMIT Youth Unit.

#### **Kildonan**

Kildonan provides the Reconnect Program including individual and family case management, counselling, mediation and conflict resolution case work with young people aged 12-18 and their families at risk of homelessness.

#### **Smith Family**

The Smith Family provide services and scholarships to meet education expenses for disadvantaged young people through specific schools in Whittlesea.

### **Analysis of Support Programs for those under 16 year olds**

Compared to other northern region Local Government Areas, there are a limited number of organisations that provide direct youth support and counselling services or that provide support to young people in a family context.

The Whittlesea Council Youth Services Team has a particular focus on working in partnership with schools as well as operating within particular local areas. The works “*supports wellbeing, positive engagement, developmental and learning outcomes for young people.*” The Team also provides resources and links for parents, teachers and others both within schools and in the local community.

However, only the Project Edge (co-sponsored by the Council, Kildonan and the Pavilion School) actively address re-engagement in education as a standalone activity.

Workers coming into contact with disengaged young people and those only marginally attached to schools report that they have very few referral options for those aged under 16. Program options are soon swamped by applicants as word of mouth spreads about the option. Further activities and programs need to be available to assist the re-engagement of large pool of young people that remain invisible to the service systems.

## **9. Summary of Findings**

Many young people under the age of 16 in the City of Whittlesea attend school on a very irregular basis. Government schools reported in excess of 411 young people in this situation.

There is a smaller and almost invisible group of young people under the age of 16 who are not attending school, few of whom interact with government or community agencies unless they get into trouble with police or come to the attention of services such as Child Protection.

Interviews with those working with local families and interviews undertaken for this project with young people suggest that there are considerable numbers not attending, especially when it is identified there are often multiple instances of young people in the one family not attending school.

Many of the under 16 year olds disengaged from school have no contact with youth agencies or other support systems. Therefore it is almost certain that the 25 reported by Whittlesea agencies as not attending school in 2011 understates the actual extent of complete school disengagement among 10 to 15 year olds.

When re-engagement with education does occur, it is frequently the result of word of mouth peer referrals to programs such as the Pavilion School.

One of the factors that make it extremely difficult to establish the extent of school non-attendance for this age group is that Government agencies will not release data citing privacy legislative requirements. Since data is not shared even between government agencies, the effect is to keep the extent of school disengagement hidden from public view. The focus of Government data collection on school disengagement commences at 15 years of age, when the evidence is that some young people have not been going to school for several years by that time.

Based on the available data and interviews, the majority of those disengaged from school appear to be in the 13-15 year old age group, but there are some cases in which disengagement has occurred by 11 or 12 years of age. This is consistent with Victoria Police and Juvenile Justice data that also indicates that most contact occurs from age 14, and particularly age 15.

More effective integrated tracking mechanisms from primary school and beyond would assist in more accurately quantifying how many people under 16 are not attending school.

### **Primary to Secondary Schools Transition**

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.

### **Applied Learning Options**

The lack of sustainable learning programs in Whittlesea has been noted. There is a need for practical applied learning options available from at least the beginning of secondary school. The most frequent suggestion from currently or formerly disengaged young people that were interviewed was for more applied learning options to be provided earlier than the VCAL or pre-VCAL programs currently available.

When young people who have been disengaged for lengthy periods become eligible at 15 or 16 for enrolment in VCAL programs they often decide to return to education and training through community or TAFE programs.

These programs provide a less formal learning environment more flexible options and still work to address literacy and numeracy skill development.

The learning environment also needs to be kept to a small class size so that strong personal relations have a chance of being established between students, staff and parents. The first point of re-engagement must be small scale and capable of providing the level of intense support required for the particular individual.

### **Parent and family engagement**

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 Whittlesea 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 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 students’<sup>19</sup>*

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

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. 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.

### **Data Collection**

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<sup>19</sup> Family School Partnership Framework DEEWR 2008

As per the Moreland Under16 Report “Invisible and Ineligible”<sup>20</sup> to capture information on when and how young people cease attending school we propose development of a standard interview template that could be used by each agency that comes into contact with a young who is re-engaging with education or other programs.

The information could be periodically collated to identify patterns of disengagement and opportunities for strengthening the service system.

Repeating the process of data collection from schools on patterns of non-attendance among the under 16 age group will enable longer term trends to be monitored and help develop a focus on engagement issues for this age group.

Resolving the blocking of access to data by government agencies most likely to interact with young people who are not attending school will provide a much more complete picture as to the extent of complete school disengagement. Surveying only the community agencies with which those under 16 come into contact provides a limited insight into the full extent of disengagement.

## **10. Strategies to improve engagement of those under 16.**

- (a) In order to provide all students with flexible and responsive learning options (particularly those who are most vulnerable) secondary schools need to broaden the range of programs and supports relevant for students in Years 7 to 9. In particular there needs to be a focus on providing small scale applied learning options that include appropriate support for participants. The best means of developing applied learning options for students in Years 7 to 9 will be through partnerships between schools and vocationally focussed organisations.
- (b) School disengagement is beginning to occur more frequently in Year 5 and 6 at primary school level. Some primary school principals are suggesting that there is a need for Youth Connections style support for students and schools in these years. Some parents and students provide feedback to primary school staff and those working in other agencies about how difficult some young people find the transition from primary to secondary school. To strengthen the transition for students identified at risk, formation of partnerships between schools and external support agencies would improve the prospects of successful transitions for at risk students. Primary schools in particular need support and experience in working with relevant partners.
- (c) Parents need more support to assist them deal more effectively with the issue of school refusal. Single parents in particular appear to struggle to either support their children attend school or be able to address school attendance effectively. In some cases schools also report difficulty in engaging parents; especially in relation to attendance issues. School follow up on attendance requirements can be difficult to balance with provision of support for parents. Parenting programs run locally by the City of Whittlesea and Kildonan provide a non-school based model of support and could be provided with greater support aimed at parents of students in Years 5 and 6 and linked to the emerging Whittlesea primary to secondary transition strategy.

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<sup>20</sup> U/16: Invisible & Ineligible...The Moreland Under 16 Project

- (d) Many students in Years 7-9 effectively choose to attend school part-time through the pattern of attendance they establish. Options for creating more effective models of part-time school through combining with community support and other forms of learning engagement need to be developed. Some local schools already attempt to negotiate such arrangements with specific students. Packaging a program for disengaging students might combine school with other supports (such as Neighbourhood House programs or local government services)
- (e) Local data collection processes need improvement to enable more accurate identification of young people under the age of 16 who are not attending school. This should include:
  - a. Developing an agreed data collection approach with Principals from Government, Catholic and Independent schools and Community Agencies in Whittlesea.
  - b. Identify and collect data on attendance and level of engagement of all students living in Whittlesea on an annual basis in partnership across Primary and Secondary Schools, Community Agencies, Youth Connections brokered by the Hume Whittlesea LLEN.
- (f) School welfare and wellbeing staff are key contacts on student disengagement. They appear to have relatively few opportunities to meet colleagues, discuss issues and achieve a profile across the school community. A regional conference or seminar would provide a higher profile on the issues facing this cohort of students and provide a platform for exchange of information on support strategies.

## References

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City of Whittlesea Forecast id. 2011 sourced at <http://profile.id.com.au/whittlesea/home>

Davies M, Lamb S, and Doecke E, Strategic Review of Effective Re-engagement models for Disengaged Learners, University of Melbourne, DEECD 2011

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*Out of Home Care Education Commitment*, A Partnering Agreement between Department of Human Services, Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, Catholic Education Commission of Victoria and Independent Schools Victoria, published by DEECD Melbourne August 2011

Family School Partnership Framework DEEWR 2008

U/16: Out of School, Out of Sight...The Hume Under 16 Project

U/16: Invisible & Ineligible...The Moreland Under 16 Project

## Attachment 1

### Whittlesea Under 16 Project Data Collection

The “Whittlesea Under 16 Project” is attempting to identify as precisely as possible the number of young people aged between 10-15 years who are disengaged from education and training in the City of Whittlesea. We are sending you this data request on the basis that your school has some students in this age range who may have become disengaged from school, or are at serious risk of disengagement.

The project is being managed by the Asquith Group on behalf of the Hume Whittlesea LLEN and the NMIT Youth Connections program.

#### Time frame

- We are seeking data on students enrolled last year between 1<sup>st</sup> Jan and 30<sup>th</sup> Dec 2011.

#### Age Range

- We are seeking information on students aged 10 to 15 years of age in 2011. (Those born between 1 February 1995 – 1 February 2001).

#### Residing in Whittlesea

- We are seeking information on those living in the City of Whittlesea (see postcodes below)
  - **3074, 3075, 3076, 3082, 3083** (Thomastown, Lalor, Epping, Mill Park, Bundoora)
  - **3752, 3754** (South Morang, Doreen)
  - **3064, 3750, 3753, 3755, 3757** (Donnybrook, Wollert, Beveridge, Woodstock, Yan Yean, Eden Park, Humevale, Kinglake West, Whittlesea)

Sufficient data is being collected to enable the project to clarify whether young people are being counted only once or multiple times when we compare data provided by other agencies and services.

**We will not identify individual school or agency data in the report.**

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When the following sections have been completed please **save the document as a new file**, and email this file to:

[asquithgroup@ozemail.com.au](mailto:asquithgroup@ozemail.com.au)

Queries can be directed to Peter Kellock at the Asquith Group on 0412 342 637, or 9859 0342.

Please provide details for students aged between 10 to 15 years of age (i.e. born between 1 February 1995 – 1 February 2001).

**Students aged between 10 to 15 years who average school non-attendance of more than 40% between January-December 2011.**

	Date of Birth	Male or Female	Resident Postcode	Initial of Surname
1				
2				
3				
4				
5				
6				
7				
8				
9				
10				

**Students aged between 10 to 15 years who average school non-attendance of between 20%-40% between January- December 2011.**

	Date of Birth	Male or Female	Resident Postcode	Initial of Surname
1				
2				
3				
4				
5				
6				
7				
8				
9				
10				
11				
12				
13				
14				
15				
16				
17				
18				
19				
20				

**Students aged 10 to 15 years who have been expelled or asked to leave school between February 2011 – December 2011.**

	Date of Birth	Male or Female	Resident Postcode	Initial of Surname
1				
2				
3				
4				
5				
6				
7				
8				

**Students aged 10 to 15 years who were still enrolled but are unable to be contacted.**

	Date of Birth	Male or Female	Resident Postcode	Initial of Surname
1				
2				
3				
4				
5				
6				
7				
8				

**2011 Student Enrolment**

	Male	Female	Total
<b>Year 7</b>			
<b>Year 8</b>			
<b>Year 9</b>			
<b>Year 10</b>			

When the sections have been completed please **save the document as a new file**, and email this file to:

[asquithgroup@ozemail.com.au](mailto:asquithgroup@ozemail.com.au)

Thank You.

## Attachment 2

### Whittlesea Under 16 Project Data Collection

The “Whittlesea Under 16 Project” is attempting to identify as precisely as possible the number of young people aged between 10-15 years who are disengaged from education and training in the City of Whittlesea. We are sending you this data request on the basis that your organisation has some contact with young people in this age range who may be disengaged from school, or are at serious risk of disengagement.

The project is being managed by the Asquith Group on behalf of the Hume Whittlesea LLEN, and the NMIT Youth Connections program.

#### Time frame

- We are seeking data on clients assisted last year between 1<sup>st</sup> January and 30<sup>th</sup> December 2011.

#### Age Range

- We are seeking information on clients aged 10 to 15 years of age in 2011. (Those born between 1 February 1995 – 1 February 2001).

#### Residing in Whittlesea

- We are seeking information on those living in the City of Whittlesea (see postcodes below)
  - **3074, 3075, 3076, 3082, 3083** (Thomastown, Lalor, Epping, Mill Park, Bundoora)
  - **3752, 3754** (South Morang, Doreen)
  - **3064, 3750, 3753, 3755, 3757** (Donnybrook, Wollert, Beveridge, Woodstock, Yan Yean, Eden Park, Humevale, Kinglake West, Whittlesea)

Sufficient data is being collected to enable the project to clarify whether young people are being counted only once or multiple times when we compare data provided by other agencies and services.

Please include data on any individuals placed on program waiting lists.

**We will not identify individual agency data in the report.**

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Please save the document as a new file, and email this file to:

[asquithgroup@ozemail.com.au](mailto:asquithgroup@ozemail.com.au)

**by 30 September 2012.**

Queries can be directed to Peter Kellock at the Asquith Group on 0412 342 637, or 9859 0342.

- Clients assisted last year between 1<sup>st</sup> January and 30<sup>th</sup> December 2011
- Who were born between 1 February 1995 – 1 February 2001
- And were living in the City of Whittlesea

	<b>Date of Birth</b>	<b>Male or Female</b>	<b>Postcode</b>	<b>Initial of Surname</b>	<b>Still attending school? (Yes/No)</b>	<b>Language spoken at home</b>
1						
2						
3						
4						
5						
6						
7						
8						
9						
10						
11						
12						
13						
14						
15						
16						
17						
18						
19						
20						

(If more than 20 clients have been assisted in 2011, please copy table and complete additional details)

Please save the document as a new file, and email this file to:

[asquithgroup@ozemail.com.au](mailto:asquithgroup@ozemail.com.au)

**by 30 September 2012.**

Thank You

### Attachments 3

#### Young people aged under 16 not going to school

- How old are you now?
- How old were you when you began to regularly not go to school? How long has it been since you last went?
- What caused you to stop going to school regularly? (Describe what happened)
- What do you do when you aren't going to school? How do you spend your time?
- Do you know many other people your age not going to school? How many?
- What programs or services have you gone to since you stopped going to school?
- Where and how do you get information about what options and services are available to you?
- What would help you go back to school or to somewhere else to learn useful skills?
- If you have returned to school or training, what helped get you started again? (*skip to the next question if you haven't gone back*)
- Is there anything that you miss about school?
- Does not going to school have any effect on you (or on your family)?