



Social Policy Research Centre Report Series

Never Stand Still

Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences

Linking Schools and Early Years Project Evaluation

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Data collection round 3: Final report

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Abbreviations

DEECD Department of Education and Early Childhood Development

ECEC Early childhood education and care

FTT Footscray Transition Timetable

SEHQ School Entrant Health Questionnaire

LSEY Linking Schools and Early Years

CCCH The Royal Children's Hospital Centre for Community Child Health

Site story Community Facilitators documented reflections on how the project has developed and progressed over time

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Executive Summary

The aim of the Linking Schools and Early Years Project (LSEY) is to ensure that all children enter the formal education system ready to engage with the many opportunities offered by their new learning environment. The project also aims to ensure that schools are prepared for children of all abilities and backgrounds when they first attend, and that families, services and communities are ready to support the development of children. The rationale for the project comes from research showing the importance of a holistic, multi-dimensional approach to transition, encompassing schools, early education and care, families and communities.

This is the fourth evaluation report, and covers the third full round of data collection. An interim report was published in 2011, describing significant developments between the 2010 round and this report. For this report, quantitative and qualitative data collection methods were used. Quantitative data were collected using a series of questionnaires: a parent questionnaire, a schools questionnaire, an early years/early education and care services^a questionnaire, and a child and family services questionnaire. Qualitative data were provided through face-to-face individual and group interviews.

The LSEY outcomes framework translates the research evidence on transition into three goals. The outcomes and implementation findings for this and previous reports are organised around these goals. A number of implementation strategies were effective across each of the goals, and we describe strengths of the model and barriers to implementation.

Goal 1: Children and families make a smooth transition between early years services and school

The participation of families in transition activities has increased over the life of the project, and their experience of transition is thought to have improved. There have been changes to the way schools and services conduct transition processes. Specifically, there have been changes to transition programs and the ways schools and early years services collaborate, to promote a consistent approach to transition for incoming prep families.

Families' experience of orientation programs and starting school:

- Most children (95 per cent) participated in orientation activities. Over time, more children had sustained contact with school over a number of weeks, and fewer had one visit only to the school. This reflects the change in transition activities offered, as schools offered more sustained activities over a longer period.

Mutual respect and links between schools and ECEC:

^a The term 'early years services' and 'early education and care (ECEC) services' are both used in this report, to describe prior-to-school services including long day care and kindergarten.

- Research has shown that the relationship between schools and ECEC services can be poor, and that transition is improved when the expertise of ECEC services is recognised by schools. In LSEY sites, both schools and early childhood education and care services recognise the fundamental role that ECEC services play in preparing children for transitioning to school, particularly in terms of children's adjustment and disposition.
- In interviews, teachers and ECEC educators reported that children and families are making a smoother transition to school. This is greatly assisted by the partnerships that have been developed.
- Participation in LSEY has enabled ECEC services to maintain a supportive role for children once they have started school: for example, through making contact with prep teachers early in the new school year about any concerns about children who attended their service.
- Schools reported increased links with ECEC services. The number of schools that exchanged information with ECEC services increased substantially over the life of the project, from three in 2008 to eight in 2012. Schools' rating of their relationship with feeder early childhood education and care services increased.
- ECEC services also reported increased links with schools. In 2012 over 80% (13/16) of early childhood education and care services reported having links with between one and four schools. The number of services with links to more than five schools increased. The frequency of the activities that ECEC services conduct with schools, as well as the number of joint training and education sessions for teachers and service staff, all increased between 2008 and 2012.

Successful implementation strategies for this goal include:

- A collaborative approach to transition. The transition statements have been an important resource because of activities enabled through LSEY.
- Transition calendar. Two of the LSEY sites have developed and distributed a transition calendar over the life of the LSEY project. This has now been adopted as a regular activity.
- Transition programs. LSEY has enabled schools to make significant changes to their transition activities, including starting programs much earlier and offering a much wider variety of transition programs. School principals and teachers, and ECEC educators alike have commented on the outcomes of the transition program for children.
- Continuity between ECEC and school environment. Play-based learning has been implemented to varying degrees in prep classrooms. This has been found to contribute to a smoother transition to a school learning environment because

the format of the lesson is familiar from ECEC services. Schools also now have a better understanding of the developmental needs of children and the diversity of these needs. In turn, ECEC services have introduced some of the school prep year activities into their learning environment, which also facilitates continuity.

Goal 2: Early years services and schools actively connect with families

Families' experience of ECEC services:

- Parents reported generally good experiences with their child's early education and care service.
- ECEC services also played a key role in informing parents about starting school. Ninety per cent of responding parents (293) in 2012 reported they had received information from their child's early education and care centre prior to their child starting school.

Connections between schools and families:

- Most parents had a positive relationship with their child's school. On average they strongly agreed that their school is friendly and welcoming and they know where to go if they need to speak to someone about their child's experience of school. On average, they agreed that their child's school provided useful information about their time at school, offered activities and resources for parents as well as children, and that they had a good relationship with their child's teacher(s).
- In 2012 the majority of schools reported that they had hosted activities for groups of parents (8/10) such as singing groups, family picnics, and access to the library. This represents a substantial increase from the commencement of the program in 2008 when only three schools hosted such activities (3/7).
- There was a slight increase in the total number of schools involved in early intervention or health promotion programs (2012=8/10; 2010=4/7; 2008=6/7) such as supported playgroups, family support and breakfast clubs.
- A number of the LSEY schools across all sites have established parent-friendly spaces at the school meaning a room dedicated to parents where they can relax and interact with other parents.

Successful implementation strategies for this goal include:

- Engagement with families by schools and services: A number of schools have conducted surveys to ascertain parents' satisfaction with the school and how this could be improved, and some schools find value in teachers being present and available to chat to parents in the playground before and after school.

- Respecting parents as active participants. Most schools commented that they had adopted a collaborative approach with parents to address any particular learning needs for their child. Including parents in this decision-making and action-implementing process also assisted to develop trust between families and schools.
- ECEC educators emphasised the importance of encouraging parents to implement strategies at home to help meet their child's needs and to prepare for a smooth transition to school. They also acknowledge the importance of adopting particular activities or strategies used in the home.

Goal 3: Schools are responsive to the individual learning needs of all children

Capacity to work in partnerships, and links with child and family services:

- Links with child and family services. ECEC services and schools are working more closely and regularly with local child and family services.
- The total number of schools with links to these services increased over the life of the project. In particular the links schools had with child and family services that provide migrant or ethnic resources, alcohol and other drug services, and playgroups or parent-child playgroups expanded considerably.
- The number of referrals schools made to child and family services increased over the life of the project. In 2012 no schools had made less than five referrals in the six months prior to the survey, whereas the number of schools who had made more than 11 referrals had increased to five from a figure of just three in 2008.
- The number of schools that arranged for staff to attend planning, training or information days organised by child and family services also increased substantially over the life of the project from less than half in 2008 and 2010.
- A small number of parents needed services for their children but couldn't use them. Averaged across all years, the most common service needed but not used were dental services (needed by 5.2 per cent of children on average) followed by therapy (3.2 per cent average). The most common reason for not using the service was wait time followed closely by expense.
- All three sites commented that the capacity to work in partnerships with other services had improved since being involved in the LSEY project.

Earlier identification of needs:

- Parents of children with additional needs were satisfied with their school's response to their child's needs. This high satisfaction rating was stable over time.

- There was a strong theme in the qualitative data that LSEY facilitated close relationships between schools, parents and services that enabled schools to identify and respond to the individual learning needs of children.

Successful implementation strategies for this goal include:

- Locally relevant responses: a parenting program in Hastings was developed from findings of a survey of parents. In Corio Norlane a partnership with an early intervention provider delivered a pilot model for supporting children who require additional support to make a positive transition to school.
- Connecting school and home: this is an emergent strategy, addressing the home learning environment and engaging parents.
- Cooperation between schools: in one site in particular, the traditional expectation that schools are in competition with one another has been reversed, and all schools work very closely as collaborators and promote each school as equal.

Strengths of the project model

A number of strategies were effective in implementing LSEY, across each of the goals.

- The facilitator role has been a significant contributor to developing relationships between stakeholders and maintaining momentum.
- The funding for time release to engage in LSEY activities and meetings has significantly assisted the development of relationships.
- The model is flexible and responsive to local needs
- The professional development of school and ECEC educators has been ongoing at all sites since the inception of the LSEY project.
- Other project funding provided by LSEY has also been an important contributor to project goals.
- Access to information sessions about research and evidence for collaborative partnerships has also contributed to supporting connections
- The establishment of formal practitioner groups at all three sites has been a key contributor to the development of actions to ensure a smooth transition to school for children and families.
- The engagement of local government in the partnerships has been a critical factor in the success of the project.

Barriers to implementation

It is important to emphasise that people expressed a great deal of enthusiasm for the LSEY model and principles in interviews and focus groups. Nonetheless, the barriers to implementation are also important, even if they were not universally experienced.

There are time constraints on educators to meet and follow up on the actions from meetings.

Participants have also commented that the project can be quite resource-intensive, which is a challenge when there is a small LSEY team in an organisation and their capacity is limited.

The sustainability of the LSEY project ultimately relies on the schools and services adopting many of the LSEY roles. This is challenging because many participants feel that they are part of a system that is already overwhelmed. Thus the need for an external facilitator to continue the role of the CCCH LSEY team has been reported as crucial to the sustainability of the project.

Key learnings

The implementation experiences of LSEY include the following key lessons.

- Linking in with existing local partnerships is critical.
- The model appeared to be more effective in locations where there is a clearly defined, geographically bound community.
- The model needs to be flexible to accommodate the changing nature of communities
- A significant amount of preparation and start up time needs to be granted to allow time to build relationships.
- Resourcing for project-specific roles, including facilitators, and for the extra work carried out within schools and local services, were regarded as an extremely valuable component of the project.
- The LSEY experience has seen a focus on partnerships between schools and services, especially ECEC services, rather than concentrated and direct involvement with families.

Conclusion

Ecological understandings of transition, rather than a focus on individual outcomes, have driven the implementation of LSEY. These understandings have led to partnerships between schools and services becoming a priority. These partnerships have been successfully achieved and generated a lot of activity towards each of the project goals. Research has identified that ECEC has been undervalued by schools,

and that this disrespect is a significant barrier to increased collaboration and smoother transition. Given this, the strengthened relationships enabled by LSEY can be seen as a significant achievement, especially as LSEY school principals and teachers have benefited from adopting some ECEC practices.

The intensity of activity described in this report, and the benefits reported by services and schools, are consistent with research evidence on initiatives to increase parental involvement in children's learning. However, LSEY is also a place-based initiative, with a focus on the whole of community rather than individual schools. The literature on place-based initiatives also supports the experiences and achievements of LSEY, and underlines the need for time and resources to build partnerships.

1 Introduction

1.1 Background and overview of LSEY

The aim of the Linking Schools and Early Years Project (LSEY) is to ensure that all children enter the formal education system ready to engage with the many opportunities offered by their new learning environment. The project also aims to ensure that schools are prepared for children of all abilities and backgrounds when they first attend, and that families, services and communities are ready to support children's development.

1.2 Policy context

The LSEY project commenced in 2006. Since then, developments in Victorian early childhood policy have seen the introduction of a number of new policies and programs that align with the activities and objectives of LSEY.

Some of these developments, as facilitated by Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD), have included:

Integration and transitions

- 30 pilot programs were conducted with early childhood services and schools across Victoria to test approaches for supporting children's transition from early childhood services to schools. All three LSEY sites participated as pilot initiatives with a focus on different elements of transition.
- An extensive literature review of research and best practice around a positive transition to school.
- The pilots and literature review and consultation with services/schools informed the development of the Transition: A Positive Start to School initiative, which aims to improve children's experiences when starting school. Key elements of this initiative included:
 - Transition Learning and Development Statements that share information between ECEC services, children and families and schools
 - Professional development for ECEC and school educators around writing the Transition Statements
 - 10 promising practices for a positive transition to school (this also developed into a trial/research project of three of the promising practices)
 - A strengths-based working paper and guide for educators
 - Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework
 - Evaluation of early childhood community networks.
- Partnerships
 - Families as Partners in Learning: a practical resource for early childhood services and schools to build and strengthen family partnerships.

- Education Partnerships Resource: comprehensive information for schools on creating, implementing and growing partnerships with external organisations, including businesses, community organisations, local government and early childhood providers.
- Extended School Hubs: One of the initiatives within the National Partnerships is the Extended School Hubs Field Trials. School hubs deliver extended services to the community, either as a central point or through extended reach programs. These activities are delivered before, during and after school hours through establishing genuine partnerships with families and community agencies. There are five Extended School Hubs in Victoria involving primary and secondary schools. (DEECD, 2012b)
- Early childhood and education systems
 - Literacy and Numeracy. The Department has developed a series of initiatives and resources to maintain and extend a focus on literacy and numeracy education in schools. These resources will support ongoing improvement in the literacy and numeracy outcomes of all Victorian students.
 - Languages Learning for the 21st Century: The Victorian Languages Strategy. The ability to communicate in more than one language and interact across cultures will enable Victorian students to become successful global citizens. This strategy aims to increase student participation, engagement and achievement in languages education over the long term to 2020.
 - DEECD-MAV Partnership Agreement. The agreement between the Department and the Municipal Association of Victoria (MAV), signed on Thursday 6 August 2009, commits to building positive, collaborative relationships between the Department, MAV and all Victorian local councils, to increase the learning and development opportunities for children, young people and families.
 - Leading Practice and Design. Leading practices in school design have been adopted by schools and teachers in their goal to improve student learning outcomes and to more effectively identify and address student learning needs.
 - Energising Science and Mathematics Education in Victoria. This strategy, released in 2009, aims to raise student's mathematics and science achievement, increase student participation and expand the knowledge base of teachers. (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD), 2012a)

1.3 Research base

The LSEY project is a theory-driven, research-based model derived from findings from academic research, early childhood services' and schools' policy goals, and community school models in Australia and internationally.

The rationale behind the project is described in a comprehensive review of the literature, produced by The Royal Children's Hospital Centre for Community Child Health:

There is clear evidence that addressing the low literacy levels of many children from disadvantaged backgrounds requires identifying and removing barriers these children face when starting school. Doing this will require new ways of working and greater partnerships and collaboration between schools and early years services

- The importance of links and partnerships between schools and early years services is supported for a number of reasons:
- Current thinking about the importance of adopting an approach to child development and education that focuses on the whole life course highlights the need to close the gap between the early years and school
- Barriers to learning need to be addressed before a child starts school. These barriers include poor experiences in the early years, inadequate parenting, parents' own poor experience of school and unidentified developmental problems.
- Engaging parents as active partners requires schools to provide opportunities for them to become familiar and comfortable with the school before their children start attending.
- There is a need for a more holistic approach to supporting families to create the best possible environment for children to develop.
- Schools will benefit from having greater access to information about the implications of current research on the early years. (McLoughlin et al., 2006: 8).

Transition to school is an important event in the lives of children and their families. Although it is not clear precisely how important the experience of transition is in determining later academic and social achievements (Duncan et al., 2007; Pelletier and Corter, 2005), there is a growing body of research pointing to the importance of starting school in supporting children to perceive school as a positive environment and themselves as competent learners (Dockett and Perry, 2001). A number of studies have found that transition activities have a positive effect on academic scores in the first year of school (Ahtola et al., 2011; Schulting et al., 2005), especially for children from low-income families and especially if parents are involved in their children's school activities (Schulting et al., 2005).

Transition to school is important because it is a key event in early childhood, a stage of the life course that has been subject to an enormous amount of research and established as a critical period (Irwin et al., 2007; Karoly et al., 2005). Early childhood is a promising point of intervention to ameliorate the effects of poverty, and to narrow the gaps between privileged and disadvantaged children, especially the

differences in cognitive and social skills that have been shown to persist through school and afterwards (Rouse et al., 2005).

Although 'school readiness' has long been recognised as important, over the last two decades the term has been broadened, to encompass the importance of relationships and environments, rather than being an attribute of individual children. Ecological models and systems theory describes transition in the following terms: 'the influence of contexts (for example, family, classroom, community) and the connections among these contexts (e.g., family-school relationships) at any given time and across time' (Dockett and Perry, 2001).

This model of transition emphasises the importance of different actors and settings, and therefore the benefits of partnership and continuity across different contexts. Collaboration has been described as making 'more sense' in transition to school than any other area of educating young children (Pianta et al., 2001). The need for professionals to work closely together at times of transition has been included in early childhood reform documents, including the Education and Care Services National Regulation established as part of the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care (Hopps and Dockett, 2011; MCEEDYA, 2011)

Recent research in Finland demonstrates the benefits of communication between early years services and schools. In a study of 396 children who moved from 36 preschools to 22 schools, transition activities increased the acquisition of skills in the first year of school. The most important predictors of children's skills were co-operation over curricula and the exchange of information from preschool to school, although this was not commonly done (Ahtola et al., 2011). Barriers to communication between settings include professional hierarchies and tensions over mutual respect and recognition of expertise (Hopps and Dockett, 2011).

This research evidence is the basis of the LSEY outcomes framework (Centre for Community Child Health, 2007), which translates these findings on transition, relationships and environment into three goals:

1. Children and families make a smooth transition between early years services and school.

This goal focuses on linking schools and early years services so that there is a seamless transition for children and their families. Research has demonstrated that transition points in children's lives can be challenging. Smoothing transitions will require dialogue and shared effort between early years services and schools.

2. Early years services and schools actively connect with families.

This goal is based on the research finding that the greater the parents' presence in schools, the more improvement there is in child school-related outcomes. Achieving this goal will involve reaching out to families in which children have not had any involvement in early education and care services prior to starting school. It will also involve trying to engage parents who had negative experiences themselves at school and helping them to support their child's learning.

3. Schools are responsive to the individual learning needs of all children.

There is enormous diversity in children's experiences, backgrounds and learning styles when they start school. Schools that link with early education and care services, parents and child and family services prior to the start of the school year are in a position to develop tailored learning solutions.

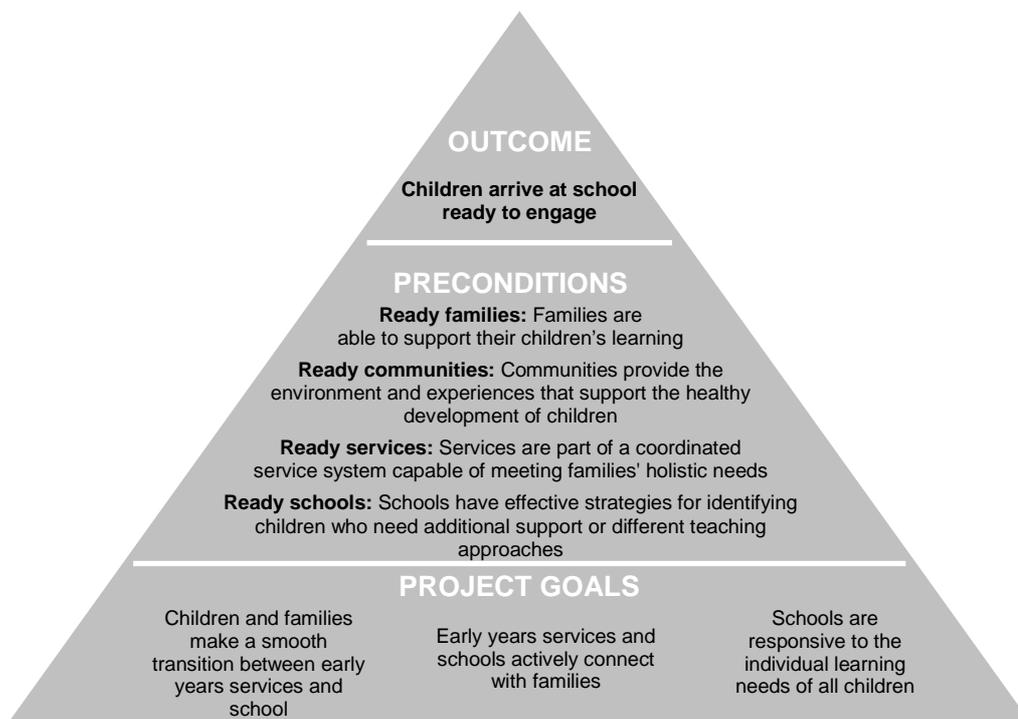
2 Evaluation overview

This is the fourth evaluation report; it describes the third full round of data collection. Qualitative and quantitative data have been collected for this report and previous main evaluation reports in 2008 and 2010 (Eastman et al., 2010; valentine and Dinning, 2009). An interim evaluation report in 2011 described significant developments in implementation and progress towards achieving project goals in the 12 months since the previous (Round 2) evaluation report (Rajkovic and valentine, 2010). Each of these reports is available on the *Linking Schools and Early Years* website: www.rch.org.au/lsey/project_evaluation/

2.1 Aims of the evaluation

The aims of the evaluation are informed by the LSEY outcomes framework developed by the CCCH (2007). The outcomes framework, pictured in Figure 2.1, demonstrates the project's ultimate outcome, the pre-conditions that research indicates are needed to achieve the ultimate outcome and the specific project goals.

Figure 2.1 LSEY outcomes framework



The outcome that children arrive at school ready to engage, is the ultimate aim for the whole project. The overall outcome is the hardest to measure and requires the longest time to reach. Being ready to engage at school means that children have the social, emotional and learning skills and attitudes that will enable them to benefit from the school environment. In order for this to occur, a number of things need to take place before they get to school:

- They need to attend high quality early childhood services.

- Early childhood services and schools need to develop strong links so that children’s transition to school is smooth.
- There needs to be support from families for their children’s learning. This includes families being actively engaged in child and family services and being welcomed into school settings.

To achieve the ultimate aim, research suggests that certain outcomes or preconditions need to be achieved. There are four preconditions in the LSEY framework that contribute to the overall outcome outlined above. These preconditions or broad outcomes are also hard to measure and are beyond the scope and impact of the project. Instead, the aims of the LSEY project evaluation are to operationalise and measure the three project goals.

These project goals have been reviewed using the evaluation questions found in Table 2.1.

Table 2.1: Evaluation questions

Evaluation aim	Evaluation question
Determine the overall impact of the project towards achieving each of the project goals	Has the experience of transition to school improved for children and their families over the life of the project?
	Have the connections between schools and families strengthened over the life of the project?
	Have the connections between early education and care services and families strengthened over the life of the project?
	Has the capacity to work in partnerships between early education and care services, schools and child and family services strengthened over the life of the project?
	Have schools improved their ability to meet the specific needs of children in their first year?
	In addition to LSEY, what other factors were involved in achievement of outcomes?
	Have there been unanticipated outcomes, positive and negative?
Identify the effectiveness of strategies and activities implemented towards achieving the project goals across and within the project sites	Have schools, early education and care services and child and family services changed their operations to better facilitate the achievement of the project goals?
	Over the life of the project, what strategies were found to support strengthened connections between early education and care services, schools, and child and family services and to

	support them to work in partnership?
	What strategies were found to contribute to children and families transitioning smoothly between early years services and schools?
	What strategies were found to contribute to connections between schools and families strengthening over the life of the project?
	What strategies were found to contribute to schools meeting the individual learning needs of all children in the first year of school?
	What strategies were found to be unsuccessful in contributing to the achievement of the project goals?
Identify barriers and facilitators to the implementation of the project	To what extent has the project been implemented as intended?
	What are the core elements that assisted and impeded the project goals being achieved?
	What are the strengths and difficulties of the project model?
	What are the characteristics and effective elements of the project partnership groups?
	What are the functions and characteristics of local leadership in schools, local government, ECEC and community services?
	What characteristics of the local service network in each site assisted and impeded the project goals being achieved? (e.g., history of collaboration and existing relationships)
	To what extent was the project adopted and championed by the partnership groups?
	What enabled and hindered the capacity of the partnerships to work with existing local initiatives? (e.g., Best Start)

2.2 Evaluation methodology and sample

A mixture of quantitative and qualitative data collection methods were used to inform this evaluation. Quantitative data were collected using a series of questionnaires, and the qualitative information was provided through face-to-face individual and group interviews.

Questionnaires

Data were collected from four survey instruments to inform the quantitative component of this evaluation. These are a parent questionnaire, a schools questionnaire, an early education and care services questionnaire, and a child and family services questionnaire.

Parent questionnaire

This questionnaire was administered to all parents whose children had just started prep in the current year in the LSEY schools. The questionnaire asked parents to comment on their experiences using early childhood education and care services and child and family services for their children, and their satisfaction with these services. The questionnaire also asked about transition to school activities the family engaged with, how satisfied they were with the support and information received from the school during this time, and how their child was settling into school.

This questionnaire was used as a cross-sectional measure of children starting school in the years 2008, 2010 and 2012. At each of these three time points, the parent questionnaire was disseminated in conjunction with the Victorian School Entry Health Questionnaire in each of the participating schools in the three LSEY project sites.

The sample for the 2012 questionnaires is 568 parents, 10 schools, 17 ECEC services and 34 child and family services (Table 2.2).

Table 2.2: Sample and response rate

Parent questionnaire	
Prep enrolments for 2012	568
Total number returned	364
SEHQ survey	
Number complete	408
Number SEHQ not matched to parent survey	72
Combined parents and SEHQ information	
Number parent completed survey not matched to SEHQ survey	22
Both parent and SEHQ information available	342
Percent of total (final sample/prep enrolments)	60.2%
Margin of error at 95%	3.35%
School questionnaire	
Number issued	15
Number returned	10
Per cent returned	67%
Early childhood education and care questionnaire	
Number issued	34
Number returned	17
Per cent returned	50%
Child and family services questionnaire	
Number issued	56
Number returned	34
Per cent returned	61%

Table 2.3: Regional breakdowns, return rate in each region

	Early Childhood (N)	Child and Family Services (N)	Parent/SEHQ Combined (N)	Schools (N)
Corio/Norlane	7	14	177	6
Footscray	6	8	149	3
Hastings	4	12	38	1
All	17	34	364	10

	Early Childhood (%)	Child and Family Services (%)	Parent/SEHQ Combined (%)	Schools (%)
Corio/Norlane	41.2	41.2	48.6	60.0
Footscray	35.3	23.5	40.9	30.0
Hastings	23.5	35.3	10.4	10.0
All	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Table 2.4: Primary service provided by child and family services

	2008	2010	2012
Health (and allied health) services for children	3	3	6
Health (and allied health) services for adults	0	0	1
Health (and allied health) services for adults and children	2	0	4
Maternal and child health services	0	4	5
Counselling and or mental health services	2	2	1
Alcohol and other drug services	0	1	2
Playgroups or parent-child groups	9	11	7
Housing	1	0	1
Disability services	3	0	2
Indigenous services	0	0	1
Migrant or ethnic resources	0	1	2
Library/toy library/mobile library	3	3	6
Family domestic violence services	1	3	0
Family support services	5	5	6
Parent education courses or programs	7	4	6
Other	0	8	8
Total	36	45	58

Interviews

Qualitative interviews were conducted with a total of 48 school representative, early years workers and managers, child and family service providers, LSEY project staff, and government representatives (Table 2.5). All interviews were carried out face-to-

face with the exception of two phone interviews, and comprised a mixture of individual and small groups in a participant’s workplace. All interviews took place in May 2012.

Table 2.5: Interview participants

	Footscray	Hastings	Corio/ Norlane	All	Total
Schools ^a	6	5	15	-	26
Early childhood education and care services ^b	1	3	5	-	9
Child and family services ^c	0	0	2	-	2
Other practice/policy stakeholders ^d	2	1	3	5	11
Total	9	9	25	5	48

a. Principals and teachers

b. Early years educators and service managers

c. Librarian, child and family specific organisations

d. Best Start staff, LSEY project staff, local and state government representatives

The duration of the interviews ranged from a half an hour to an hour and a half. Interview questions were tailored to each participant based on their professional role and degree of involvement with LSEY. One interview schedule was developed for practitioners and another for government/regional representatives and managers, and LSEY project staff. For shorter interviews the interviewer prioritised which questions to ask the participant group.

Participants were asked a series of questions about the LSEY project regarding the implementation of LSEY, strengths and challenges of the project model, outcomes from the project, and their views about what aspects of the project are considered sustainable.

All interviews were voice recorded and transcribed verbatim. Identifying information was removed and aliases applied to all interviews. Transcripts were analysed using NVivo 9 qualitative software, using open and axial coding, based on the research questions and emergent themes. The coding frame used to theme and analyse the data is presented at Appendix B.

During the analysis the coding framework was revised and updated as necessary to ensure that the coding frame accurately captured the themes of the interviews. All coding was completed by the researcher who conducted all of the interviews. This researcher worked closely under the guidance of a senior researcher who also had a thorough knowledge of the interview content.

2.3 Attribution

The strength of the existing service network in each of the three sites seemed to be important in determining the success with which LSEY was implemented, as those sites with already strong relationships had smoother experiences.

The presence of other initiatives and the changing policy environment also contributed to the impact of LSEY. Both Victorian and Commonwealth policies in early childhood, and specifically transition to school, have changed and developed significantly since 2006. In all LSEY sites there were existing early years-focused initiatives that may also have contributed to changes observed throughout the LSEY evaluation. These included both state and federal government and privately funded initiatives. The impact of each of the individual projects is difficult to disentangle.

2.4 Caveats and limitations

As described in previous reports, the evaluation design has limitations, in common with other studies of this type (Eastman et al., 2010; valentine and Katz, 2010). The most important of these are: the views and perspectives of children are not included; the relationship between the project goals and the overall outcome cannot be tested; and the changing policy context in Victoria means that the extent to which changes in practice and outcomes can be attributed to LSEY, as opposed to other federal, state and local initiatives, cannot be quantified.

Satisfaction ratings at baseline data collection were generally high, as were the self-ratings of schools and services of the activities they carried out at that time. It is perhaps unsurprising that schools and services rated their transition programs highly at commencement, as their voluntary engagement with LSEY is itself indicative of placing a high value on transition—of course this should also translate to caution about the generalisability of LSEY findings to regions where schools and services are less engaged prior to the introduction of the project.

High ratings at baseline mean that changes over time are difficult to quantify, as improvements on those ratings cannot be measured. Differences between sites over time could also not be measured, due to the low sample size of services and schools. The quantitative data should be read with these issues of instrument sensitivity in mind.

For this round of data collection, the parent questionnaires for one school (n=80) were lost in transit, which contributed to the non-response rate.

2.5 Structure of this report

The following three sections describe the outcome and implementation findings for this round of data collection, and changes over time in relation to the three project goals. Section 6 describes successful implementation strategies that were common to all goals. Section 7 looks at the strengths of the project model and barriers to implementation. Section 8 draws from the preceding sections to discuss key lessons and recommendations, and discusses strategies for sustainability adopted by each of the sites in preparation for the cessation of project funding. Appendix A describes the ECEC attendance of families in LSEY communities. Appendix C provides methodological details about the analytic frame used in the qualitative data analysis.

3 Goal 1: Children and families make a smooth transition between early years services and school

This goal focuses on the changes that have been made at each site at both a community and an organisational level to improve the transition to school experience for children and their families. Overall, the evaluation showed that these schools and services made changes to their transition processes over the life of the project. The participation of families in transition activities increased, and families' experience of transition is thought to have improved. Specifically, there have been changes to transition programs, and to the ways schools and early years services collaborate to promote a consistent approach to transition for incoming prep families. The specific findings for this goal relate to:

- The various activities and strategies schools and early years services implemented to improve their transition programs
- The various activities and strategies implemented to improve communication and collaboration between schools and early years services
- Parents' participation in orientation and other transition experiences

3.1 Data sources

For this goal, we asked parents about their experience of early education and care, the information they received when their child started school; their experience of the school start period (orientation activities, contact with teachers, and information received); and about their child's experience of school – whether they are happy to go to school and have friends, if they like their teachers, and if they have any worrying traits in their disposition or behaviour.

We asked schools and early childhood education and care (ECEC) services about their transition to school activities, and other things they do to prepare children and families for starting school. We also asked both schools and ECEC services to rate the importance of ECEC services in preparing children for school. This question was designed to elicit information on the professional respect between schools and ECEC services, and the differences and commonalities between the two sectors in their assessment of the strengths of ECEC services in school readiness.

3.2 Outcomes

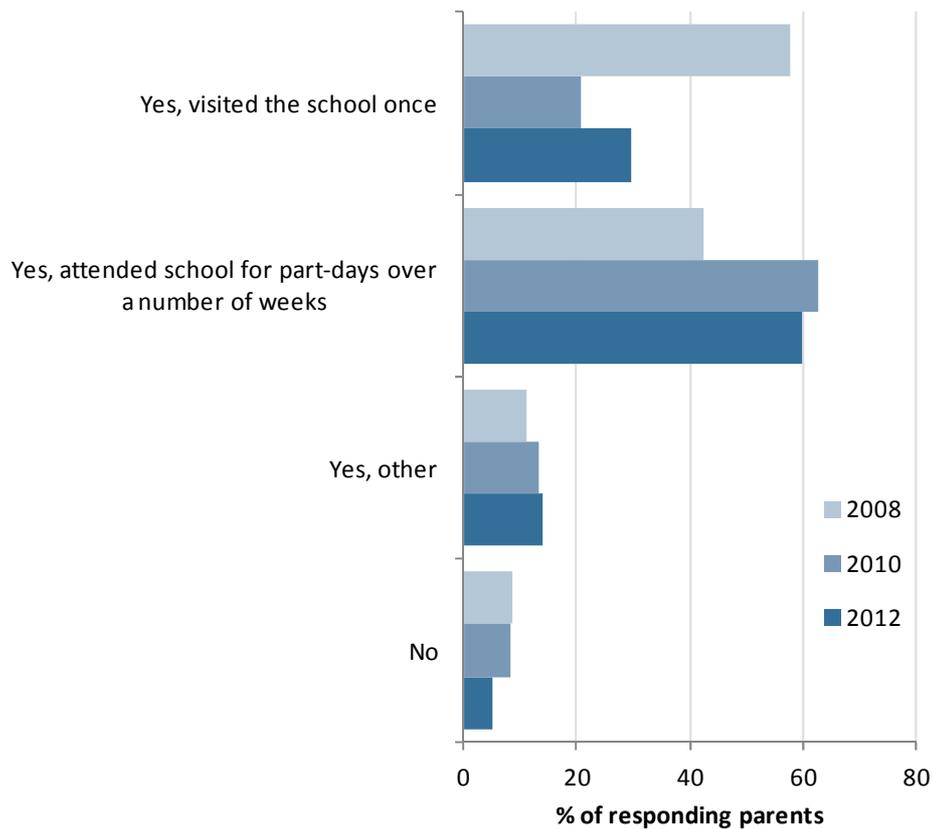
The research question for the outcomes component of the evaluation for Goal 1 is: *Has the experience of transition to school improved for children and their families over the life of the project?*

Families' experience of orientation programs and starting school

As Figure 3.1 shows, 95 per cent of children participated in orientation activities. Attending school for part days over a number of weeks was the most frequent orientation activity in which children participated prior to starting school. In 2012, 60 per cent of children participated. A further one in three children visited the school once (29.7 per cent)

Over time, the number of children who only visited the school once declined, as did the number of families who didn't participate in any orientation activities. This reflects the change in transition activities offered, as schools offered more sustained activities over a longer period.

Figure 3.1 Did your child participate in an orientation program before commencement?

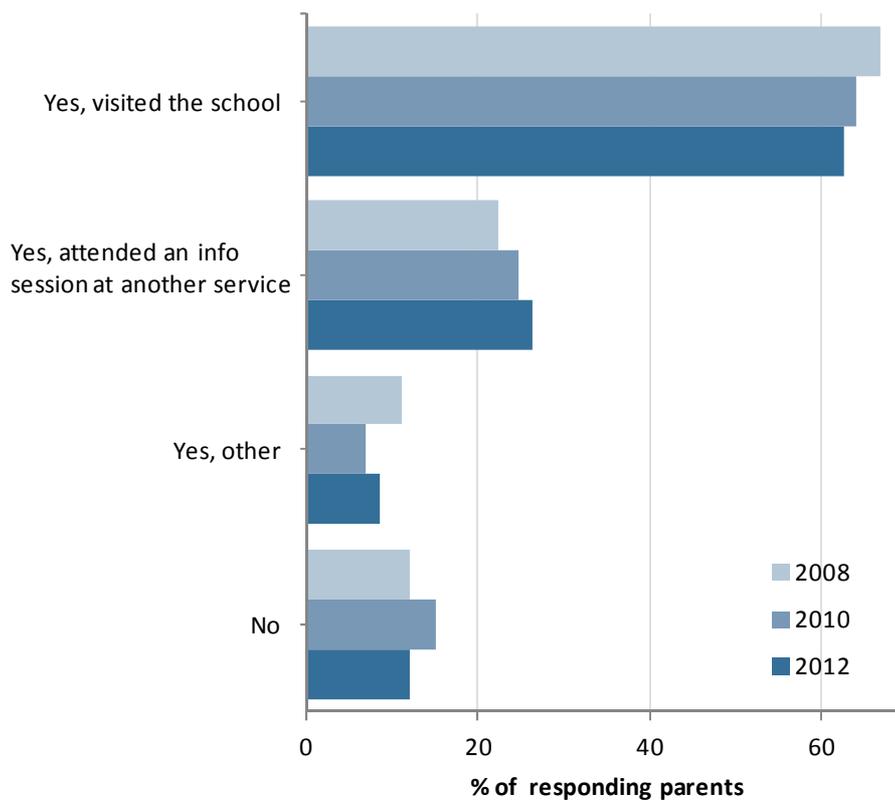


N 2008 =198, 2010 = 305, 2012 = 340

Parents were also engaged in orientation activities. In 2012, just over 60 per cent of parents (62.6%) responded they visited the school prior to their child starting. A further 26.5 per cent responded they had attended an information session at another service. Forty one parents (12.1 per cent) reported they had not used an orientation program, and 8.5 per cent used some other orientation (Figure 3.2).

Figure 3.2 shows that parent participation in orientation activities remained fairly stable throughout the duration of the project with only slight differences between evaluation data collection points.

Figure 3.2 Did you (or your partner) participate in any orientation programs for the school?



N 2008 =197, 2010 = 304, 2012 = 316

We asked parents if there was any information about transition that they needed but didn't receive, because early positive relationships between parents and schools can facilitate a smooth transition for children. Conversely, if parents do not have the information they need, a positive transition experience is less likely.

In 2008 and 2010, very few parents reported that there was information or support they needed but could not get when their child started school (eight and seven per cent respectively). However, this increased substantially in 2012 when 27 per cent of parents reported that they did not get information or support they needed when their child started school^b.

Further analysis of 2012 data indicated that parents who reported lower satisfaction rates when they attended an interview with their child's teacher (as described below) reported a higher incidence of requiring information and support but not receiving it^c. However, there were no differences for those parents who did not

^b This increase was confirmed using a chi-square analysis of time, $X^2(2) = 57.86, p < .001$.

^c Fisher's $p < .05$ (Q13 converted to binary of satisfied vs moderately/not satisfied), 2012 only.

attend an interview with their child's teacher, nor did it vary between first time parents, child country of birth, child indigenous status or region.

It is not clear why there was a reported increase in parents being unable to gain information and support, especially as schools were increasingly engaged with parents over the period, in asking for information from parents and conducting interviews with them. Parents of children with additional needs often have difficult relationships with schools (Bacon and Causton-Theoharis, 2012; Ryan and Cole, 2009; Todd and Jones, 2003); however, as Section 4 discusses, numbers of these children stayed stable over time and their parents expressed satisfaction with schools. It is possible that the increasing policy emphasis on the importance of transition, discussed in Section 1.2 above, may have heightened parents' expectations and concerns around transition, although this is not certain. Changes to schools, especially the amalgamation of schools in one site, are also likely to have caused confusion and communication difficulties.

In 2012, three quarters of the parents (76 per cent) reported that they had attended an interview with their child's teacher in their first term of school to discuss any questions or concerns. This is slightly lower than previous years (80% in 2008 and 82% in 2010). Within the group that had attended, the majority were satisfied with the interview (90 per cent average across all three waves). However, as described above, in 2012 those parents that were less than satisfied (either moderately or not satisfied) were also more likely to respond that they needed but did not receive information or support when their child entered school. This is not surprising, as unsatisfactory interviews and a failure to receive information are both indicative of communication difficulties. It is important to note in this context that schools are not the only source of information on transition for parents: as we discuss in Section 4.2 below, 90 per cent of parents receive transition information from their ECEC service.

Parents were also asked how strongly they agreed or disagreed with statements about their child's experience of school. On average they strongly agreed that their child is happy to go to school on most days, that their child likes their teacher(s), and their child does not seem worried or upset most of the time. On average they agreed that their child has at least one good friend at school, often volunteers to help others (e.g., parents, teachers, other children), is generally well behaved and usually does what adults request. This was stable over each round of data collection.

The qualitative data show that building and sustaining relationships with families has been a priority for schools. Children and families have been found to be more likely to experience a smooth transition to school if they have a prior existing relationship with the school. Interview participants suggest engaging families earlier, prior to their child starting school, in an informal way so as to build up a relationship and break down barriers or reservations that a parent may have about entering a school environment. This was highlighted in the Hastings site and one practitioner provided the example of school-based playgroups that have commenced in the Hastings site as a fun and comfortable way to connect with families early.

Interview participants also said that child- and family-centred meanings of transition are being communicated to parents.

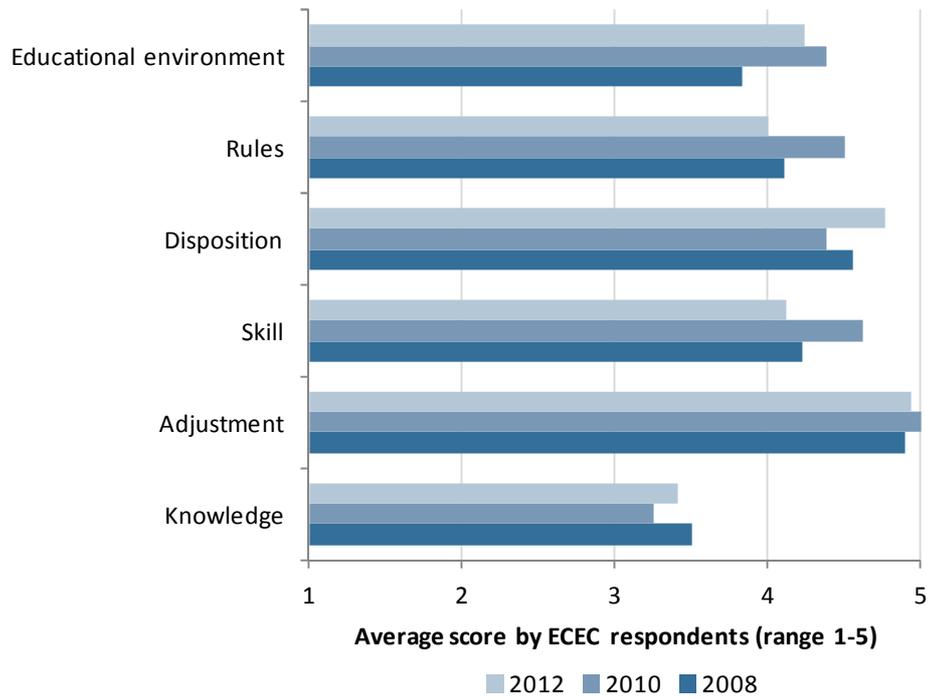
A lot of the work too has been around creating family-friendly schools. So again, it's sort of switching around from having – making sure that kids are ready for school, as having schools ready for young people. So that's been seeking feedback from the parents and utilising that to inform what the transition programs look like (Principal, Corio-Norlane).

Mutual respect between schools and ECEC

An important component of supporting a positive transition to school is the relationship between schools and early childhood education and care (ECEC) services. Because research has shown that this relationship can be characterised by a lack of trust and mutual respect (Hopps and Dockett, 2011), and could be enhanced if the expertise of ECEC services is recognised by schools, we asked both schools and ECEC services about the importance of ECEC in transition.

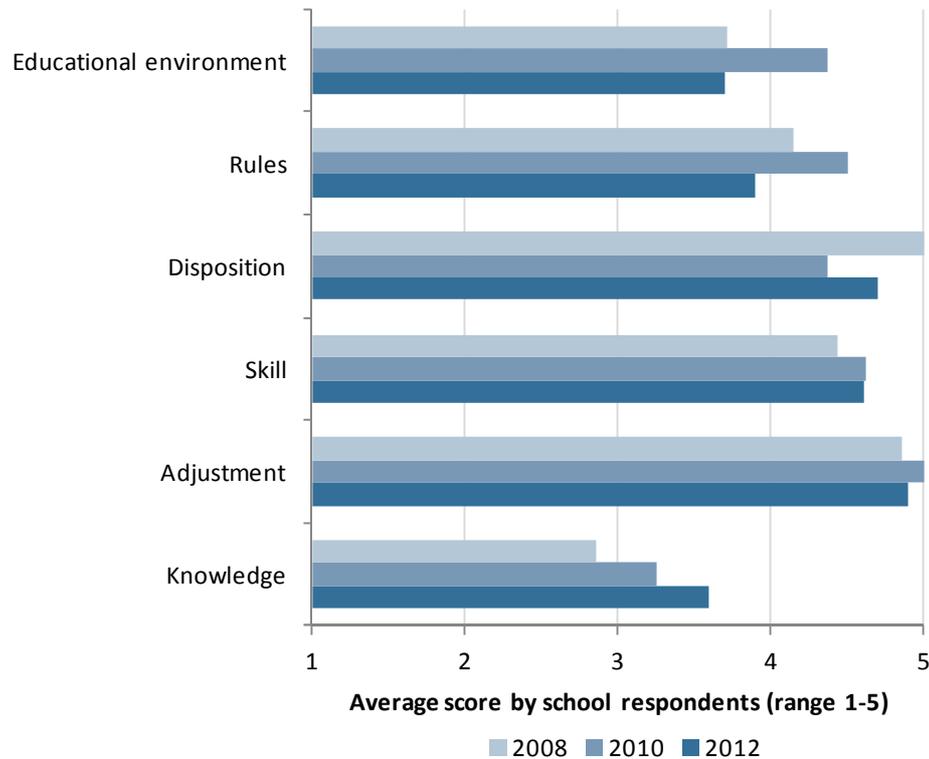
Overall, Figure 3.3 and Figure 3.4 show that both schools and early childhood education and care services recognise the fundamental role that ECEC services play in preparing children for transitioning to school, particularly in terms of children's ability, adjustment and disposition. These ratings remained stable over the life of the project.

Figure 3.3 ECEC perspective of importance of preparation for transitioning to school



Notes: Respondents per item (average) 2008: 18, 2010 = 23, 2012 = 17

Figure 3.4: Schools' perspective of importance of preparation for transitioning to school



Note: Respondents per item (average) 2008 = 6, 2010 = 4, 2012 = 8

In interviews, a number of school teachers and principals across the sites commented that among the LSEY members there is now a 'stronger valuing' (Principal, Corio-Norlane) of the role of ECEC services in supporting children to emotionally and practically prepare for transition into a school environment. ECEC educators also feel more empowered professionally and that they have a valuable contribution to make to early childhood education.

This is reflected in the collaboration between school and ECEC educators in the development of transition programs. Some schools commented that they are now careful not to cause a significant interruption to the ECEC lessons by ensuring that their transition activities are at a time suited to the feeder ECEC services. Additionally, schools and ECEC services also strategise the time during the year to begin transition, because starting too early in the year can disrupt the ECEC services. In consideration of this, the Hastings site engage generally with the community regarding transition from early in the year, and then begin their formal orientation programs in late October-November to ensure the child and family complete their ECEC program.

Interview participants report that children and families are making a smoother transition to school. This is greatly assisted by the partnerships that have been developed between services within each site who work together to collaboratively support a smooth transition to school for families.

Principals and teachers across Corio-Norlane observed children experiencing a smoother transition.

"The prep teachers have noticed that the prep children have settled well this year. This is [because of] all the work of the Transition Leaders last year." Principal, 2012

"All the preppies have settled much quicker this year. They are familiar with where things are and there are less tears." Prep teacher, 2012

(Corio-Norlane site story)

Participation in LSEY has enabled ECEC services to maintain a supportive role for children once they have started school. For instance, one ECEC educator in the Hastings area commented that one of the most important achievements of the LSEY project has been the ability to **follow up with prep teachers** early in the new school year about any concerns or issues they have with children who attended their service, and provide strategies on how this was managed in the past. Prior to the LSEY project, ECEC teachers would not have any interaction with families or school teachers once the child had left the service.

Strengthened connections between schools and ECEC services

Research shows that discontinuities and poor relationships between schools and ECEC services can lead to difficult transitions (Centre for Community Child Health, 2008). A strong focus of the project has therefore been on developing these relationships and building mutual respect.

All schools reported that they arranged for teachers to visit early childhood education and care services, and that they received student profiles from them. Half of the schools surveyed also ran joint training and education sessions for school and centre staff.

The number of schools that exchanged information with early childhood education and care services increased substantially over the life of the project, from three in 2008 to eight in 2012 (Figure 3.5).

Schools' rating of their relationships with feeder early childhood education and care services increased from an average of six out of ten in 2008 to eight out of ten in 2012. On average, early childhood education and care services rate their relationship with feeder schools as (moderately) effective, however, services' rating of this relationship has strengthened over time.

Figure 3.5 School links with early childhood education and care services

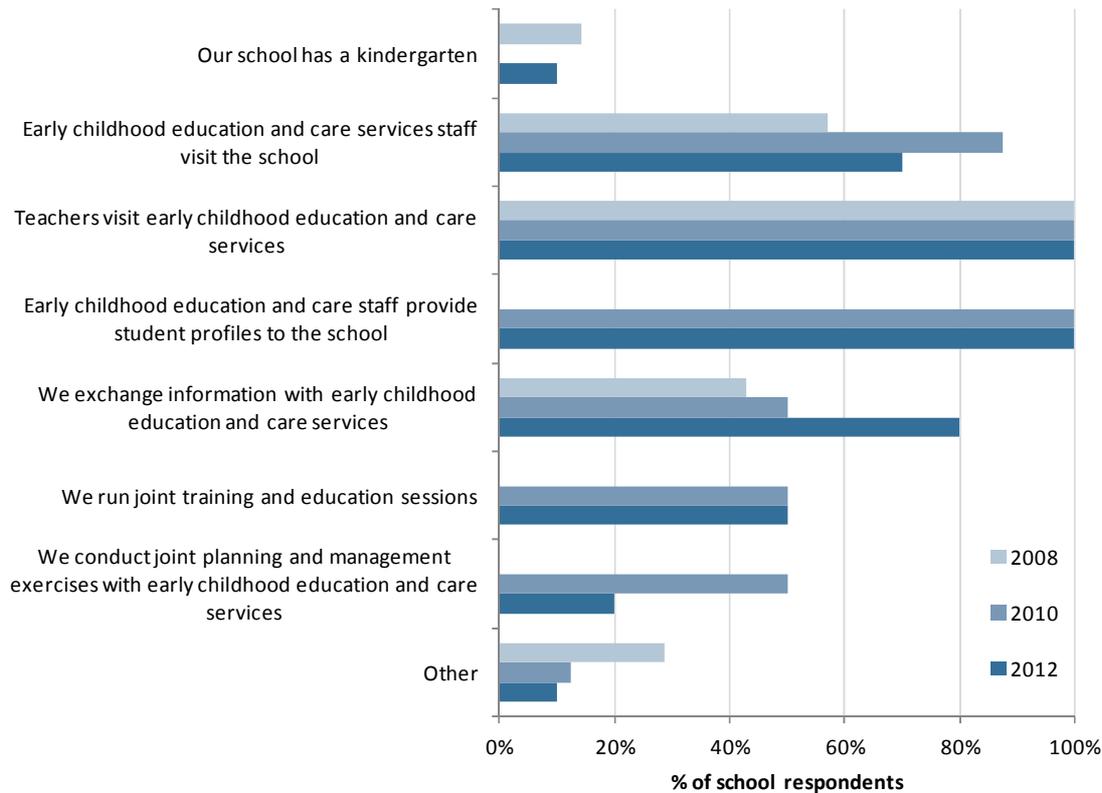
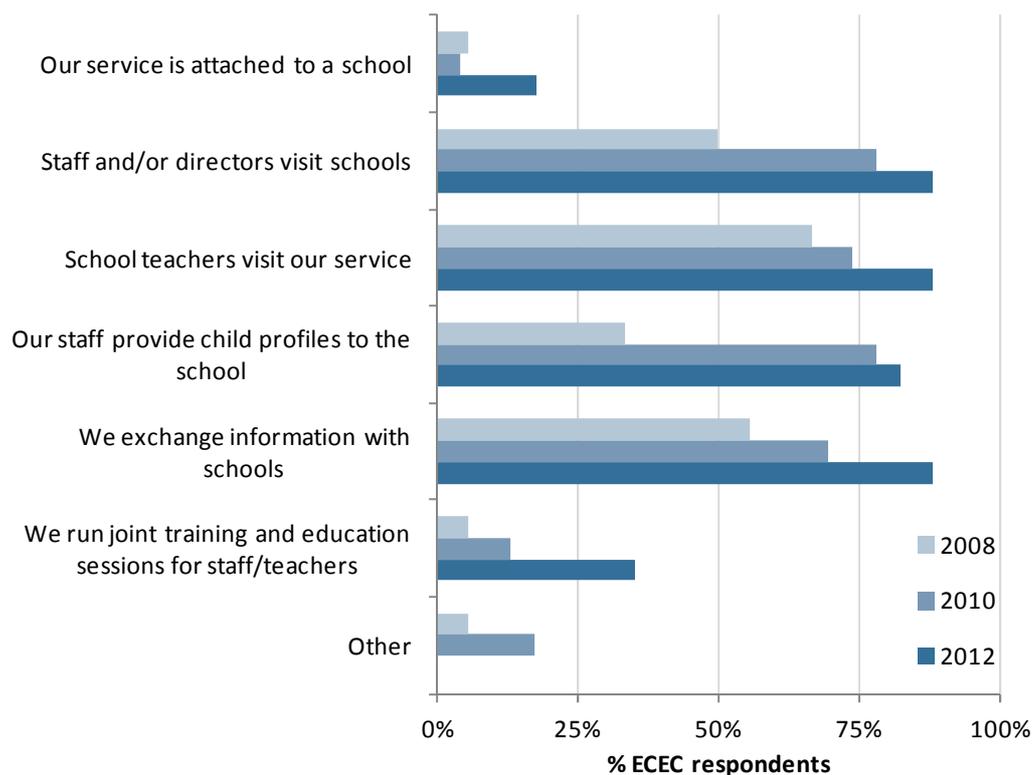


Chart notes: 2008 N=7; 2010 N= 8; 2012 N=10. Missing columns are N/A for that year. There was an increase in the absolute number of schools that reported early childhood education and care staff visited their school. More schools participated in the study over time, resulting in a proportionate decrease

Overall schools rated their transition programs as highly effective for families, teachers and schools (2012=9/10); and particularly effective for disadvantaged and vulnerable families (2012=10/10). This represents a slight increase over the life of the project (by approximately 1 point or 10 per cent).

Early childhood education and care services also increased the number of schools that they had links with. In 2012 over 80% (13/16) of early childhood education and care services reported having links with between one and four schools. The number of ECEC services with links to more than five schools has increased, from just one in 2008 to three in 2012 (Figure 3.6). The frequency of the activities that ECEC services report they conduct with schools, as well as the number of joint training and education sessions for teachers and service staff, has increased between 2008 and 2012, demonstrating that the links between early childhood education and care services and schools strengthened considerably throughout the life of the project.

Figure 3.6 ECEC links with schools



Notes: Total respondents 2008: 18, 2010 = 23, 2012 = 17

3.3 Implementation

The research questions for the implementation component of the evaluation for Goal 1 are:

- *What strategies were found to contribute to children and families transitioning smoothly between ECEC services and schools?*
- *Have schools, early education and care services and child and family services changed their operations to better facilitate the achievement of the project goals?*

A collaborative approach to transition

As noted in previous evaluation reports, the Victorian government Transition Statements have been an important resource and have been implemented within the context of meaningful and locally relevant processes across each LSEY site. The project has coordinated resources and events around the statements, including an evening for ECEC and prep teachers dedicated to exchanging the transition statements. These processes were considered valuable because ECEC and prep teachers can discuss information contained in the transition statements and how to best support children. One participant attributes the successful use of the transition statements to the LSEY project, 'As far as what has LSEY actually really impacted on, it would be the handover, so that smooth transition' (Principal, Footscray).

The transition statements are used in different ways, and are especially useful in identifying students with additional needs. In an encouraging sign of the developing partnerships with parents, in some communities the transition statements are used to encourage parents to be active participants in providing information about their child and taking action regarding a concern. For instance, at the Hastings site a lot of collaborative work was done in planning the format and content of the statements, to ensure they are strengths-based and useful. One interview participant emphasised that there is 'much more emphasis on the collaboration with the primary school teachers and the parents in this whole transition statement thing' with the introduction of the LSEY project. The participant said that this supports them in their role of providing support to the parents to actively connect with schools sufficiently early to set up supports.

The transition exchange evening also provides an opportunity for educators to build and maintain relationships between schools and ECEC services. In doing so it allows trust to be developed and therefore 'a little bit more openness and the willingness to talk further beyond what's written down as well' (Principal, Corio-Norlane). This enables educators to have a better understanding of the needs of individual children and families.

While the transition statements and exchange night are invaluable, they may also be temporary. In areas where there are well-established partnerships and ongoing networking opportunities, these activities become unnecessary. This is particularly true in the Hastings site. One school teacher reported that the nature of their practitioner network enables them to be having conversations about families, with their permission, much earlier than a few months prior to the child starting school. These conversations also extend beyond just schools and ECEC services, as allied health services in the area are part of the LSEY partnership group. This whole of community approach ensures that children's needs are identified earlier and the schools are much more prepared to accommodate these needs when the child starts school.

Site facilitator reflections, Corio-Norlane

The key area of activity supporting schools to respond to the individual needs of all children has been the partnership approach to completing and implementing the Transition Statements.

Reports from educators are that the personal handover of the Transition Statements provided in-depth information about children transitioning to school that was helpful in planning for individual children. The handover was also the first time that representatives from all local schools and early years services were in one room together. This activity provided great impetus for engaging schools and early years services not previously engaged in the project and the merge of BS-LSEY provided the merged funding/resource pool to support and enable engagement in collaborative local actions.

The Transition Exchange was reviewed by the ECEC group and was found to be an activity that they would see important to become part of common practice.

The key activity that supports early years services and schools to respond to the specific needs of children continues to be completion of and responsiveness to the Transition Statement.

Transition calendar

As reported in earlier evaluation reports, two of the LSEY sites developed and distributed a transition calendar over the life of the LSEY project. This has now been adopted as a regular activity. In the Corio-Norlane and Hastings sites, the transition calendar is developed by the Transitions Leaders Group and the Practitioner Leadership Group. The calendar helped to foster relationships between educators within and between school and ECEC services. Schools will negotiate with one another and with the ECEC services, for appropriate days and times to hold their transition activities. This demonstrates a mutual professional respect not only between prep teachers, but also towards ECEC services, and an acknowledgement that ECEC lessons and activities are important and should not be interrupted.

The transition calendar also promotes to parents the importance of taking the time to investigate which school is right for their child and to actively engage with the different schools and services to make an informed decision. It also helps parents to feel less uneasy about attending the activities at different schools as a transition calendar promotes the idea that all the schools are united in helping parents find the right environment for the next phase of their child's learning career.

While a transition calendar has not been developed in Footscray, the site is preparing to implement their 'Footscray Transition Timetable'. This is a collaborative initiative developed by the LSEY Practitioner and Partnership groups aimed at supporting a positive transition to school for children and families in the local area.

Transition coordinator

Most schools in the LSEY project have a transition coordinator or a transition leader who have embraced the LSEY project and incorporated it into their role to varying degrees across the three sites. The role of the transition coordinator is to liaise with ECEC services and develop a transition program for the school. Transition coordinators in the Hastings and Corio-Norlane sites also sit on a Practitioner Leaders and Transition Leaders group. These groups have become fundamental to the development and preparation for transition programs and activities. In particular, successfully organising joint activities, such as the transition calendar, the transition exchange, and fun activities such as family picnics, relies on the capacity of these practitioners and educators to meet and collaborate. In Footscray, transition coordinators focus more on their internal transition program and maintaining relationships with their feeder ECEC services.

Transition programs

All schools participating in the project run formal orientation and transition to school programs or activities including orientation day/night, information sessions for parents, and arranging for children to visit schools and for teachers to visit early childhood education and care services. As noted in previous reports, schools were conducting orientation and transition programs prior to LSEY, and the project has brought about significant changes to these activities.

The most common reported change is that schools are starting their transition programs much earlier in the year to allow extra time to get to know children and families and their individual needs, before they commence school the following year. Schools are also offering a much wider variety of transition programs and events at different times of the day so that children in a kinder program, or working parents, will have a greater opportunity to attend. School principals and teachers, and ECEC educators alike have commented on the outcomes of the transition program for children.

They settled in extremely quickly and that was noted by not just their prep teachers but people that were coming in and helping, and the specialists and things. They were amazed at how settled – and I think it had something to do with the transition program. (Prep teacher, Corio-Norlane).

Questionnaire data show that the majority of ECEC services run orientation and transition to school programs or activities, the most common of which are arranging for children to visit schools and holding information sessions for parents. Throughout the life of the project the number of ECEC services that provided information sessions for parents increased modestly from just over a third to half.

In interviews, ECEC services reported a number of changes to their transition program through participating in LSEY, and a strong theme from the qualitative data is improvements over time in transition programs in ECEC services. Prior to LSEY, ECEC teachers had very little to do with their local schools, could not really comment on the teachers, the school grounds or the prep curriculum and had very little to do with the children after they had started school. Thus ECEC educators could not really provide parents with much assistance about where to send their child to school.

As a result of the LSEY partnerships and activities, ECEC educators are much more informed and able to assist families with their questions about starting school. ECEC services also now actively engage in the transition programs of local schools by escorting children and parents on school visits and explaining information about the school's curriculum and details.

In Footscray, where the children attending the ECEC services are less likely to attend the local feeder schools, the educators are still using this opportunity for children to learn about and practice going to school. One ECEC provider from Footscray commented that parents generally rely on their staff to provide them with information about the local schools, but until recently they could not really comment because they were not familiar with the schools. Since getting to know the schools and the teachers through the LSEY project, one ECEC provider commented that they are in a better position to meet the diverse needs of families, particularly because the Footscray area has a large population of families from non-English speaking backgrounds with varying socioeconomic positions.

We've been able to meet their needs a bit more because we've actually been able to support them with their transitions to school

because we know the schools, we know the teachers (ECEC provider, Footscray).

Joint planning and delivery of lessons

There has been a strong focus in each of the sites on building collaborative relationships between schools and ECEC services.

During the early stages of LSEY the peer swaps assisted in promoting a shared understanding of the needs of children transitioning to school. This activity also helped in the development of relationships between schools and ECEC services, as well as providing a medium for insight into the other's profession. The swaps enabled teachers and educators to really get a sense of their ECEC/school counterpart and value the importance of the other's role in early childhood education. It also promoted a shared knowledge base and consistent approach to ECEC education so that children are in the best position to make this transition. The benefits of these swaps include increased partnerships and respect between schools and services, described in the previous section of this report.

Continuity between ECEC services and school environments

There has been a shift in the perspectives of school principals and teachers regarding transition and introducing children to school. Rather than the traditional expectation that children need to be ready for school, they reported that schools need to be in a position where they are able to accommodate the individual needs of all children entering prep: schools need to be ready for children.

This change in perception about schools needing to be child-ready has led to a change in pedagogy in many of the LSEY schools. Play-based learning has been implemented to varying degrees in prep classrooms. This has been found to contribute to a smoother transition to a school learning environment because the format of the lesson is familiar from ECEC services. The degree to which this has been implemented varies. For instance, one school has adopted the play-based approach for 45 minutes each morning, while another school implements it for two hours per day; some schools limit play-based learning to the first term and slowly transition the prep class to a traditional learning style, while another school has wholeheartedly embraced play-based learning as their normal method of teaching every day throughout the school year.

In turn, ECEC services introduced some of the school prep year activities into their learning environment, which also facilitates continuity. For example, ECEC teachers in the Hastings site started to teach children to write their name with a capital letter followed by lower case letters, following a suggestion from prep teachers.

Schools also now have a better understanding of the developmental needs of children and the diversity of these needs. One principal commented that, 'there's a better understanding of when children come in to start their prep year, the reason behind them all being at different stages of development' (Principal, Corio-Norlane).

One school in Footscray has assisted the transition to school for children after they commence their prep year by rolling out a four week 'Bridge into Prep' program that provides an early years-focus learning curriculum. This project was a direct result of funding provided by LSEY to complete a research project into the school readiness of children attending a feeder kindergarten in the local area. This involved working closely with the ECEC service teachers and drawing on their expertise to provide guidance on how to run the sessions. This program also developed an evidence base to guide change for the prep year pedagogy, facilitated by collaboration between services.

Goal 1: Summary of findings

The participation of families in transition activities increased over the life of the project, and their experience of transition is thought to have improved. There have been changes to the way schools and services conduct transition processes. Specifically, there have been changes to transition programs and the ways schools and early years services collaborate to promote a consistent approach to transition for incoming prep families.

Families' experience of orientation programs and starting school:

- Most children (95 per cent) participated in orientation activities. Over time, more children had sustained contact with school, over a number of weeks, and fewer had only one visit to the school. This reflects the change in transition activities offered, as schools offered more sustained activities over a longer period.

Mutual respect and links between schools and ECEC:

- Research has shown that the relationship between schools and ECEC services can be poor, and that transition is improved when the expertise of ECEC services is recognised by schools. In LSEY sites, both schools and early childhood education and care services recognise the fundamental role that ECEC services play in preparing children for transitioning to school, particularly in terms of children's adjustment and disposition.
- In interviews, teachers and ECEC educators report that children and families are making a smoother transition to school. This is greatly assisted by the partnerships that have been developed.
- Participation in LSEY has enabled ECEC services to maintain a supportive role for children once they have started school: for example, through making contact with prep teachers early in the new school year about any concerns about children who attended their service.
- Schools reported increased links with ECEC services. The number of schools that exchanged information with ECEC services increased substantially over the life of the project, from three in 2008 to eight in 2012. Schools rating of their relationship with feeder early childhood education and care services increased.

- ECEC services also report increased links with schools. In 2012 over 80% (13/16) of early childhood education and care services reported having links with between one and four schools. The number of services with links to more than five schools has increased. The frequency of the activities that ECEC services conduct with schools, as well as the number of joint training and education sessions for teachers and service staff, all increased between 2008 and 2012.

Successful implementation strategies for this goal include:

- A collaborative approach to transition. The transition statements have been an important resource because of activities enabled through LSEY.
- Transition calendar. Two of the LSEY sites developed and distributed a transition calendar over the life of the LSEY project that has now been adopted as a regular activity.
- Transition programs. LSEY has enabled schools to make significant changes to their transition activities, including starting programs much earlier, and offering a much wider variety of transition programs. School principals and teachers, and ECEC educators alike have commented on the outcomes of the transition program for children.
- Continuity between ECEC and school environment. Play-based learning has been implemented to varying degrees in prep classrooms. This has been found to contribute to a smoother transition to a school learning environment because the format of the lesson is familiar from ECEC services. Schools also now have a better understanding of the developmental needs of children and the diversity of these needs. In turn, ECEC services have introduced some of the school prep year activities into their learning environment, which also facilitates continuity.

4 Goal 2: Early years services and schools actively connect with families

This goal recognises the importance of parents' engagement with their children's schooling, and the need for schools and services to be accessible to parents to facilitate this engagement.

4.1 Data sources

For this goal, we asked parents about their relationships with the ECEC services their children attended before starting school, and their current relationship with the school.

We asked schools and early years services about activities and opportunities provided for families to engage in their children's learning environments.

4.2 Outcomes

The research questions for the outcomes component of the evaluation for Goal 2 are:

- *Have the connections between schools and families strengthened over the life of the project?*
- *Have the connections between early education and care services and families strengthened over the life of the project?*

Families' experience of ECEC services

The transition experience begins well before children commence school, and the relationship between families and ECEC staff is important to transition. Increasingly, children in Australia start school after some experience in ECEC environments, and as Appendix A shows, most children in LSEY communities attended ECEC.

Parents reported generally good experiences with their child's early education and care service, responding positively to questions about the information provided about their child's day, the activities and resources offered to parents and the relationship and contact with their service (Table 4.1).

Table 4.1 Average parental rating of their experience with their child's early education and care centre

	2008	2010	2012
The service provided me with useful information about my child's day	4.0	3.9	4.1
The service offered activities and resources for parents as well as children	3.8	3.7	3.9
If I needed to speak to someone about my child, I knew where to go	4.4	4.3	4.4
I had a good relationship with the teachers/staff at the service	4.3	4.3	4.4

The service is friendly and welcoming for parents	4.4	4.3	4.4
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Notes:

Rating between 1 strongly disagree, and 5 strongly agree

N (average response per item) for 2008 = 186, 2010 = 278, 2012 = 318

ECEC services also play a key role in informing parents about starting school. In 2012, 90 per cent of responding parents (293) reported they had received information from their child’s early education and care centre prior to their child starting school. This was similar throughout the study, with rates of 88 per cent and 91 per cent in 2008 and 2010 respectively. Parents generally rated the information they received as being useful. When asked to rate the usefulness on a scale of 1 (not at all useful) to 10 (extremely useful), on average they rated it 8 (in 2010 the average was 7 and in 2008 the average was 8).

Connections between schools and families

Parents generally had a positive experience with their child’s school. When asked how strongly they agree or disagree with statements about their school, on average they strongly agreed that their school is friendly and welcoming and they know where to go if they need to speak to someone about their child’s experience of school. On average, they agreed their child’s school provided useful information about their time at school, offered activities and resources for parents as well as children and they had a good relationship with their child’s teacher(s). These patterns remained high over time with minimal change.

Table 4.2 Average parental rating of their experience with their child’s school

	2008	2010	2012
My child’s school provides me with useful information about their time at school	4.0	3.9	4.0
My child’s school offers activities and resources for parents as well as children	3.9	3.8	3.8
If I need to speak to someone about my child’s experience of school, I know where to go	4.4	4.4	4.4
I have a good relationship with my child’s teacher(s)	4.2	4.2	4.3
My child’s school is friendly and welcoming for parents	4.5	4.4	4.4

Notes:

Rating between 1 strongly disagree, and 5 strongly agree

N (average response per item) for 2008 = 195, 2010 = 293, 2012 = 336

Additionally, just under half of the parents responded they spend time at their child’s school at times other than dropping them off or picking them up (45 per

cent), which has remained stable over time. The most common reason was to attend community or cultural events (40.5 per cent), or to do reading or other classroom activities (35.3 per cent).

Schools are working hard to strengthen and foster their relationships with families both before and once their child starts school with the aim of making schools more family friendly. This has been done in a number of ways, including parent surveys, or more informal conversations between parents and teachers in the playground, and by hosting far more activities for groups of parents.

In 2012 the majority of schools reported that they had hosted activities for groups of parents (8/10) such as singing groups, family picnics, and access to the library. This represents a substantial increase from the commencement of the program in 2008 when only three schools hosted such activities (3/7). There was a slight increase in the total number of schools involved in early intervention or health promotion programs (2012=8/10; 2010=4/7; 2008=6/7) such as supported playgroups, family support, and breakfast clubs.

All three sites emphasised the importance of ensuring that the school environment is family friendly. This is a part of the philosophy of schools changing their mindset to be ready for children. Teachers and principals recognise that new parents are accustomed to ECEC settings, where they are welcome to come or go as they please. Traditionally schools have not always encouraged parents to stay on school grounds during class time. To remedy this, a number of the LSEY schools across all sites have established parent-friendly spaces at the school that comprise a room dedicated to parents where they can interact with other parents and relax.

One Footscray school opened its classroom doors regularly to parents for one hour at the end of the day for one month to talk to the teacher or observe the lesson. While the feedback received from parents was overwhelmingly positive the principal is unsure of how financially viable it is to continue this activity.

4.3 Implementation

The research question for the implementation component of the evaluation for this goal is:

- *What strategies were found to contribute to connections between schools and families strengthening over the life of the project?*

Engagement with families by schools and services

Interview participants from schools and services commented that it is becoming increasingly rare for schools to not have had interactions with families before a child starts school. The range of LSEY activities and transition programs implemented by the schools and ECEC services ensures that teachers and principals are getting to know families much earlier. Teachers and principals report that feedback from parents has generally indicated an increase in satisfaction with the level of engagement and collaboration between schools and families.

Many participants discussed the importance of building trust with families to be able to help them transition smoothly to school. Once workers are able to develop trust with families they are more likely to talk about their concerns, and workers will therefore have a greater insight into their individual needs. One ECEC worker reported that one way schools are developing trusting relationships with the families is through the ECEC service, and it is because of LSEY that these connections between schools and ECEC services have been developed: 'you have to build up a trusting relationship with the families [and the] relationships that have been forged through the LSEY have provided that' (ECEC provider, Footscray).

Parents and carers of children who attend one ECEC service in Footscray are invited to attend transition excursions that visit the local schools. The service sees this as an opportune way to actively engage families in conversations about the different learning environments available to their children at the different schools. Whether or not the children will be attending the school they visit, it is still perceived as a valuable opportunity for children and their families to learn about what a school program and environment is like.

Similarly, ECEC providers in the Hastings and Corio-Norlane sites have commented that because of the LSEY project there has been a much stronger emphasis in the community about engaging families in the transition process and for educators to be continually aware about what they are doing to involve families. One educator from Corio-Norlane commented that the LSEY project has 'really encouraged us to collaborate with parents and that it is a partnership thing' (Prep teacher, Corio-Norlane).

In the Hastings area one of the ECEC services holds a collaborative meeting with the parents of each kinder child to develop the transition statement, 'So there's much more emphasis on the collaboration with the primary school teachers and the parents in this whole transition statement thing' (ECEC provider, Hastings). This involves parents in the process of providing information to the schools about their family and allows the kinder teacher and the parents to reflect on the child's learning and any concerns they have about the child starting school.

In Hastings, an ECEC provider reported that they now have a greater understanding of the child and family services in the area. As a result, workers feel that they are in a much stronger position to suggest services to families and recommend different strategies for meeting a child's needs. The ECEC provider works with the parents and child and family service so that any decisions made regarding intervention programs the child receives are made in consultation with the family, 'it's sort of around the table discussion now where beforehand it probably wouldn't have been.' (ECEC provider, Hastings). Additionally, this collaborative approach to intervention ensures that any strategies used to meet the child's needs are consistent across services and at home.

A number of schools have conducted surveys to ascertain parents' satisfaction with the school and how this could be improved. Across all sites, some of the activities

that have resulted from parent feedback and a greater commitment from ECEC services and schools to engage families have included:

- playgroups in schools
- inviting parents to participate in classroom and school activities
- schoolyard 'meet n greet' where staff are available for informal conversations with parents on a regular basis
- implementation of a 'parent space' in some schools
- offering language and arts classes on school grounds
- family transition days where parents are invited to informal 'get to know you' activities, school tours and teachers meet and greet.
- parent interest groups.

In response to these activities, anecdotal feedback from schools and services has indicated that there has been:

- increased parent presence at schools and early years services
- increased engagement in school issues and activities
- increased parent feedback about opportunities for parents to be involved in school.

Respecting parents as active participants

ECEC educators emphasised the importance of encouraging parents to implement strategies at home to help meet their child's needs and to prepare for a smooth transition to school. They also acknowledge the importance of adopting particular activities or strategies used in the home to assist the child to learn in the ECEC environment. Additionally, for children who have them, ECEC services are working with external support workers. As one ECEC provider from Hastings phrases it, 'we're doing this as a team'. They commented that prior to the LSEY partnerships it was not really common practice to intervene so much with individual children, however it is now embedded in the culture of the service and the community so they are always alert to the need to follow up concerns.

Goal 2: Summary of findings

Families' experience of ECEC services:

- Parents reported generally good experiences with their child's early education and care service.
- ECEC services also play a key role in informing parents about starting school. Ninety per cent of responding parents (293) in 2012 reported they had received information from their child's early education and care centre prior to their child starting school.

Connections between schools and families:

- Most parents had a positive relationship with their child's school. On average they strongly agreed that the school is friendly and welcoming and they know where to go if they need to speak to someone about their child's experience of school. On average, they agreed their child's school provided useful information about the child's time at school, offered activities and resources for parents as well as children, and that they had a good relationship with their child's teacher(s).
- In 2012 the majority of schools reported that they had hosted activities for groups of parents (8/10) such as singing groups, family picnics, and access to the library. This represents a substantial increase from the commencement of the program in 2008 when only three schools hosted such activities (3/7).
- There was a slight increase in the total number of schools involved in early intervention or health promotion programs (2012=8/10; 2010=4/7; 2008=6/7) such as supported playgroups, family support, and breakfast clubs.

A number of the LSEY schools across all sites have established parent-friendly spaces at the school that comprise a room dedicated to parents where parents can interact and relax.

Successful implementation strategies for this goal include:

- Engagement with families by schools and services: a number of schools conducted surveys to ascertain parents' satisfaction with the school and how this could be improved, and some schools find value in teachers being present and available to chat to parents in the playground before and after school.
- Most schools commented that they adopted a collaborative approach with the parents to address any particular learning needs for their child. Including parents in this decision-making and action-implementing process also assisted to develop trust between families and schools.
- Cooperation between schools: in one site in particular, the traditional expectation that schools are in competition with one another has been reversed, and all schools work very closely as collaborators and to promote each school as equal.

5 Goal 3: Schools are responsive to the individual learning needs of all children

This goal is based on the importance of schools' building capacity, through changing their operations and building relationships with families and with services to identify and meet the individual learning needs of all children. This is an important component of a shift from a focus on the 'school readiness' of children to the 'child readiness' of schools. The specific findings for this goal relate to:

- schools being more prepared to meet the specific needs of children prior to starting prep due to partnerships with local services and a prior relationship with families
- schools providing ongoing assessment and health services for children to detect any newly developed areas of need
- schools and services engaging families in the planning and decision making surrounding their child's needs

5.1 Data sources

For this goal, we asked parents about the kind of information they received from the school, and about their child's experience of school.

We asked schools about the perceived effectiveness of their capacity to respond to children's individual learning needs. We also asked schools about the resources they had to respond to individual learning needs and community needs.

We asked schools about any community-based and early intervention activities, as staging these activities is a means of engaging with parents and ensuring the school is a community resource.

We also asked schools, ECEC services and child and family services about their relationships with each other. We asked schools about their relationships with ECEC services and with child and family services. We asked ECEC services about their relationships with schools (both specific transition relationships and generally) and with child and family services. We asked child and family services about their relationships with ECEC services and schools.

5.2 Outcomes

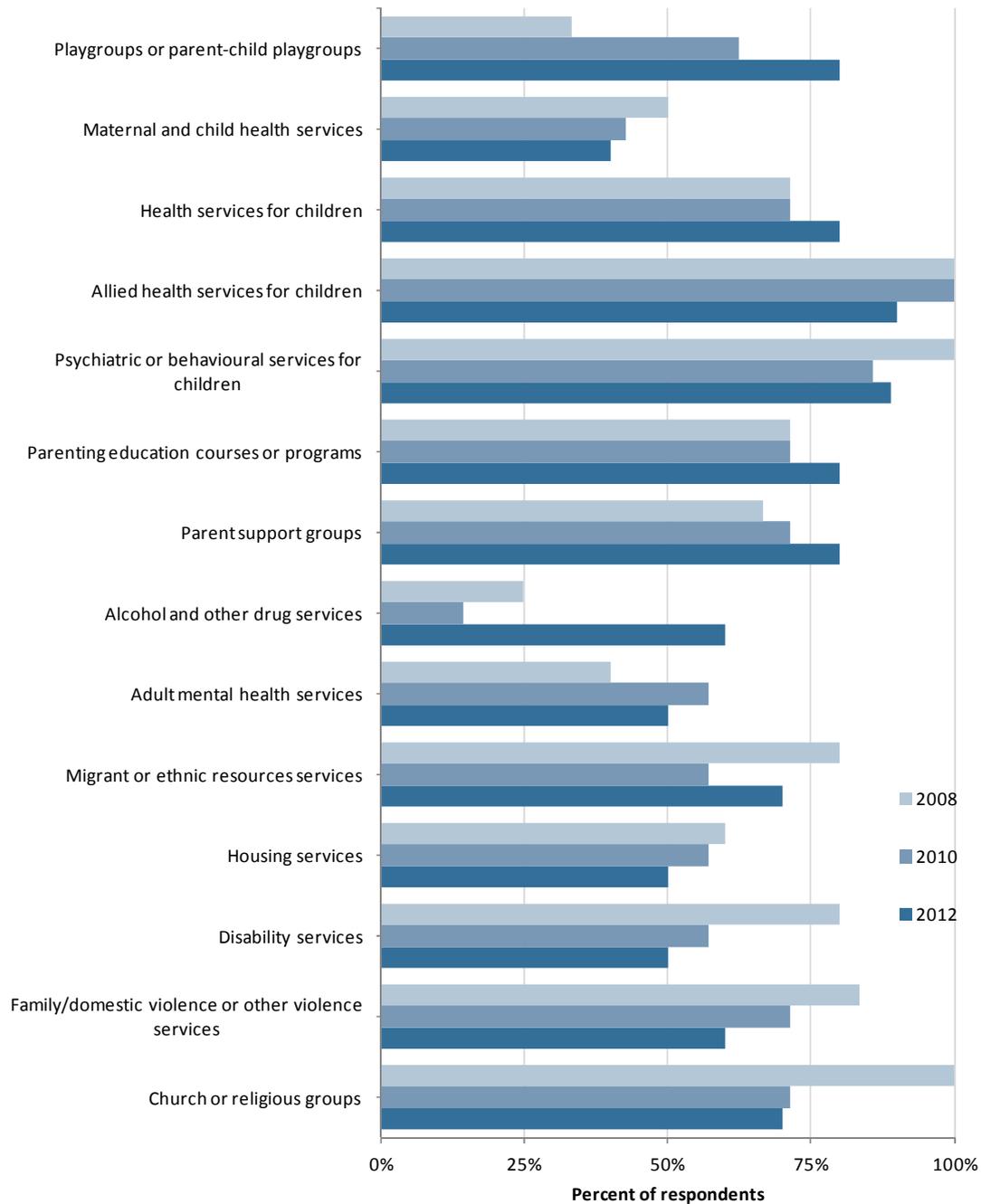
The research questions for the outcomes component of the evaluation for Goal 3 are:

- *Have schools improved their ability to meet the specific needs of children in their first year?*
- *Has the capacity to work in partnerships between early education and care services, schools, and child and family services strengthened over the life of the project?*

Links between schools and child and family services

As Figure 5.1 shows, ECEC services and schools work closely and regularly with local child and family services. The most common services that schools are in contact with are allied health services for children (with contact over time close to 100%: 2008 = 7/7, 2010 = 11/11 and 2012 = 9/10) and psychiatric or behavioural services for children (over time 2008 = 7/7, 2010 = 9/10, 2012 = 8/9).

Figure 5.1 Types of child and family services that schools are in contact with

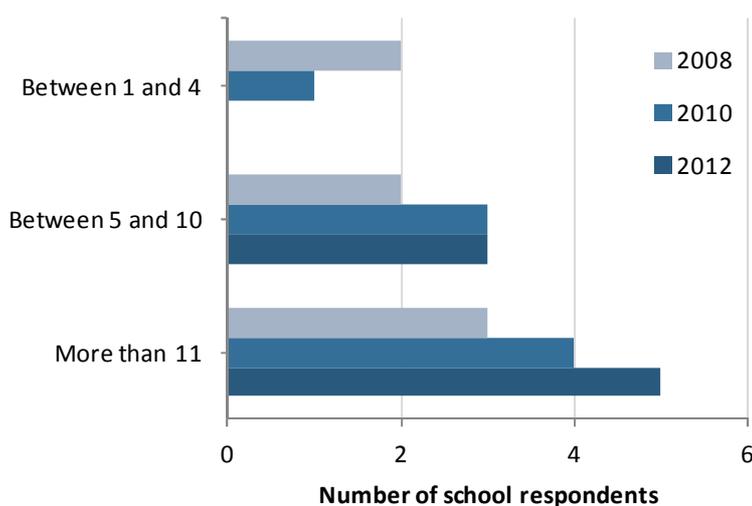


Note: Average N respondents per item 2008 = 6, 2010 = 10, 2012 = 10

The total number of schools with links to these services has increased over the life of the project. In particular, the links schools have with child and family services that provide migrant or ethnic resources, alcohol and other drug services, and playgroups or parent-child playgroups have expanded considerably. This is evidence that cooperation between child and family services and schools has strengthened, despite some service categories decreasing in proportion to the total number of schools participating in the study.

Figure 5.2 shows referrals made by schools to child and family services in 2012. Most (5/9) schools had made more than 11 referrals in the six months prior to the survey, and a third (3/9) had made between five and 10 referrals in the six months prior to the survey. There is some evidence that the number of referrals schools made to child and family services increased over the life of the project. In 2012, no school had made fewer than five referrals in the six months prior to the survey, whereas the number of schools that had made more than 11 referrals had increased to five from a figure of just three in 2008.

Figure 5.2 Referrals from schools to child and family services



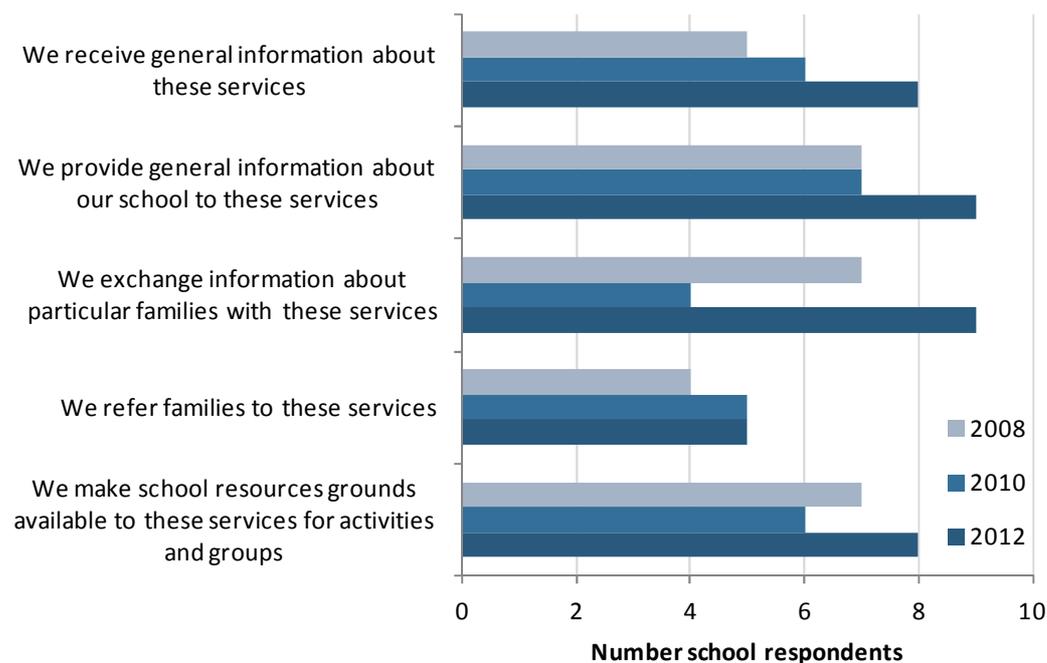
Note: N 2008 = 7, 2010 = 10, 2012 = 9

The number of schools that exchanged information with child and family services also increased over the life of the project from fewer than half in 2008 (3/7) to all but two in 2012 (eight schools out of a total of 9 responding schools). Of those schools that participated in information exchange sessions, the majority had arranged for teachers and staff to attend between one and four sessions in the six months prior to the survey (2012=5/8; 2010=3/7; 2008=0/6).

Over the life of the LSEY project schools not only increased the number of child and family services that they had links with but also increased the amount of contact they had with them. The most common interaction between schools and child and family services was for schools to share information about particular families and refer families on to services they required, as presented in Figure 2.1 below. The vast

majority of schools also received general information from child and family services and made school resources available to them for running activities.

Figure 5.3 Type of contact with child and family services



ECEC services also had relationships with child and family services, but less change over time. Of those early childhood education and care services that had links with child and family services the vast majority surveyed in 2012 reported receiving general information from them (16/17), referring families on to these services (15/17) and exchanging information about particular families with these services (14/17). The majority of these services also provided general information about their service to the child and family services that they had links with (9/17).

When asked about the number of referrals made from ECEC services to child and family services, the most common response across all three years was that ECEC services made between one and four referrals during the six months prior to the survey (2008= 10/15, 2010 = 8/13, 2012 = 5/9). This changed slightly between 2010 and 2012; the proportion of ECEC services reporting they had made between five and 10 referrals in the six months prior to the survey increased from 23% (3/13) in 2008 to 44% (4/9) in 2012, although the small number of respondents in 2012 make this figure unable to be generalised to determine whether this is significant.

In 2012 two thirds (9/15) of early childhood education and care services reported receiving referrals from child and family services that they had links with. Proportionally this was consistent with the numbers reported in 2010 (13/21), however represented a slight decrease compared to the levels reported in 2008 (15/18).

Service use and needs – capacity to work in partnerships

We asked parents about the health and community service usage patterns of families to ascertain the significance of schools and ECEC services developing relationships with child and family services. Access to services can be an important determinant of transition to school, and may also be an indicator of the collaboration and integration of services. Parents were asked about their child’s service usage during the previous 12 months – both whether their child needed and used a service and whether they needed but did not use a service.

Figure 5.4 shows the average percentage of children who needed and used these services across the data collection period. GPs were the most common service needed and used by parents for their children (75% average), followed by dental services (44% average).

Figure 5.4 Services needed and used by parents for their children during 12 months prior to survey

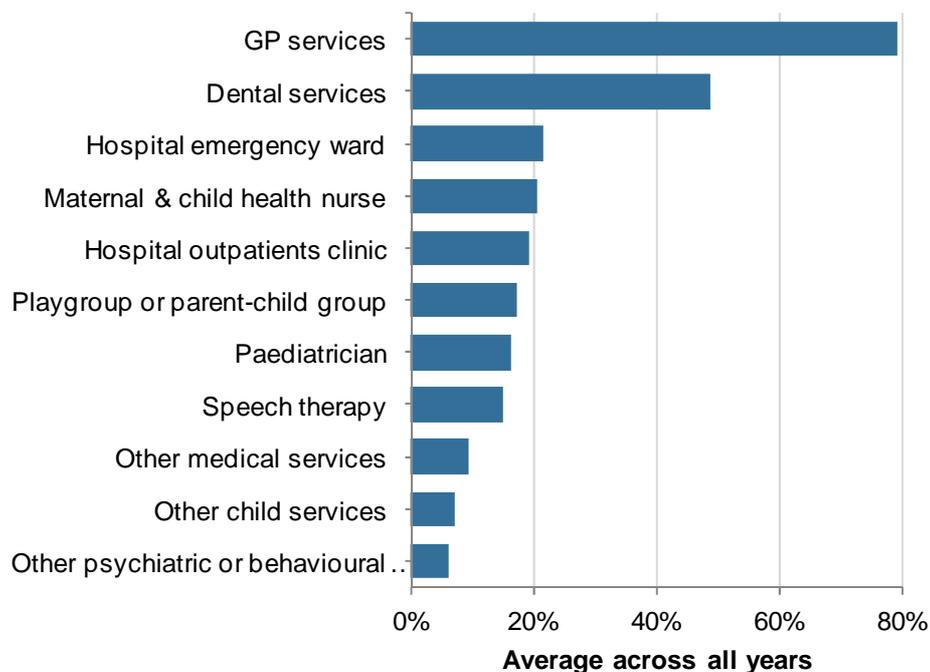
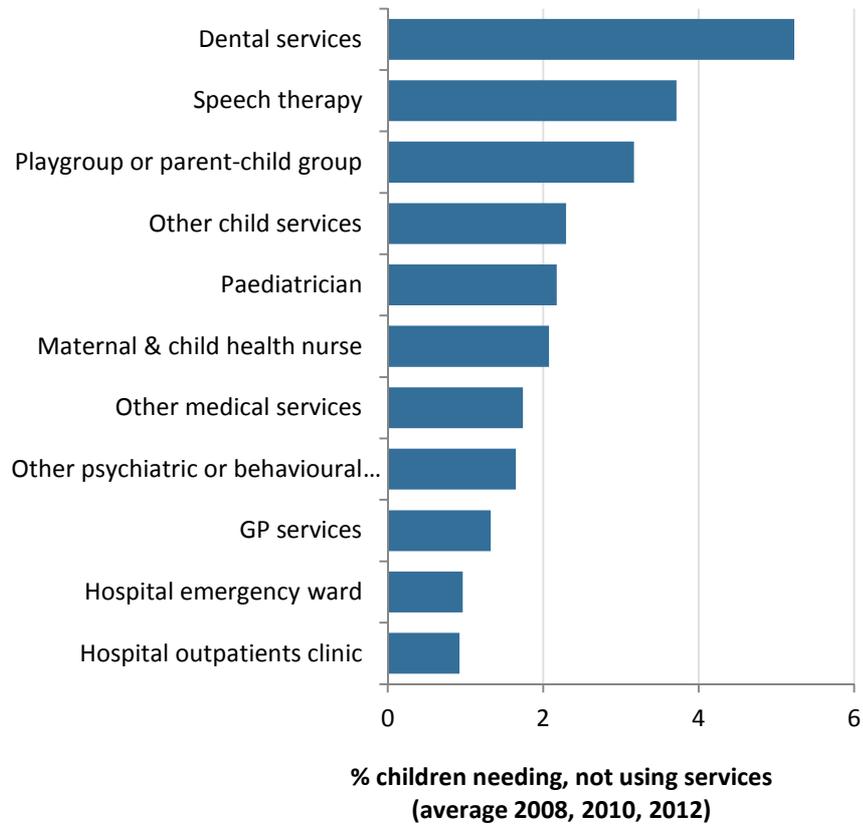


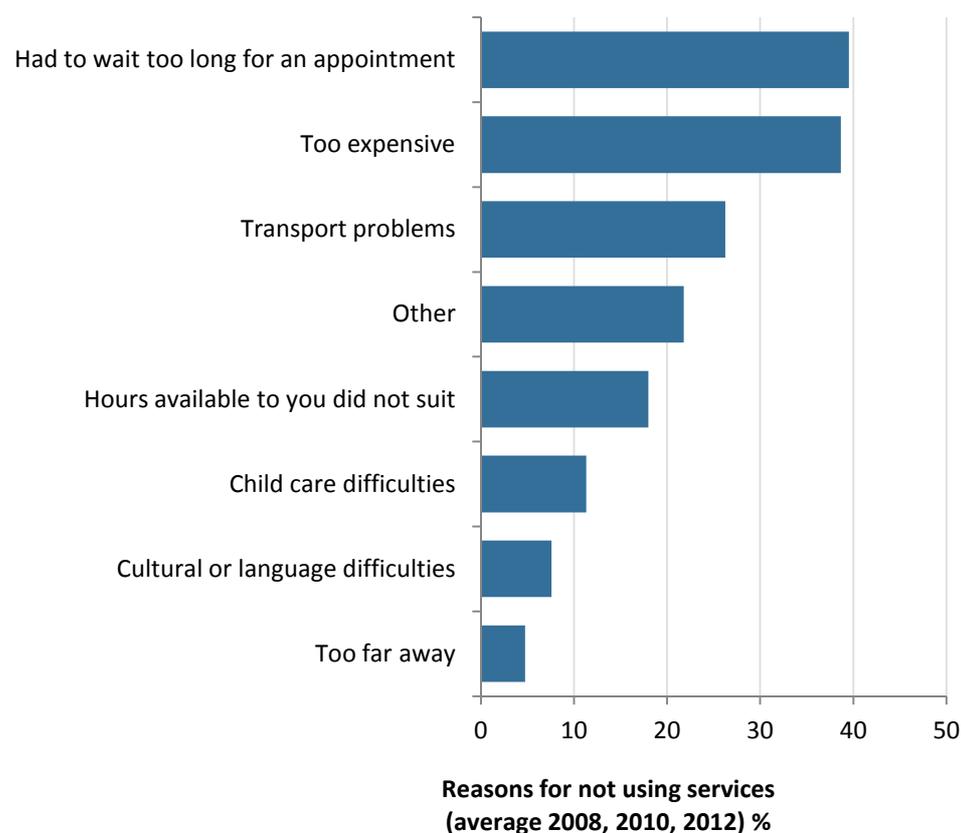
Figure 5.5 shows that a small number of parents needed services for their children but couldn’t use them. Averaged across all years, the most common service needed but not used were dental services (needed by 5.2% of children on average) followed by therapy (3.2% average).

Figure 5.5 Services that parents needed for their child but couldn't use during 12 months prior to survey



Across the three years, the most common reason for not using the service was wait time followed closely by expense (Figure 5.6).

Figure 5.6 Reasons for not using service when needed by child (per cent)



Parents were also asked about services that other members of their family required during the 12 months prior to the service. The most common service needed but not used was parenting education courses or programs, with almost half of the respondents indicating that some member of their family needed but could not use that service. This was followed by other counselling services and parent support groups. As with the services for the child, the main reason that these services were not accessed was due to expense; however, parents also responded that the hours didn't suit and they had childcare difficulties.

These findings indicate the importance of initiatives that increase access to these services. Long waiting lists for these services are generally high, and beyond the scope of projects such as LSEY to address. The findings from the questionnaires do not seem to indicate that lack of coordination or integration between services is driving this unmet need.

All three sites commented that the capacity to work in partnerships, especially between schools and ECEC services, has improved since being involved in the LSEY project. This has occurred to varying degrees across the project sites.

In the Hastings site, working collaboratively in partnerships with other service providers has become a part of the professional culture of schools and services. As

everyone knows everyone else it is much easier and more efficient to address any issues as they arise. Additionally, the more connections between services are strengthened, the less time- and resource-intensive it is to work in partnership because it becomes part of routine work.

In Corio-Norlane, the capacity to work in partnerships is steadily improving and becoming a part of the professional culture. This is greatly assisted by the merging of schools as many of the LSEY professionals already work in partnership external to the project. However, groups such the ECEC working group are relatively strong and educators in this group value working collaboratively with other educators and services.

The Footscray site has experienced a number of setbacks to its practitioner and partnership group over the life of the project, and while groups are improving in their capacity to work in partnership in the last year of LSEY, the apprehension still exists for many educators regarding how much to commit to the partnership as the future of the project is uncertain.

Earlier identification

The project goal is responsiveness of schools to the learning needs of all children. Responsiveness to children with additional needs is an important component of this. Forty five parents had children with additional needs (13.6 per cent), and these parents were satisfied with their school's response to their child's needs, on average providing a score of 8 out of 10 where one is extremely dissatisfied and 10 is extremely satisfied. Around 15 per cent of parents across all years reported that their child has additional needs such as allergies, disabilities or health problems (17, 16 and 14 per cent of parents in 2008, 2010 and 2012 respectively). These parents were asked how satisfied they were with their school's responses to their child's needs. Across all years parents reported high averages. They decreased slightly between 2008 and 2012 however this difference was not shown to be significant.

A strong theme in the qualitative data was that LSEY has facilitated close relationships between schools, parents and services, which have enabled schools to identify, and respond to the individual learning needs of children.

Schools reported various strategies for identifying the individual learning needs of children. These included information being passed on by the ECEC and community services, provided in the transition statements and exchange night, and during other formal settings such as playgroup. One school principal from Hastings comments that his school has always focused on identifying the needs of children early, however participation in LSEY means that the school now has a much better relationship with the ECEC and community services and can therefore better assist families to ensure they are receiving the appropriate supports.

We find out better information about that child's needs because we have great relationships with those organisations, that extra layer of trust. So we'll find out stuff that we may have otherwise not have, and we probably, through that resource, have a better

and earlier relationship with the parents (School principal, Hastings).

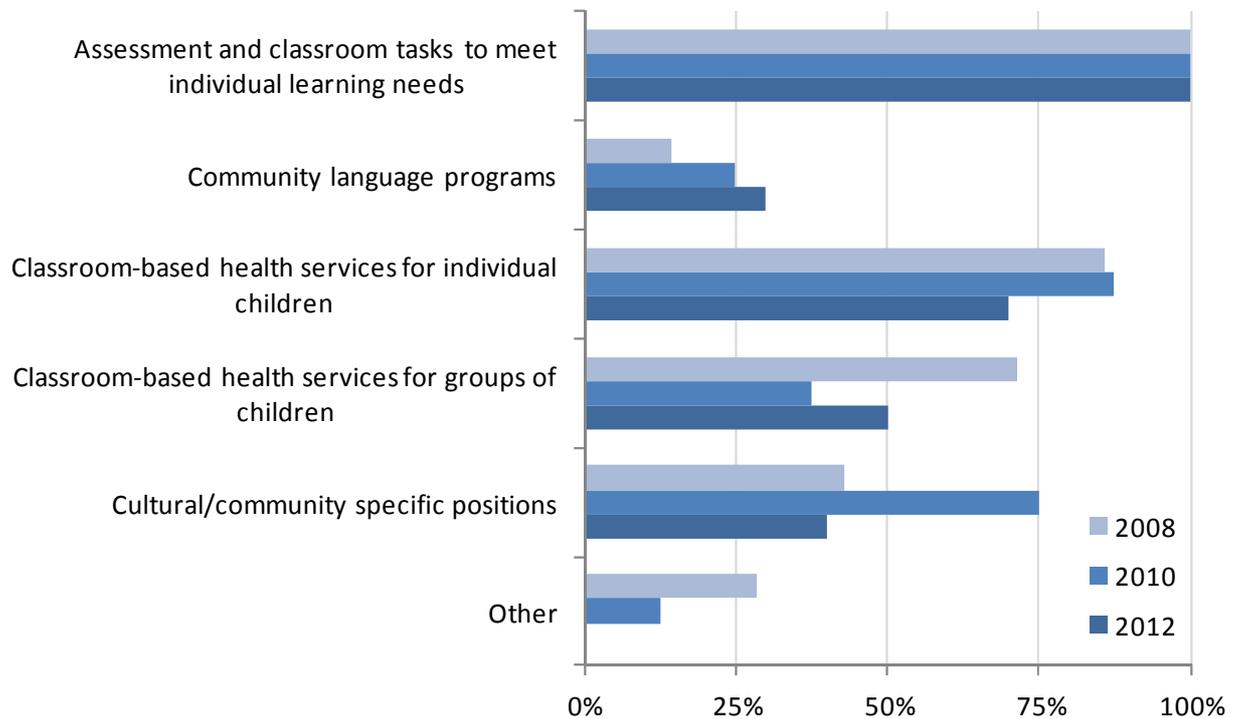
Likewise, school teachers and principals at Corio-Norlane commented that through their relationships with ECEC services they are able to prepare applications for students with disabilities in the year prior to the child starting school as opposed to after the child has already commenced the prep year. Consequently children with disabilities are receiving the appropriate learning curriculum and interventions and 'you're not waiting one or two terms to actually get some action happening' (Prep teacher, Corio-Norlane). This teacher went on to comment that because they are being alerted to the individual needs of children much earlier in the year prior to the commencement of prep, schools, services and families are able to work together to prepare a transition strategy most appropriate for that child, for example, 'we can put an integration aide in; longer transition program for a child who may have autism' (Prep teacher, Corio-Norlane).

Assessments and classroom tasks

The questionnaire data shows that schools consistently provided assessments and classroom tasks to meet individual learning needs. Sixty-seven per cent of schools also provided classroom-based health services for individual children; and half of all schools also provided classroom-based health services for groups of children.

It was less common, however, for schools to have cultural and community specific services available, such as teacher's aides for non-English speaking students, or Aboriginal student liaison officers. These were only provided in approximately a third of all schools. Further, the presence of cultural/community-specific positions has seen a marked decrease since 2010. However, the survey data shows that the total number of community language programs schools offer is steadily increasing. This suggests that even if schools are not resourced for specific positions, they are implementing programs through other means.

Figure 5.7 Types of programs/resources provided by schools



Acknowledging and meeting the individual learning needs of all children, not just those with additional needs, is a priority for LSEY, and the Transition Leaders group at Corio-Norlane identified that the transition program and transition exchange night are key contributors. The educators reported that through getting to know each child throughout the year through the transition program, and then by having a collaborative discussion with the early years teacher during the transition statement exchange, the prep teachers are now in a better position to understand what learning environment would achieve the best outcome for each child. For instance, some classrooms are large and open plan with a focus on play-based learning, while others are smaller and more traditional. By knowing the child the teachers can make the decision best suited to the needs of the child.

Case study, Footscray

A gradual transition process was developed in conjunction with an early years service, the school, and the parents of a child who required additional supports to address his behavioural issues. The early years service was able to liaise with the school very early in the year prior to the child starting school to secure an inclusion support worker to ease the child into the transition by visiting the school together regularly outside of a set transition program. This enabled the school to develop some routines over time with the child and allowed him to become comfortable in the school environment. The school also worked closely with the childcare and parents to develop and learn strategies for managing any episodes of difficult behaviour. By the time he commenced his prep year 'the parents were far more comfortable with the school environment, [and the child] was more comfortable'. The early years worker went on to say that prior to the introduction of the LSEY partnerships 'we wouldn't have done that' and the outcome for the family would have been quite different as the parents were nervous about attending orientation programs for fear of how the child would react and therefore those supports would not have been as effective.

5.3 Implementation

The research questions for the implementation component of the evaluation for this goal are:

- *Have schools, early education and care services and child and family services changed their operations to better facilitate the achievement of the project goals?*
- *Over the life of the project what strategies were found to support strengthened connections between early education and care services, schools and child and family services and to support them to work in partnership?*

Locally relevant responsiveness

A Parent Discovery Program was a collaboration of a Hastings primary school and local community service through their connections on the LSEY partnership. They partnered to deliver a parenting program to all local families. School staff surveyed parents in the playground on what topics they would like information on and when was the most suitable time for the sessions. The program was developed from this information. The program was offered free by the community service to all parents in the Hastings community and hosted by the school.

In Corio-Norlane, the Transition Leaders worked with a local early intervention provider to develop a pilot model for supporting children who require additional support to make a positive transition to school and to enable them to engage in the learning experiences schools provide. The pilot was both targeted and universal in that it aimed to target children who were identified as having some learning challenges but who don't receive formal 'additional needs' funding. It was universal in that the strategies and professional development throughout the pilot could support learning for all children. The pilot supported the Victorian State government, Catholic education and private intervention services to coordinate and enhance their

professional development capacity to focus specifically on issues identified by local educators for local children moving from ECEC services to school. They were able to build successive professional development sessions over time rather than continue to repeat previously delivered sessions. This pilot has shown that local ECEC services, school and community service can work together to be responsive to the individual learning needs of all children.

Connecting school and home

An emergent strategy has been around promoting the importance of connecting school and home and working to create a uniform approach to implementing strategies for children at home as well as at school. This aspect of the project, though not very widely commented on, but had been expressed as significant by a couple of participants to engage families and promote early learning at home.

Cooperation between schools

Another change in the perceptions of school teachers and principals, particularly in the Hastings site, is the antithesis to the traditional expectation that schools are in competition with one another. The three schools in the Hastings local area work very closely as collaborators and to promote each school as equal. Such a collaborative approach has greatly assisted in the development and implementation of LSEY programs and activities aimed at improving transition to school, such as the combined transition calendars. It has also benefited the sustainability of dedication to the LSEY program. For example, one of the schools was appointed a new principal who was unfamiliar with LSEY or the town. The two remaining principals mentored the new principal about the project and worked closely with the school to ensure that the progress made in previous years through the project was not hindered as a result of leadership change. The entire community involved in the LSEY project is of the view that each school is to be treated equally because the goal is to focus on promoting the town of Hastings where all schools and services are united to be in the best position to support families at a community level.

Site facilitator reflections, Hastings

During their conversations on governance, the Partnership recognised the characteristics that make the partnership work – leadership, strategic direction, collaborative planning, community-wide participation and effective auspicing. They further identified and articulated that good will, respect and valuing what each organisation brings to the table, collaboration – more of a broad term versus collaborative planning and having a defined focus to Hastings area are key components of their partnership that they want to keep for the future.

This non-competitive approach between schools is also present in Corio Norlane, particularly as the amalgamation of schools means that there is now one school over five campuses. However, at the Footscray site, while the school principals and teachers work collaboratively, the perceptions of schools being in competition with one another is still explicitly present, as one school principal diplomatically comments, ‘I think we have a healthy respect for the other schools, but it is a competitive environment’ and explains that it is due to the need for increased

enrolments to be able to continue funding programs and staff to deliver activities such as transition. Irrespective of whether schools are promoting equality, or equal respect, data shows that school teachers and principals are developing relationships with ECEC services and one way this has been achieved is through joint professional development.

In 2012 all schools reported that teachers or other staff attended planning and training sessions with teachers from other schools (10/10). This is similar to 2008 and an increase from 2010: 2008=7/7 and 2010=5/8.

Site facilitator reflections, Footscray

Which children, families, community members are thought to be benefiting?

All children and families directly engaged in the various environments where activities are implemented by project participants are thought to be benefitting. For example, the children who transitioned from early years services implementing extended transition programs in response to local need, as well as children transitioning into schools actively working to create a seamless early learning environment are thought to be benefitting from these changes. This is evidenced by reports from parents that transition to school was greatly supported by comprehensive transition programs, as well as by anecdotal reports from teachers who have indicated that 2012 has been the smoothest transition for children and families to date.

The strong collaborative relationship with Maribyrnong Council and a shift towards evidence-informed action has motivated Council to not only seek guidance regarding the use of evidence/data to inform planning around transition to school, which is anticipated to have flow on effects for children and families engaged in council-led activities, but has also supported council's engagement in related professional development.

Practitioners reported that the strength of their relationships and respect for each other supported them to openly and honestly communicate and share information about children transitioning to school, enabling prep educators to respond to the needs of all children and families and the put appropriate supports in place in a timely manner.

Links with other projects and initiatives

As reported in previous evaluation reports, in Corio-Norlane in 2010 LSEY and the state-wide initiative Best Start merged. This has resulted in a number of challenges due to the different policy priorities of the two initiatives, but also a number of benefits. Firstly, it enabled the range of agencies involved in the LSEY project to expand, as 'LSEY has been able to build on some of the partnership platforms that had been established through Best Start' (Regional representative, Corio-Norlane). As a result, the pool of shared knowledge, accessible service provision for families, and professional development opportunities increased. Best Start has also been operating for 10 years and therefore the merge with LSEY assisted in elevating the profile of the much newer and smaller project in the region.

A second significant development in Corio Norlane was the Extended Schools hub pilot, which saw the amalgamation of five local schools. Three of these schools were part of the LSEY project and the other two joined the project once the five schools become one school across five campuses. As all the public schools on the LSEY

project sit under the one school, closer partnerships between the educators of the different campuses have naturally developed. This has proven timely and beneficial for LSEY because one prep teacher from each of these campuses has been appointed as transition leader on the LSEY project. The fact that these teachers are developing relationships for the purposes of collegiality only increases the cohesion of the LSEY practitioner groups.

The other sites also developed links with other initiatives, enhancing the impact of both LSEY and those projects

The engagement of **local government** in the partnerships has been a critical factor in the success of the project. Councils have recognised the importance of the LSEY project and how it aligns with values and goals at both a local and state level. In each site the council has expressed their strong support for the project, demonstrated by their attendance at LSEY partner level meetings, and through working closely with site facilitators to generate interest and tailor LSEY to each particular site at a community level. The LSEY project team noted the significance of the support of council to the success of the project:

The key partner has been local government and Best Start and that alignment, or even actually having someone in a role in that place in local government, has made a massive difference (CCCH LSEY team).

Goal 3: Summary of findings

Capacity to work in partnerships, and links with child and family services:

- Links with child and family services: ECEC services and schools are working more closely and regularly with local child and family services.
- The total number of schools with links to these services has increased over the life of the project. In particular the links schools have with child and family services that provide migrant or ethnic resources, alcohol and other drug services, and playgroups or parent-child playgroups, have expanded considerably.
- The number of referrals schools made to child and family services increased over the life of the project. In 2012 no schools had made fewer than five referrals in the six months prior to the survey, whereas the number of schools who had made more than 11 referrals had increased to five from a figure of just three in 2008.
- The number of schools that arranged for staff to attend planning, training or information days organised by child and family services also increased substantially over the life of the project from fewer than half in 2008 and 2010.

- A small number of parents needed services for their children but couldn't use them. Averaged across all years, the most common service needed but not used were dental services (needed by 5.2% of children on average) followed by therapy (3.2% on average). The most common reason for not using the service was wait time followed closely by expense.
- All three sites comment that the capacity to work in partnerships with other services has improved since being involved in the LSEY project.

Earlier identification of needs:

- Parents of children with additional needs were satisfied with their school's response to their child's needs. This high satisfaction rating was stable over time.
- There was a strong theme in the qualitative data that LSEY has facilitated close relationships between schools, parents and services, which has enabled schools to identify, and respond to the individual learning needs of children.

Successful implementation strategies for this goal include:

- Locally relevant responses: a parenting program in Hastings was developed from findings of a survey of parents. In Corio-Norlane a partnership with an early intervention provider delivered a pilot model for supporting children who require additional support to make a positive transition to school.
- Connecting school and home: this is an emergent strategy, addressing the home learning environment and engaging parents.
- Cooperation between schools: in one site in particular, the traditional expectation that schools are in competition with one another has been reversed, and all schools work very closely as collaborators and to promote each school as equal.

6 Strengths of the project model and barriers to implementation

Strengths

As described in previous sections of this report, and in earlier evaluation reports, the project model has a number of strengths. These included:

- facilitator role
- funding and time release
- flexibility of model
- research and evidence base
- local partnerships and capacity building.

Facilitator role

The functions of the facilitator have been to bring key LSEY stakeholders together, facilitate and mediate practitioner and partner meetings, inform stakeholders about the evidence base driving the project, and to work with educators, practitioners and partners around capacity building with the view of handing over leadership responsibilities once the project has been established in the site. Ongoing evaluation and reflection, with the goal of sustainable partnerships to improve transition to school for families, is also built into this role. The CCCH ensured succession planning for changes in personnel in the facilitator roles.

Interview participants were also pleased that the role of the facilitator was initially one that provided group structure and strong guidance and support, and then relinquished some of this as the project progressed, giving local educators and practitioners the freedom to drive the project.

The facilitator role has been a significant contributor to developing relationships between stakeholders and maintaining momentum. Each of the sites has had to negotiate staff turnover, and the facilitator has consistently sought to actively engage new people in key positions. One participant from Footscray said that recently some of the schools have undergone significant staffing changes at the management level, and that the role of the facilitator in engaging new principals was critical to the project.

I think that the work that certainly [the facilitator] did in reaching out to those new players was very important because they could have just as easily not become engaged (Regional representative Footscray).

This participant goes on to explain the dynamic nature of the community that regularly experiences changes in local professionals and residents, and how the 'connector role' that the facilitator brings to the community is 'critical'.

The facilitator has also adopted the vital role of completing the administrative tasks for the project. The facilitators in each site set meeting agendas, and keep

meticulous notes, minutes and reflective information about the project. They also follow up on meeting actions and ensure that tasks are being completed.

I think the role that the Centre for Community Child Health have had has actually been critical to the project, and I think if that wasn't there, it certainly wouldn't have had the success that it's had (Regional representative, Footscray).

Funding and time release

The funding for time release to engage in LSEY activities and meetings has significantly assisted the development of relationships. The transition leaders use the time funded for time release to develop relationships with other local teachers and ECEC providers and for planning and implementing LSEY project initiatives. The availability of LSEY funding to provide to release ECEC staff and school educators has also significantly helped break down the barriers to engaging the childcare sector and develop partnerships with these services. Many educators commented that without the time release funds to provide them with the time to complete their LSEY project tasks, the project would not be as successful. Despite the availability of funding for time release, some ECEC providers were still unwilling to release staff and they have withdrawn from the project.

Additionally, the time release aspect of the LSEY project is important for the professional recognition of educators that what they are doing is needed and valued. Being paid to commit this time to the project symbolises the importance of the work they are doing to schools or ECEC services and the wider community. It also helps to cement the project goals of a collaborative approach to transition as a necessary and 'normal' aspect of early childhood education.

Other project funding provided by LSEY has also been an important contributor to project goals. For example, in one Footscray school LSEY funded a research project to evaluate through Leichardt surveys if parents were satisfied with information they received about their child's school, if they felt welcome in the school, and their relationship with their child's teachers. This project also involved working with early years teachers to generate ideas for improving parent engagement in the school. Feedback from kindergarten teachers was that parents felt as though the school 'shut the door' on them rather than encouraging them to have a presence in the school. As a result of this feedback the school increased their level of engagement with parents by holding family activities throughout the year, and opening the prep classrooms to parents three afternoons a week. The surveys the following year showed a significant improvement in the satisfaction of parents concerning their interactions with their child's school.

In Corio-Norlane, funding provided by the LSEY project is assisting teachers to develop their skills to appropriately teach children who may require specific additional needs. The transition leaders group is working with SCOPE, a Victorian early intervention organisation to assist children with specific needs, on behalf of the ECEC group. The aim is to identify areas of professional development training that teachers require around the most concerning areas where children are delayed. The

example provided was the identification of the highly underdeveloped fine motor skills of children in Corio-Norlane. Through community consultation and collaboration, SCOPE and the transition leaders group developed an appropriate professional development plan to be delivered to educators and improve their confidence and capacity to respond to these learning needs of children.

Flexibility of model

The three LSEY sites are each very different in a number of ways and the project has flexibility built into the model to be place-based and relevant to the local area. This has been demonstrated through the different journeys and progress of each site.

Additionally, the LSEY project does not consist of a number of particular activities or set programs, but rather the site facilitator presents the groups with an approach, or a model. Armed with relevant resources and the flexibility to adapt the model to the local community and services, the groups are able to tailor the LSEY initiatives in a way that is effective for the area.

Research and evidence base

Access to information about **research and the evidence base** driving the direction to a collaborative partnership approach to transition, has also contributed to supporting connections between community services. It promotes a shared and consistent approach to early childhood education. Many of the project participants commented that they perceive a key strength of the LSEY project model to be the strong research and evidence base from which to justify and inform the work they do. This evidence base drives the project goals, reinforcing the LSEY activities and helping participants to remain focused, as well as providing the opportunity to develop and add to the existing knowledge at a site level. A number of interview participants also commented that the support of such a credible institution such as the Murdoch Childrens Research Institute, with its extensive access to knowledge and an up-to-date evidence base, is also a significant strength of the project.

Local partnerships

The LSEY project model has a focus on developing and maintaining local community partnerships. One of the advantages of the model is that it allows the project to utilise existing initiatives and community partnerships so the current local strengths are recognised and built upon. This was particularly the case in the Hastings area where a number of local initiatives saw community partners meeting regularly, and LSEY worked to increase the cohesion and collaboration of this group.

LSEY has also worked very hard to build new relationships between professional groups and services. It has never been core business for schools and ECEC services to work together, nor has it been the norm for principals to work collaboratively to promote schools other than their own. LSEY has helped to break down these barriers within and between service sectors. The level of partnership in Hastings has transformed so much that school professionals in the town regard each school as equal and they have eliminated all competition for attracting children to enrol in their school. The culture in the Hastings area is now that the community needs to

work together to improve outcomes for all children, irrespective of which school they attend, as all children are the responsibility of the town of Hastings. In addition, this equality between schools extends to an equality and professional respect between school teachers and ECEC providers. Historically ECEC providers have not been as valued for making a significant contribution to the educational development of children, this has dramatically changed since the introduction of the LSEY project.

The establishment of **formal practitioner groups** at all three sites has been a key contributor to the development of actions to ensure a smooth transition to school for children and families. Activities such as the transition calendar, the transition exchange and a refining of transition programs in schools in collaboration with other schools and ECEC services have been championed by this group to improve the transition process and experience for families. The LSEY partnerships have also been valuable for community and family services as each community service that is a part of the LSEY partnerships has access to the knowledge and support provided by this forum. One practitioner provided the example that the local preschool for children with disabilities is in a much better position to prepare transition to school for their students because their close relationships with the schools enables a collaborative approach to transition that suits each individual child's needs.

Arguably one of the most important and effective features in developing partnerships has been the formation of **practitioner leaders groups**. These groups are very successful in Hastings and Corio Norlane, but challenges with community-wide partnership working and local resources for ongoing sustainability in Footscray hindered their capacity to establish such a group.

In addition to the partnerships a variety of LSEY activities at each site have assisted in strengthening relationships between educators and practitioners. An example from early on in the project, which is now regarded as fundamental in developing relationships and a shared understanding of early childhood education, has been the peer swaps. One school teacher describes the impact that activities such as peer swaps has had on the whole early years sector in the community:

It's empowered the early years staff to feel that they are valued professionally and it has enabled school staff – not just our school, the other school staff – to value the early years services and the work that they do as professionals (Prep teacher, Hastings).

Capacity building

The joint professional development between school and ECEC educators has been ongoing at all sites. Participants have commented that it has contributed to their understanding of what is required of children to make smooth transition to school. As the project model calls for the active input of educators and practitioners on the ground as well as managers at a partner level, the project allows them to have a voice and for their knowledge and expertise to be recognised and valued at a community level. This also assists in breaking down professional barriers and values all participants (childcare, kindergarten and school) professionally as equals. In

addition, this ongoing collaboration and professional learning helps to promote a shared and consistent approach to early childhood education.

The LSEY site facilitators have also reflected on the development and progress of the project model throughout the duration of the project. Some of their reflections of the strengths of the model are:

- place-based and flexible model
 - builds on local strengths
 - adapts to the local context in terms of partnership structures and operations
 - able to flexibly respond to local organisational, structural, bureaucratic and policy contexts
 - uses local information and data to inform planning
 - enables local responsiveness
- a partnership approach – driven by relationships for collaborative activity planning and delivery
- evidence-informed project and local activities
- outcomes-based approach to community planning
- capacity building – joint professional development and development of collective local leadership
- supporting local stakeholders to view themselves, each other and the community as a resource and promotes resourcefulness
- an ongoing commitment and enthusiasm of local schools/services to improve outcomes for local children.

Many of these are consistent with those reported by stakeholders across the LSEY communities.

Barriers

It is important to emphasise that people expressed a great deal of enthusiasm for the LSEY model and principles in interviews and focus groups. Nonetheless, the barriers to implementation are also important, even if they were not universally experienced.

Overall

There are time constraints on educators to meet and follow up on the actions from meetings. This is one of the reasons the site facilitator role is so crucial. Having someone in a supportive role to ensure actions are being followed up and individual tasks are still achievable helps to ensure that project initiatives are implemented on time. Participants have also commented that the project can be quite resource-intensive and participating in LSEY, especially for people working in small organisations, can be challenging due to time and resource constraints.

A number of participants in all sites commented that they found the level of planning frustrating. For these people, there was too much talking, documenting, and seeking approval, rather than executing ideas soon after they are proposed. One participant stated, 'we have to prove ourselves too much before we can get on with an activity', and as a result, 'sometimes I feel like the timelines are a bit slow to get things done' (ECEC provider, Hastings). To remedy this, a streamlined approach to preparing for activities was suggested, such as a checklist, to condense the amount of documenting and paperwork prior to implementing activities.

LSEY time is not part of the normal role of educators and, because it is not core business of schools and ECEC educators and services to work together, it heavily relies on support at the management level to permit educators to be involved. Similarly the project also relies on managers to engage and commit to the project at a partnership level. This requires people at the management level to be passionate and motivated about the LSEY project goals. In addition, while it has been detailed how the place-based nature of the project can be a facilitator to meeting project goals, this approach can also be a limitation because LSEY is a pilot project and so unsupported by resources from state or federal government – although policy is increasingly aligning with LSEY goals and activities.

Another barrier expressed at all sites has been the change of staff or prep teachers and people leaving that role and taking their knowledge and community relationships with them. Educators and practitioners have recognised the need to share the capacity to ensure that progress is not lost with change of staff.

Footscray

The LSEY project is based around geographically defined communities and the Footscray site has met with a number of specific challenges. Schools and services in the Footscray area commonly work with those in neighbouring suburbs, and families are also transient across the areas and the services they use. This has been difficult when attempting to set distinct boundaries around inclusion of services in the project. This also risks excluding key services that may be particularly appropriate or relevant for particular population groups because of their location.

In addition the high turnover of staff coming in and out of different roles creates less opportunity for practitioners and educators to identify with a community because it is not defined. The restructure of DEECD has also affected staff in the Footscray area and as there is uncertainty to the future direction and roles of staff. Furthermore, a number of the school principals find it difficult to commit to the project because there is a lack of clarity around what resources and budgets the schools will receive in the coming years.

Another barrier to implementing the project in the Footscray area, expressed by several participants, has been a lack of understanding around the objectives and direction of the project. One participant commented that the LSEY project failed to have a clear objective in this site 'I think LSEY went into different tangents... I could see that it was doing bits here, there and everywhere but I couldn't see a clear

direction' (Principal, Footscray). The principal went on to comment that recently the Footscray site has been 'pushed' to the direction of play-based learning. The school has since withdrawn from the LSEY practitioner group because it was taking a different approach to classroom learning.

Lack of clear direction of the practitioner meetings was echoed by another participant who commented 'I know the practitioner meetings became, there was sort of a lot of people saying, what's the purpose of them?' (Prep teacher, Footscray). This is still an ongoing challenge for the practitioner meetings in Footscray, as this teacher went on to explain the current feeling among the group, 'we're not getting very much out of it anymore' (Prep teacher, Footscray).

Practitioner meetings were not consistently attended by the same people so a number of people with different interests and agendas would attend the meetings and a lot of time was wasted getting people up to date and repeating information from prior meetings.

Some frustration was expressed at the lack of communication between LSEY sites. One interview participant suggested pooling all the LSEY initiatives from each site together so that this knowledge can be accessed and then assessed for implementation at each particular site, either as is or to be tailored to the local area, 'I don't think it's a negative that we're taking their ideas. I see it as a positive because you don't have to reinvent the wheel' (ECEC provider, Footscray).

Corio-Norlane

The flexibility of the LSEY model is one of its strengths, but the counterpoint to this can be a lack of clear goals. For example, a regional representative in Corio-Norlane described an 'initial lack of clarity' on objectives, and spent a considerable amount of time trying to grasp what the project meant for this site before they were in a strong enough position to begin to implement some of the initiatives.

Another source of frustration raised in the Corio-Norlane site is the lack of clarity around what resources and funding are available for LSEY initiatives. Participants were confused about how much funding they could apply for, and specifically what criteria of initiative would be granted funding, 'That's always been a little bit ambiguous from my point of view, so we've really not known what's the capacity of this project to be able to respond to the local needs' (Regional representative, Corio-Norlane).

While the merging of Best Start and LSEY appears to have worked seamlessly on the ground, at a governance level participants in senior roles have found the attempt at a merger difficult because the two projects have different modes of operating. Best Start is a local government initiative, and its processes are much more formalised and stringent. LSEY is perceived to be less formal and has the capacity to be more flexible. An example of this was the process of engaging and securing the support of a disability service, where there were divergent views on the appropriate amount of consultation and approval before proceeding.

Hastings

Participants from the Hastings site have experienced very few barriers to implementing the project and have commented that over the life of the project trial and error in implementing activities has only contributed to learning and improving the project.

One particular barrier that does exist and is extremely difficult to overcome, however, is the challenge of schools engaging families. The town of Hastings suffers from a negative reputation in the region and the schools in particular experience the stereotype from the local community as being 'bad' schools. As such, many of the children living in Hastings attend schools in neighbouring towns. This is a norm for Hastings families that has existed for several generations and is therefore a difficult cycle to break. In addition many of the families in the Hastings area experience extreme social disadvantage and are generally apprehensive of attending institutions such as schools.

Another barrier recognised by some of the participants has been securing the commitment of the local privately owned childcare services. Although the engagement of childcare providers has significantly improved over the life of the project, it has been reported that their involvement is on the premise that they will receive time-release funding for their workers and will receive reciprocal benefits by being a part of the project. ECEC educators working in the childcare setting are only able to engage in the project activities during service hours if they can be time-released and if the centre proprietor permits it, irrespective of their individual passion or commitment to the project.

Finally, another small area for improvement is educators' and practitioners' ongoing reflection and evaluation skills. Currently the site facilitator drives much of the reflection and evaluation processes, however they should ideally come naturally as a part of the planning, implementation and debriefing of LSEY initiatives.

The LSEY site facilitators' reflections of barriers to implementation include:

- evaluation and reflection processes are largely driven by the facilitator
- the facilitator plays a key role in administrative support and connecting the 'dots' between local initiatives and can be the primary driver of partnership and relationship development
- funding for activities that are not seen as core business (by service funders) can be challenging for organisations to find within their current budgets
- there can be a lack of effective 'orientation' processes for new partnership group members, which can be a tedious task within meeting times
- there is currently ongoing pressure and policy change within the early years sector on the early years and community sectors
- the model defines community geographically, which is not effective in all places.

Again, many of these are consistent with those reported by stakeholders across the LSEY communities.

Sustainability

From the outset, the LSEY model was implemented with sustainability in mind. The strong focus around capacity building and developing local leaders has been one of the elements to promoting a sustainable project at a community level. Stronger relationships and greater capacity had been achieved through:

- Site facilitators working closely with practitioners and partners around a number of different areas, enabling them to generate their own initiatives through collaboration, brainstorming and reflection.
- Coaching around the development of a facilitator role.
- Guidance on developing and undertaking local research projects to evaluate their progress.
- Providing a strong evidence-base regarding the early years to encourage ongoing professional development, interagency and practitioner collaboration, and a shared approach to learning.

The community partnerships have been working towards changing the culture of the business of ECEC services, schools and community services around the transition to school, engaging families and responsiveness to children by promoting the importance of ECEC providers and schools in working together. Further to this are the benefits of working in a whole of community approach to transition and improving outcomes for families. Instilling the recognition of need for community partnerships has been an indirect goal of the project and overall this has been achieved. The question however, is how much it will continue to be a part of the sector and community culture once the project is no longer funded by the CCCH.

The sustainability of the LSEY project ultimately relies on the schools and services championing the LSEY approach and activities. This is challenging because many participants feel that they are part of a system that is already overwhelmed and that doesn't recognise (fund) networking and collaboration as core business. Additionally, the broader context of the Victorian public service sector is such that many core services are experiencing task reduction and job loss and securing the future of the project relying on this strategy alone is therefore unlikely. Thus the need for an external facilitator continues to remain a factor for sustainability.

Corio-Norlane

Participants from the ECEC working group commented that for the project to continue in its current form there would be a need for continued funding to attend meetings and for someone to facilitate the meetings in the role that the CCCH site facilitator currently performs. The site facilitator has worked intensively with the transition leaders group to develop their group facilitation skills so they will have the capacity to facilitate the ECEC working group independently of the CCCH. This contributes to the sustainability of the project and partnerships through this

professional development as the prep teachers are gaining the competence to lead this group forward on the project directions. However, it is still undecided how ECEC workers will source funding to continue to attend the working group meetings.

The school sector in the Corio-Norlane area has recognised the value of prep teachers and ECEC providers working in collaboration around transition. This has been demonstrated by the principals of each school agreeing to jointly fund the time release for their transition coordinators to plan transition and attend the transition leaders and ECEC practitioner group meetings. Next year the principals have agreed to fund the entire costs of time release for this purpose, reinforcing their commitment to the linking schools initiative. In addition, all prep teachers from each school are now mandated to attend all the ECEC practitioner group meetings. The compulsory attendance of these meetings being handed down from the management level further demonstrates the schools' emphasis on collaborative transition to school. Furthermore, a relatively new initiative has been the appointment of one of the school principals as a transition leader at the partnership level to increase the connection between the partnership and practitioner groups. One CCCH team member commented that the benefit of this initiative to the groups in the absence of an LSEY site facilitator is that 'they can draw on their expertise and guide them in different ways to improve the momentum and that evidence base and the more strategic level thinking'. All of these factors add to the sustainability of a collaborative transition to school initiative between schools and ECEC services in Corio-Norlane.

At a wider community partnership level the ongoing facilitation of the partnership group, unlike at the practitioner level, is already secured due to the partnership with Best Start, which includes a Best Start facilitator providing leadership to this group. The merging with Best Start is a significant factor contributing to the sustainability of the LSEY project in Corio-Norlane. As Best Start is a long-standing initiative (with recurrent government funding) within the community with already established community partnerships, practitioners and educators commented that they are confident these partnerships will continue and that LSEY goals will remain on the agenda. Representatives from the schools, as well as the newly appointed transition leader for the partnership group, will support this. Additionally, the LSEY and Best Start partnership group have recently developed a shared vision and signed a partnership agreement to cement their shared commitment to the vision and goals of the group.

While the partnership group itself appears sustainable for the foreseeable future, there are reservations as to how much of the LSEY project can be sustained once the project funding runs out. Even though Best Start and LSEY have appeared to have merged on the surface, Best Start representatives commented that it is not a full amalgamation as the objectives and funding criteria for each project is quite distinct. As such a significant amount of the LSEY project will not be funded by Best Start and is at risk of falling over. For instance, as previously noted as a concern by the ECEC providers, there is currently no funding for the ECEC working group. Furthermore, there is a lack of clarity around which organisations are willing to, or even have the capacity to take on some of the LSEY responsibilities, 'My discussion with a number

of local organisations are they're overwhelmed with the responsibilities that they've already got, without necessarily taking on additional responsibilities on behalf of the network' (Regional representative, Corio-Norlane).

Footscray

Participants in the Footscray area are equally conscious that funding for the future of the LSEY project is uncertain. As such, they are talking about sustainability in terms of what they can do within the parameters of existing resources. The partnership and practitioner groups had recently spent a significant amount of time developing, drafting and revising the Transition Timeline, which was endorsed by all parties with the intent to implement in 2012.

Unlike Corio-Norlane, the practitioner group in Footscray has not had a significant impact. Each school has an educator who may or may not attend the practitioner group and the extent to which this group is perceived as valuable varies between schools. This is because some schools prefer to focus on transition to school in direct collaboration with only their local feeder ECEC services and parents. One school that has adopted this method self-funds the time release for the prep teacher to plan the internal transition program and liaise with ECEC services and parents, rather than receiving LSEY funding to do this. As a result, and because this approach has proven successful, the school are committed to continue this funding next year. The school representatives acknowledge that they do and will receive benefit from the LSEY professional learning program, but can autonomously sustain their own transition program separate from other LSEY activities. This point has also been echoed by an ECEC provider who commented that through the LSEY partnerships she has developed relationships with those local practitioners and educators relevant to transition to school, and as a result she is confident that those relationships will be maintained without a need to continue involvement in the LSEY project

Interviewer: Okay, so you feel that those relationships are sustainable as they are?

Interviewee: Yes, as they are now without the support of LSEY or a continuing leadership group (Early years provider, Footscray).

Despite some practitioners' nonchalance about a continued partnership element to the LSEY project, others are committed to continuing the work they have begun through the LSEY project and see value in maintaining the partnerships, '... I really want us to continue the work that we do, but I also want the network to continue because I think that we've really achieved a lot through being involved in the LSEY Project' (Principal, Footscray). The main strategy for sustainability of the project in the Footscray area is through the 'Action Plan', however, the development of this is in the early stages and it is still uncertain how the plan will be funded and implemented in the future.

As Footscray was later to develop a significant commitment to LSEY than Hastings and Corio-Norlane were, there has been less time to develop sustainability plans for

the site. The engagement with Maribyrnong Council has significantly developed over time, but there was no capacity to merge LSEY with the local Best Start because in Maribyrnong Best Start is municipality-wide, not at a local community (suburb) level. While the principles of LSEY aligns with the Maribyrnong Early Years Plan, and the council representative has been active on the LSEY partnership groups, the relationship has not extended to include, for instance, council absorbing the LSEY responsibilities or funding commitments. The council representatives commented that the LSEY philosophy is already strongly embedded in the Maribyrnong vision for early years, and so that will continue, however they do not have the resources to cover LSEY initiatives and activities in the future.

Hastings

In Hastings many educators and practitioners are adamant that the project's principles, goals and initiatives are now embedded as part of the culture within the local community, schools and services. For instance, the collaboration between ECEC services and teachers in the development of transition programs has become second nature. So too the attitude of all participants has changed in terms of competition between services for families. As a community, Hastings has adopted the stance that to improve outcomes for families, all services and schools need to work equally and in partnership. The practice of working together, through the partnership and practitioner network groups, has become part of the normal working culture in the community. Many participants commented that these groups would continue irrespective of funding support. However, representatives from the CCCH commented that a change in management that does not support the LSEY philosophy or attend the meetings could cause momentum to dwindle at both the partnership and practitioner level.

While it is recognised that a few aspects of the LSEY project will go unchanged when LSEY is no longer funded, two key elements of the project must continue for the project to be sustainable. Firstly, many participants have reported that the appointment of a facilitator is crucial for the project to be ongoing. One interview participant articulates the facilitator role concisely. She states that the project needs someone to

Pull it all together, set the agendas for meetings, keep the skill base rolling along and developing amongst the practitioners; interpret the needs of the project in terms of evaluations and be a mediator between the practitioners – the practitioner level, the leadership group and any sponsors or fund, you know, philanthropists that might get behind it. We need that. That's not just going to happen automatically' (Prep teacher, Hastings).

Secondly, a vital part of the project is the Practitioner Leadership group, which is funded by the LSEY project to meet fortnightly. One principal commented that without the support for this group to meet and plan the project initiatives, much of the other aspects of the project will soon die off also. For instance, while the Practitioner Network group may continue, many of the initiatives endorsed by the

group rely heavily on the preparation from the Practitioner Leadership group, such as the transition calendar and the transition exchange. Newer initiatives such as Plan Together, Teach Together would be particularly likely to cease without the Practitioner Leadership group and a facilitator to whom participants are accountable.

Capacity building and succession planning has also been a focus. The rationale for this has been to ensure the sustainability of LSEY and minimise the chance of the project going backwards should changes in staffing occur.

We've worked really hard to get the structure in place, it doesn't matter the people that come in and out because through the years, through the five years that we've been doing LSEY, the primary school staff have changed ... the early years services have all changed. But still the network is still as strong as ever (Prep teacher, Hastings).

This process consists of a gradual transition from former Practitioner leaders to new Practitioner leaders. The former Practitioner leader plays a large role in up-skilling the new member to take on the responsibility as a Practitioner leader for the LSEY project. This may occur over a few meetings beginning with the novice having an observational role, to full participation in decision making over time. The former Practitioner leader then becomes part of the 'knowledge bank' to be consulted and provide their expertise when necessary. However, this is only relevant should funding for the project continue. The knowledge bank also includes a range of documents that detail all LSEY activities and their processes to ensure that this information is passed on to new leaders.

A number of participants commented that several times in the past a worthwhile project has been rolled out in the town which was received with enthusiasm and motivation from the community. However, once funding ceased, these projects were only sustainable for a short period of time because without funding the projects relied solely on the passion and good will of people to continue it in their own time. In regards to the LSEY project the participants said that this is just not possible as the planning for LSEY initiatives are much too time and resource intensive. Additionally, there is concern that the project will also dissipate without a facilitator. One participant discussed the possibility of altering the model to accommodate for less funding. An option may be decreasing the amount of time release hours for the Practitioner leaders and this extra workload being adopted by the facilitator. This would also call for a smaller number of initiatives that the project can take on at once, which may diminish the holistic approach currently undertaken. The appointment of this role would need to be chosen very carefully as the facilitator would need to have an extensive knowledge of the local community. They would need to ensure that they maintain a participatory approach that does not compromise the inclusive nature of the model.

As in Footscray, the local schools have reported that they are not in a position to afford to fund this time release once the project ends. However, the partnership

group at Hastings are extremely dedicated to the LSEY project and have been incredibly proactive in attempting to source ongoing funding to secure the sustainability of the LSEY project in the town. For instance, the partnership group organised a mail-out to 350 businesses in the region to promote the project and the need for it in the town. They have also held breakfast meetings and invited both local and state government officials and local business leaders to showcase the successes of the project to attempt to gain funding. The group have also sought to engage one of the nearby universities.

These efforts have not gone unrewarded, as the partners are making progress in securing the continuity of the project. A local charitable organisation has agreed to take on the project, and while they cannot provide funding, being under a charitable organisation will help to attract funding. This also enables the project to accept tax deductible donations. Two organisations have also offered to house a facilitator and provide them with an organisational structure and support. Although these organisations are unable to fund the facilitator's wage they are able to provide them with a work space and resources.

7 Learnings and Conclusion

7.1 Key learnings

1. Linking in with existing local partnerships is critical. The successes of LSEY came in part from its capacity to engage with existing networks and initiatives, which enabled LSEY activities to complement and work in concert with others.
2. The model appeared to be more effective in locations where there is a sense of community. LSEY defined 'community' geographically which was not effective in all sites.
3. The model needs to be flexible to accommodate the changing nature of communities, including the introduction or departure of other initiatives, and changes to the broader policy context.
4. A significant amount of preparation and start up time needs to be granted to allow time to build relationships.
5. Resources for project-specific roles, including facilitators, and for the extra work carried out within schools and local services, were highly valued by everyone involved. In some cases schools and services are now attempting to take on these roles within current budgets; it is not certain how effective this will be.
6. While some of the research evidence on effective transition to school emphasises the importance of direct engagement with families, other research emphasises the benefits of partnerships. The LSEY experience has seen a focus on partnerships between schools and services, especially ECEC services. These strengthened relationships are thought to have improved the way that schools and services do business around transition, and improved the experience of transition for families.
7. There may be ongoing need for a facilitator/leader role, because this was another component of the project that was rated as extremely valuable by schools and ECEC services. The tasks of coordination, planning, documentation and sustaining momentum may not be able to be absorbed by ECEC services and schools.

7.2 Conclusion

The rationale for LSEY is that transition to school is a critical time in the lives of children and their families, and that it is challenging and difficult for many children, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds. Although research indicates that parents' involvement in their children's schooling and the home learning environment is probably the most important determinant in children's learning outcomes, especially in the early years of school (Melhuish et al., 2008), it also shows that there are significant barriers to this engagement for many parents. Moreover, the most robust research evidence relates to spontaneous parental involvement. There is less evidence on effective interventions for increasing involvement (Desforges et al., 2003).

Transition historically focused on 'school readiness' and individuals, but contemporary models, based on ecological theories of development, recognise the

importance of the environments in which children live, and of relationships between children and their teachers, and between schools and services.

These holistic, environmental understandings of transition have driven the implementation of LSEY, which has prioritised partnerships between schools and services, especially ECEC services, and a sustained, collaborative approach to transition programs. These partnerships have generated a lot of activity towards each of the project goals, and, equally importantly, enhanced mutual respect and enabled reciprocal learning between sectors. Research has identified that ECEC has been undervalued by schools, and that this disrespect is a significant barrier to increased collaboration and smoother transition. Given this, the strengthened relationships enabled by LSEY can be seen as a significant achievement, especially as LSEY school principals and teachers have benefited from adopting some ECEC practices.

The enthusiasm with which schools and services initially engaged with LSEY has, in many cases, grown over time as the benefits of partnership have become apparent. Despite this, the importance of a dedicated project facilitator has not decreased over time, and if anything is seen by stakeholders as more important now. This seems to be an important, perhaps counter-intuitive finding, as it may instead be expected that the activities in the sites would become self-sustaining after a while. However, the work of the facilitator was overwhelmingly viewed as an ongoing necessity: to sustain and build enthusiasm and respond to changes in the sites, and also because as the activities of the sites developed and matured, the work that the facilitator needed to do changed.

The intensity of activity described in this report, and the benefits reported by services and schools, are consistent with research evidence on initiatives to increase parental involvement in children's learning. A review of the literature found that the business of linking parents and schools is 'exceedingly busy', and the number and range of activities undertaken by LSEY exemplify this. Equally, this activity is regarded as worth it, as program evaluations 'invariably report high levels of enthusiasm [and] underscore the sense of achievement and confidence in working together' (Desforges et al., 2003: 69).

However, LSEY is also a place-based initiative, with a focus on the whole of community rather than individual schools. The literature on place-based initiatives also supports the experiences and achievements of LSEY, and underlines the need for time and resources to build partnerships. Vinson (2009, cited in Moore and Fry, 2011: 44) found that effective place-based interventions are characterised by a number of features, including three which were central LSEY's implementation: engagement of communities, via local coordinating or steering groups; community capacity building; and time. These characteristics are distinct from, but complementary to, those of other transition and parental engagement initiatives. They suggest that a dual focus on specific, school-based initiatives *and* broader community strategies is beneficial.

7.3 Recommendations

The experience of LSEY, which is consistent with a growing literature on place-based initiatives and transition to school, suggests a number of recommendations for future initiatives:

- Allow time and resources for engagement, implementation, and responding to changes over time. This is true of both transition to school initiatives, and place-based initiatives, so is especially important for initiatives that are both transition to school and place-based.
- Specific roles and resources are required. Although transition to school is part of what schools and ECEC services already do, change and collaboration is difficult to sustain and cannot be absorbed into existing roles.
- As the characteristics of a community and the existing service network are important to implementation, allow time for consultation and analysis as part of pre-implementation planning.
- Ensure a balance between flexibility and structure, to allow for local needs and priorities to be met, and to ensure that stakeholders have clear expectations and common goals.
- Encourage schools and services to agree on transition outcome measures for children and families, which can be managed and tracked internally. Cognitive and social-emotional measures have often been used for transition initiatives, however, other measures relating to engagement, adjustment and wellbeing may be agreed to be more appropriate.

Appendix A Early years attendance, and service use and need

Attendance at ECEC services

Findings from the parent questionnaires showed that child attendance at early education and care services prior to school entry remained very high during the research period, with an overall average of 95% attendance across the three data collection periods. This rate remained high over time, with 97.5%, 96.4% and 90.4% reporting attendance in 2008, 2010 and 2012 respectively.

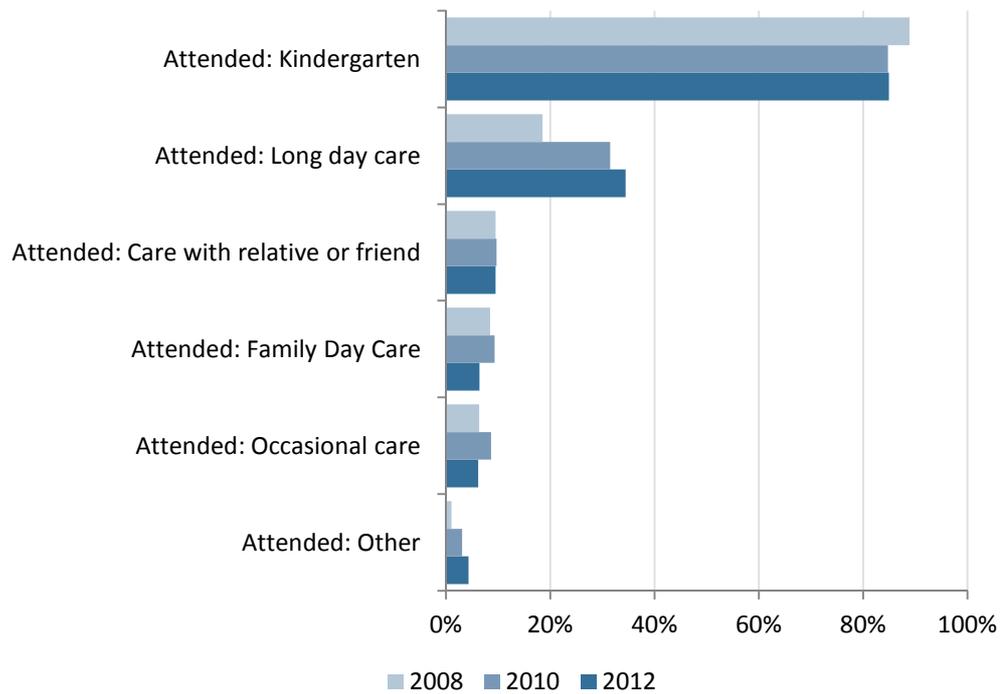
The most common service attended by children was kindergarten, followed by long day care. The overall rates were fairly stable over time; however long day care attendance significantly increased between 2008 and 2010^d then stabilised between 2010 and 2012.

In 2012, parents reported their child spent an average of 19.3 hours in any kind of care on average per week. Hours that children spent in care prior to starting school also increased significantly during the study, with a significant increase between 2008 (16.9 hrs) and 2012 (19.3 hrs)^e.

^d Adjusted standardised residuals indicate significantly fewer attendees in 2008 than 2010 and 2012. Confirmed by a chi-square test of attendance at long day care by time $X^2(2)=12.553$ $p<.01$.

^e Analysis of variance indicated an overall significant effect of time on the average hours of care outside the home, $F(2,786)=3.544$, $p<.05$, post-hoc Games-Howell test accounting for unequal samples indicated the difference was between 2008 and 2012 ($<.05$) but not 2008-2010 or 2010-2012.

Figure 7.1 Type of early education and care service attended prior to starting school over time



N 2008 =189, 2010 = 289, 2012 = 325

Appendix B Interview analysis coding frame

Parent Node	Child Node	Node description	
LSEY activities		All data relating to the LSEY activities or programs that the service or site is implementing e.g., transition coordinator, transition calendars etc.	
Effectiveness	Barriers	To partnerships	All data relating to barriers that keep the partnerships from operating effectively e.g., not all parties engaging, differing priorities
		To engage families	All data relating to barriers to engaging families e.g., community stigma about a particular school
		Other barriers	All data relating to other barriers that don't fit into the two nodes above
	Facilitators	To partnerships	All data relating to factors that facilitate successful partnerships
		To engage families	All data relating to factors that help to engage families e.g., school-based play groups
		Other facilitators	All data relating to other facilitators that don't fit into the two nodes above e.g., role of CCCH
	Strengths of LSEY	Factors that strengthen the effectiveness of LSEY e.g., motivated council	
	Difficulties of LSEY	Factors that create difficulties for LSEY to be effective of LSEY e.g., unclear objectives	
Contextual information	About the local area	All data relating to information about the local area	
	Other projects in area	All data relating to other projects, interventions and activities in the area	
	Roles of participants	All data relating to the job roles of participants	
	Activities prior to LSEY	All data relating to activities the services was implementing to prior to LSEY promote school readiness for children and families	
	Other project in organisation	Any data about initiatives or activities similar from but separate to LSEY in the organisation	
Outcomes	Activities evolving from LSEY	Any data relating to activities that has grown out of partnership activities from LSEY	
	Outcomes for children and families	Any data relating to positive outcomes for families or children from LSEY involvement	
	Changes to schools	Any data relating to changes or improvements to schools from LSEY involvements	
	Changes to ECEC services	Any data relating to changes or improvements to ECEC services from LSEY involvements	
	Improved community partnerships	All data relating to changes to community partnerships because of LSEY	
	Improved connection between schools/ services and families	All data relating to improved connections between schools/services and families from LSEY	

Parent Node	Child Node	Node description
	Meeting individual learning needs	All data relating to improved ability to meet the individual learning needs of children since LSEY
	Unanticipated outcomes	Any unanticipated outcomes arising from the LSEY project e.g., Best Start merger
	Other outcomes	All data about outcomes from LSEY that don't fit into above
	Professional development	All data about practitioners engaging in professional development through LSEY
Suggestions for improvement		All data relating to suggestions to improve LSEY in the future
Networks/ Partnerships	Role of partnerships	Committees/partnerships/groups and their roles and activities in planning and implementing LSEY
	Role of child and family services	All data relating to role of council workers in LSEY
	Role of schools	All data relating to role of schools in LSEY e.g., member of practitioner groups
	Role of ECEC services	All data relating to role of ECEC services in LSEY e.g., childcare, kindergarten in practitioner groups
Broader context	LSEY's relevance to DEECD agenda	All data relating to the extent of LSEY's relevance to the DEECD vision and agenda
	LSEY's relationship in wider context	LSEY's relationship with the broader VIC context e.g., AEDI data, NAPLAN tests
	LSEY's relationship with other organisations or community activities	All data relating to LSEY's relationship with other organisations e.g., Best Start
Sustainability	Corio Norlane	All data relating to the sustainability of LSEY after the project finishes in Corio-Norlane
	Footscray	All data relating to the sustainability of LSEY after the project finishes in Footscray
	Hastings	All data relating to the sustainability of LSEY after the project finishes in Hastings
	LSEY overall	All data relating to the sustainability of LSEY in a more general sense
Miscellaneous		All data that does not fit into the above nodes
Role of CCCH		All data related to the role of CCCH workers e.g., Best Start, Maribyrnong Council
LSEY's relationship with other community activities		

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