

**Linking Schools and Early Years Project
Evaluation
DRAFT mid-term report**

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Executive Summary

The LSEY evaluation is being conducted over six years. Qualitative and quantitative data is collected for the main evaluation reports every two years (2008, 2010 and 2012). This is an interim evaluation report. Its purpose is to describe significant developments in implementation and progress towards achieving project goals in the 12 months since the previous (Round 2) evaluation report.

For this report, qualitative telephone interviews were held with representatives of schools, early childhood education and care services, child and family services, and other policy and practice organisations. A second data source was information provided by the Centre for Community Child Health (CCCH), including site actions and workplans, activity evaluations and site journals.

The primary activities, strengths and achievements of the previous 12 months have been in the areas of: partnership and network groups; transition to school activities; engaging families; and responsive schools.

Partnership and network groups: Each site has a slightly different partnership structure, reflecting local activities and priorities. In the last 12 months, all sites have developed new activities and continued successful established activities. Significant developments in local partnerships and networks have included:

- merging the Best Start and LSEY projects
- developing a Transition Leaders group to create a consistent community approach to formal and informal transition programs
- creating a Knowledge Bank that supports the Practitioner Leadership Group to ensure consistent activity delivery
- developing links with another local project to help reduce the duplication of time commitments for early years and prep educators.

Transition to school activities: The previous 12 months has seen the partnerships consolidate many of the transition activities. These have included

- peer swaps between prep teachers and early educators becoming standard practice
- greater consistency in early years and prep programs
- ongoing provision of local community Transition Calendars
- consistent transition programs across the community
- greater consistency of information for families about the move to school and local schools.

Engaging families: In all three LSEY sites the importance of engagement between parents and schools and services has been increasingly recognised. New activities implemented to increase this engagement have included:

- parent activities on school grounds, such as supported playgroups
- participation in community literacy programs and visits to the library
- innovative methods to engage families in the early years and school programs.

Responsive schools: There is a strong alignment between LSEY goals and Victorian and federal policy goals. LSEY has supported the use of the Victorian government's DEECD Transition Statements to better respond to children's individual learning needs, and encourages a strengths-based approach. In the last 12 months this has involved:

- ongoing partnership approaches to completing and using the Transition Statements
- development of 'common language' tools to support shared language and terminology between early years services and schools.

Barriers and facilitators

To what extent has the project been implemented as intended?

In all three sites partners and practitioners are actively planning and implementing activities to engage families, meet the learning needs of all children, and working to ensure that children and families make a smooth transition to school. The LSEY partnerships have assessed the needs of the community as a whole, and this has led to local, community-specific strategies to support the implementation of LSEY activities.

What are the core elements that assisted and impeded the project goals being achieved?

Responsiveness and flexibility: a strength of the LSEY model has been its responsiveness to local community needs, and to other initiatives in the local communities. This is reflected in the capacity of individual sites to refine activities and priorities in response to local needs in order to meet the project goals.

Alignment with broader policy goals: planning and principles in the partnership groups align closely with Victorian and federal policy aims. The LSEY communities are well placed to implement new policies, and to make the policy tools and programs meaningful for the local community.

Leadership of CCCH: the facilitators have been instrumental in ensuring deadlines are met, providing background research, building wider community links, and maintaining a local approach.

Peer swaps: these have been extremely valuable in improving communication and appreciation of each learning environment.

Energy and commitment: the most successful partnership activities have been a result of the energy and commitment of all participants, and the willingness of already busy people to invest time and energy into new tasks.

What are the strengths and difficulties of the project model?

The strengths of the project model are described throughout this and previous reports. They include:

- partnerships build on existing relationships and practices
- engagement of a broad spectrum of schools and early years services, including long daycare centres and community services
- the model recognises the expertise of all participants, and the efforts currently in place to improve transition to school and children's capacity to engage in school
- local knowledge and other initiatives in place are used to complement LSEY activities, and vice-versa
- the partnerships have the capacity to link with other projects within the community, and support engagement in new projects such as Smiles4Miles in Footscray and Teacher Talk in Hastings.

Over the past 12 months, the primary difficulties experienced have been:

- time: it takes time to plan and establish new activities, and patience and persistence is required.
- centrality of the facilitator: while the facilitators have been enormously beneficial to the partnerships, this indicates that the activities of the partnerships may not be sustained without this specifically resourced role.
- geography: in the two rural and regional settings the community participants are known or clearly identifiable, and this has provided an easier implementation environment than the metropolitan site. The specific characteristics of the communities in which initiatives such as LSEY are implemented are important.
- a reliance on volunteerism, and differences in capacities, priorities and resources: participation in LSEY is largely voluntary and much of the energy invested in activities comes from people acting beyond their core responsibilities.

1 The Linking Schools and Early Years (LSEY) project

The Linking Schools and Early Years Project (LSEY) is being led by the Centre for Community Child Health (CCCH), Murdoch Childrens Research Institute, at the Royal Children's Hospital, Melbourne. The project is being funded by the R.E. Ross Trust and the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD).

The aim of LSEY is to ensure that all children enter the formal education system ready to engage in the opportunities provided in their new learning environments. 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 project goals are:

1. Children and families make a smooth transition between early years services and school.
2. Early years services and schools actively connect with families.
3. Schools are responsive to the individual learning needs of all children.

LSEY is being implemented in three sites: Corio/Norlane in the Greater Geelong City Council, Footscray in the City of Maribyrnong, and Hastings in Mornington Peninsula Shire. In each site the project works with selected schools, feeder early education and care services for these schools, local government, and child and family services in order to develop new models of working collaboratively so as to address barriers to learning and development.

The project is running over a six year period from 2007 to 2012. Qualitative and quantitative data is collected for the main evaluation reports every two years (2008, 2010 and 2012). This is an interim evaluation report. Its purpose is to describe significant developments in implementation and progress towards achieving project goals in the 12 months since the previous (Round 2) evaluation report (Eastman et al., 2010).

1.1 Summary of Round Two findings

This section summarises the findings from the second round of data collection (Eastman et al., 2010). The findings from the 2010 report were based on questionnaires completed by parents, schools, early childhood education and care (ECEC) services, and child and family services; and interviews with practitioners, managers and regional stakeholders.

The findings from the second round of data collection were:

- each of the sites was conducting a number of activities towards achieving the project goals: a partnership approach to the DEECD Transition Learning and Development Statements, transition to school activities, Transition Calendars, community forums, engaging with parents, network groups, and peer swaps
- compared to the first round of data collection, more children participated in orientation activities, and larger proportions of ECEC services conducted information sessions and had children visit schools

- participation in LSEY was reported to result in both schools and early years educators moving away from 'school readiness' to reviewing the needs of each child and being prepared to meet those needs
- compared to the first round of data collection, more child and family services reported that they had referred a child to an ECEC service, and more ECEC services had attended a planning, training or information day managed by schools or local education authorities
- a number of LSEY activities were reported to have increased the capacity of schools and services to work in partnership
- compared to the first round of data collection, more schools had cultural/community-specific programs
- the partnerships were reported to have brought about improved awareness in schools of the services available to children and families. Schools had made changes to their transition programs, towards making them more accommodating for families and early years services
- the network groups had provided teachers and practitioners with the opportunity to build new relationships, which enabled an understanding of the different roles played by schools and services, and formed the basis of new partnerships
- LSEY was reported to have improved the capacity of schools to meet the learning needs of children from CALD backgrounds, through the opportunity to learn how child and family services and early years services have changed their ways of doing business, such as producing brochures in community languages
- leadership from CCCH was very important to implementation
- the LSEY model had a number of strengths, including: Partnerships building on existing relationships and practices; the model's recognition of all participants expertise, the efforts currently in place to improve transition to school, and children's capacity to engage in school; and local knowledge and other initiatives used to complement LSEY activities
- the primary difficulties with the project model were reported to be: challenges in putting ideas into practice; reliance on volunteerism and goodwill; differences in capacity, resources and priorities among stakeholders; and gaining and maintaining participation.

2 Methodology and sample

For this mid-term report, qualitative telephone interviews were held with representatives of schools, early childhood education and care services, child and family services, and other policy and practice organisations (Table 2.1). In order to maintain consistency, the interview schedule was largely the same as used in the 2010 interviews.

Table 2.1: Interview participants

	Footscray	Hastings	Corio/ Norlane	Others	Total
Schools ^a	2	1	1	-	4
Early childhood education and care services ^b	1	1	1	-	3
Child and family services ^c	-	1	-	-	1
Other practice and policy stakeholders ^d	-	-	1	2	3
Total	4	4	3	-	11

a. Principals and teachers

b. Early years educators and service managers

c. Maternal and child health workers, Best Start workers, school nurses and child/family-specific organisations

d. Other community service providers, LSEY project staff, education authorities and local government workers

A second data source was information provided by CCCH, including reflective workplans and site journals. These documents provided a detailed account of the activities and achievements of the each of the sites, and were a primary source of information for Section 3.

All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Identifying information was removed and aliases applied to all interviews. Transcripts were analysed using NVivo qualitative software, using open and axial coding, based on the research questions and emergent themes.

The next round of significant data collection will be the final round and will be carried out in 2012. It will report on outcomes and implementation.

3 Summary of LSEY activities, strengths and achievements

3.1 Partnership and network groups

Each of the three LSEY sites has established an overarching partnership group and practitioner working groups, with two sites also establishing practitioner leadership groups. Each site has had significant developments over the past 12 months. Each level of the partnership structures includes different types of local stakeholders; including major decision makers, such as school principals and early years service managers, as well as educators, practitioners and other key community members.

The Hastings Partnership developed the Knowledge Bank element of the Practitioner Leadership Group. The Knowledge Bank is responsible for providing background knowledge and activity support for the rotating members of the Practitioner Leadership Group, who facilitate the local Practitioner network. An example of this was the processes around the design and distribution of the Transition Calendar. The Partnership Group in Hastings has taken overall responsibility for championing individual projects as well as deciding which outside groups and individuals to liaise with to enable ongoing sustainability of projects. The

Hastings Partnership Group recognises the importance of networking within the partnership itself and has established a periodic 'speed networking' event, based on the concept of speed dating, to ensure wider liaison and relationships with other key community stakeholders.

The Practitioner Group in Footscray has been strengthened by the introduction of a DEECD early years project officer, which has encouraged more early years educators to attend. In Footscray the local action plans have focused on:

- creating consistency between early years and prep programs
- strengthening and ongoing development of relationships between early years and prep educators
- research around the children's transition experiences to inform further actions to support a positive transition to school.

The focus of this group has supported new relationships between schools and their feeder early years services, and with other local groups. The LSEY partnership has strengthened established relationships with Maribyrnong council by integrating LSEY activities with those of the Maribyrnong Early Years Alliance (MEYA). This has led to collaboratively facilitated community forums and greater involvement in and support for the activities of both the MEYA and LSEY.

The Footscray partnership has also been successful in linking with other groups and initiatives, and LSEY has facilitated the development of new activities in the area. For example, the Footscray Practitioner Group is also the working group for the Smiles4Miles Project Group, an initiative of Dental Health Services Victoria, implemented in early years services, to improve young children's oral health. The collaboration between these two projects recognises the value of local projects working together and valuing the time of local educators by not establishing two working groups with the same group of educators.

The LSEY-Best Start partnership in Corio/Norlane has developed Working Groups to concentrate on specific activities. For example the Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) Working Group's role is to work together to develop and strengthen local relationships and to identify, plan and implement activities that are responsive to the needs of the children and families in their community.

The network structures of LSEY have not only acted as effective communication models within the LSEY project, but have also demonstrated that the model allows for effective networking from the partnerships into the community. This has led to some significant involvement in other local community projects supporting children in the first years of school. Examples of this are the Maribyrnong Early Years Alliance (MEYA) project in Footscray, the Literacy Village in Hastings and the Extended School Hubs in Corio/Norlane. While none of these projects were LSEY initiated, LSEY partnerships are active participants in all these projects.

3.2 Transition to school activities

The previous 12 months has seen the partnerships consolidate their transition activities and many of the activities, such as peer swaps between prep teachers and early educators, have become standard practice. School classroom spaces have been changed to more closely resemble the environments of early years services, with the formal aspects of classroom learning introduced gradually.

Through these activities, trust and relationships have developed between early years educators and prep teachers, which in turn has allowed for the free flow of information between the two sectors. Teachers and educators in all the LSEY sites feel comfortable ringing each other for advice and support.

In Corio/Norlane a Transition Leaders group has been established which has provided time release for prep teachers to provide a consistent approach to the transition program. All schools and all early years services in the area are now involved in the transition program. There have been modifications to methods of sharing information with families about transition to school, based on feedback from local families. One key change was replacing the formal Starting School Expo with a more informal starting school information session for families at their local kindergarten.

The Corio/Norlane and Hastings partnerships have continued with the Transition Calendar. The Transition Calendar is a single calendar of all transition events and activities across all schools and early years services in the project community. The partnerships have also expanded their transition practices to include other key community agencies within the planning process. In the past 12 months in Corio/Norlane a formal four-week transition program has been established, which allows families and children to visit and familiarise themselves with the school, the staff and the students. In addition, an informal transition program enables children, families and prep/early years educators to develop relationships from the start of the year through informal opportunities for prep teachers to spend time in the early years environments and for children/families to spend time in the school environment.

We're making a specific effort to have family-friendly activities, to try and have some sort of activity maybe once a term or just when it sort of arises that we invite the families in and just trying to make them more comfortable and involved here. (Thea, early years educator)

In the past year Hastings schools have moved their information sessions to earlier in the year to give parents time to explore the best schooling option for their child and schools time to prepare for the children.

3.3 Engaging families

In all three LSEY sites the importance of engagement between parents and schools and services has been increasingly recognised.

In Corio/Norlane there has been a conscious effort to engage parents, particularly in the kindergarten year. For example, a breakfast for parents was held, for which the children made food and a 'camera' project was set up, which enables children to link their

kindergarten learning with their home learning environment. These activities have been integrated into the overall learning program for the year.

We're planning an art show next term. We try and [ensure] it's also a learning experience as well as engaging the parents. (Thea, kindergarten teacher)

Hastings has focused a great deal of energy on strategies to increase the connections between schools and services and families. All the primary schools have established playgroups called Bugs and Beetles to support parents' connection with schools. The intention behind these playgroups was to encourage new and existing parents to feel comfortable at school:

They've been really successful at getting families into the school grounds, and that was the intent, for [the parents] to feel welcome and comfortable in the school environment' (Libby, policy/practice stakeholder).

The playgroups are also designed to establish informal contact between the families and the school staff to improve communication and reduce barriers.

The Hastings Speech and Language in the Early Years (SALTEY) research undertaken in 2009 has resulted in a number of activities to address local speech and language concerns identified by community information and local data. The research resulted in the development of ongoing activities such as Teacher Talk, an intensive training series that provides professional development for early years educators across Hastings to facilitate speech and language development for local children. The SALTEY research has had an ongoing impact on other community projects such as the Literacy Village, which aims to improve communication in the family by fostering opportunities for parents to read and talk to their child. During the last 12 months two Linking Together community forums were held that explored 'Valuing parents as partners' and the concept of 'No wrong door'. These forums allowed for the workshopping of ideas on improving language and literacy and improving access to services for families by focussing on more flexible ways of working with families, improving children's language skills, and participation in local services.

Footscray is also building relationships with families. The schools in Footscray have not always communicated with other schools in the area, but they are developing stronger relationships with their feeder early years services and playgroups. Parents are becoming more involved with their child's education both within the early years sector and in school. In general, the schools in Footscray are reported to be increasingly accessible to the families, arranging activities such as lunches for the families in the first year of attending school. One school has created a playgroup within their grounds and families are encouraged to use this facility.

3.4 Responsive schools

There has been a close alignment between LSEY activities and the aims of the Victorian government's policy programs and directions (CCCH, 2010).

In 2009 the Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) released its Early Years Learning and Development Framework (VEYLDF) which, through the DEECD 'Transition: A positive start to school initiative', set the framework for early years learning from 0 to 8 years (DEECD, 2009). The VEYLDF is a framework of learning and development for children 0-8 developed by DEECD by supporting early childhood professionals to support families to achieve common outcomes for children.

There has also been a close alignment between LSEY activities and the Promising Practices identified by DEECD through an evaluation of 30 Transition Pilots undertaken in 2008-09. Eight of the 10 Promising Practices are currently implemented in the LSEY sites (CCCH, 2010: 5).

The DEECD Positive start to school initiative recognises the importance of transition periods in a child's life and draws on *The Transition: A positive start to school evaluation report*. This report recognises the importance of the transition process and the need to improve the transition experience for children by developing a number of programs and tools around this process. One tool developed has been the Transition Learning and Development Statements which are used across Victoria to communicate information about children's previous learning experiences and other important information between early years services, families and schools. The information shared enables schools to respond to and plan for the individual needs of all children.

An evaluation of the Positive start to school initiative in 2010 (Success Works, 2010) recommended that a strengths-based approach be taken to the Transition Statements. In particular, the evaluation recommended improved networking between schools and early years educators. These evaluation recommendations largely parallel the approach the LSEY communities have been implementing since the introduction of the Transition Statements. Each of the LSEY communities has taken a partnership approach to completing and sharing information through the Transition Statements. Over the last 12 months, each community has refined local processes and supporting information to ensure the Transition Statements are meaningful and used effectively. One of the additional supports developed around the Transition Statements was the development of a 'common language' tool to bring together language used in early years services and schools to enhance information sharing.

Children's additional learning needs are identified by parents or early years educators through Transition Statements and relationships between early years and prep educators, early intervention services and families. This has facilitated earlier intervention for children who require additional support and resources. The project partnerships have also encouraged and supported educators to shift from a deficit-based to a strengths-based approach.

In the past we've come from a deficit model, oh these children are just going to be hard work and ... how do we sort of top them up and get them right, and I guess now we're sort of looking at that again, that strength-based approach where you know we've got to look at you know where the children are at, and develop their strengths and help them you know learn along the way. (Tanya, principal)

In Footscray, schools and early years services also ensure a personal handover of the Transition Statements. The Partnership Groups are also exploring how they can make the transition from early years to school smoother by restructuring classroom activity to replace formal teaching activity with learning through play.

Something that's actually happening where some of the schools are going to visit the childcare centres and talk about setting up places in their classrooms that would mimic some of the childcare centres where we can show them how they are learning through play (Francis, early years director)

One school self-funds the time-release for a lead prep teacher for one day per week for the school year to develop and maintain relationships and communication between the school, their feeder early years services and local children and families. The same school has developed an action research project to align environments and practices with its three feeder early education services, in order to create a seamless early learning environment and a positive transition to school. This research project is being led by the lead prep teacher and welfare coordinator.

In Corio/Norlane the LSEY partnership has merged with Best Start, which has increased its standing within the community. This has allowed the partnership to link into many local initiatives that are seeking similar outcomes for children and families. This has created wider networks and local relationships that support and enable the facilitation of information sharing.

The peer swaps continue to be reported as especially useful, especially when teachers have been able to visit early year services and observe their approaches to learning:

I think just getting into other people's classrooms and areas and seeing how they do things really has opened us up to think a lot more outside of what we were doing prior (Amelia, prep teacher)

Understanding the teaching practices used in different environments has enabled productive discussions to take place between early educators and teachers.

4 Significant developments in the past 12 months

Corio/Norlane

- The merge of the Best Start and LSEY partnerships has increased the resources and energy dedicated to LSEY project aims. It has increased the capacity to work collaboratively and engage participation from schools not previously involved in the project. Formation of the ECEC working group supports strong representation between all local schools and early years services in the LSEY-Best Start Partnership.
- Trial of enhancements in teaching activities in early years services and schools that aim to engage families in their children's education and to develop a consistent approach across both sectors.

- Exploration of an integrated community-wide practice training package around changes in service delivery across early years and kindergarten.
- Transition Leaders group. This group has been formed from participants of the ECEC working group to establish local leadership of schools in order to develop a consistent community approach to transition and to investigate ways of engaging with children, families and early years services more effectively prior to the children arriving at school

Hastings

- The LSEY partnerships have developed and implemented new projects:
 - Playgroups in schools. Known as Bugs and Beetles, this facilitated playgroup is held in each of the schools on differing days. The purpose is to improve engagement of families within the schools.
 - Teacher Talk project which focuses on training teachers and early years educators to support language development in young children.
 - Ongoing implementation of 'Reading for Life', a Rotary-supported initiative that uses volunteers from the Monash University Department of Education to act as reading buddies to prep children.
 - 'Take the time to talk and tell' which encouraged families, educators and the community to work together to support children's language and literacy development.
- Transition information sessions occur earlier in the year in response to feedback from families.
- Speed networking within the community to improve knowledge of local services, their programs and the role that all community stakeholders play in children's early learning and development.
- The Practitioner Leadership Group has developed a Knowledge Bank of project information and processes.
- Local champions model: members of the Partnership group take responsibility for championing an LSEY activity to create sustainability in these activities

Footscray

- Established relationships with Maribyrnong Early Years Alliance (MEYA)/Best Start project. The MEYA has established LSEY to be a time-limited working group to contribute to and support local activities within early years services and schools.
- Increased local, focused collaboration activity between schools and early years services.
- Action research project: seamless transition to school from early years services.
- Smiles4Miles. LSEY has agreed to act as the working group for the local Smiles4Miles project to model local collaboration and reduce duplication of time-commitments for local early years educators.

5 Barriers and facilitators

5.1 To what extent has the project been implemented as intended?

The 2010 evaluation report (Eastman et al., 2010) found that in all three sites partners and practitioners are actively planning and implementing activities to engage families, meet the learning needs of all children, and ensure that children and families make a smooth transition to school. For this report, we found this was continuing, and planning and implementation of activities aligned with project goals and objectives.

In all three sites the LSEY partnerships have assessed the needs of the community as a whole, and this has led to local, community-specific strategies to support the implementation of LSEY activities. In Corio/Norlane and Hastings, activities towards meeting the LSEY project goals have been achieved by focussing on the needs of the broader community.

We've been given a lot of guidance and opportunity to develop our own in our own way, which has been fantastic. It has been the community and the people involved who have really been able to drive the direction in which we go. (Tanya, principal)

In Footscray, collaboration has been more tightly focused on local collaborations between schools and their feeder early years services. An important development from this has been an action research project investigating ways to provide a seamless approach to the transition process.

Regular attendance at Partnership meetings is essential to maintaining the continuity of development and commitment to the LSEY project. In particular the engagement of senior staff is essential.

5.2 What are the core elements that assisted and impeded the project goals being achieved?

The core elements that assisted the project are:

- responsiveness and flexibility
- alignment with broader policy goals
- the leadership of CCCH
- peer swaps
- the energy and commitment of the participants.

One strength of the LSEY model has been its responsiveness to other initiatives in the local communities, and its capacity to refine activities and priorities to meet the project goals. For example, in Hastings this has led to initiatives around language and literacy development and the recognition of parents' role in their children's education.

In Corio/Norlane the responsive model has also enabled close links with local projects, particularly the Extended Schools Hubs pilot and the merge of LSEY and Best Start. It also led

to the development of the Transition Leaders group which grew out of an opportunity through the local Education regeneration project.

I think in general what the partnership has achieved is, that ability to develop relationships across the different service providers ... to not just think about yourself in isolation but to really look at our community as a whole (Helena, community health worker).

Footscray, as described above, has focused on improving relationships between schools and their feeder early years services rather than a community-wide approach. This has facilitated the introduction of new programs and contributed to closer alignment with the local council and LSEY goals.

In addition to local responsiveness, planning and principles of the partnership groups align closely with Victorian and federal policy aims. The new reforms being brought in for Victoria and federally require a lot of additional planning, which will require prep and early years services to work together. The LSEY communities are well placed to implement these reforms, and to make the policy tools and programs meaningful for the local community.

The LSEY project would not have been successful without the involvement of the facilitators from the Centre for Community Child Health (CCCH). The facilitators have been instrumental in ensuring deadlines are met and assisting in providing research and evidence to inform project activities. They have provided a drive and energy which has assisted in making the project a success:

I think they [facilitator] really have had to drive it at times, I mean we've had meetings where there has been you know quite a poor turnout and without that driving it would have just fizzled (Francis, early years educator)

In the partnership meetings the facilitator has ensured that meetings are inclusive, and no one person dominates the meeting.

The CCCH facilitator in each project community has been critical in building wider community links. At the same time the facilitators have encouraged a local approach to the partnership planning and actions. This has resulted in project actions being substantially different across the three communities in order to encourage local project ownership and responsiveness to local needs.

I think [facilitator] has been passionate about this and really worked with the community to drive it in a particular direction and so it's been really important that she hasn't come in and run something the way that she wants to run it, she's been very collaborative in the way that she's worked with schools and early years services and parents. (Maria, practice/policy stakeholder)

Within the partnerships there has been a commitment to ongoing professional development. In particular, the facilitators have encouraged peer learning while providing research evidence to support and guide the process.

The continuing peer swaps have been extremely valuable in improving communication and appreciation of each learning environment. They have opened up communication between schools and early years services, so prep teachers are comfortable talking to the early years teachers and vice versa.

It's opened up that communication between more kindergartens and the schools to communicate more and making us more aware of the family as a whole, not just the one child that we're focusing on, that it is the whole family that we're trying to work. So I think there's definitely been great positive things come out of it. (Joanna, prep teacher)

There is a growing awareness of the professionalism in the early years sector and as such there is a willingness to work collaboratively in the practitioner networks. As a result there is a more collaborative approach to changing work practices. The most successful partnership activities have been a result of the energy and commitment of all participants, and the willingness of already busy people to invest time and enthusiasm into new tasks.

5.3 What are the strengths and difficulties of the project model?

The strengths of the project model are described throughout this and previous reports. They include:

- Partnerships build on existing relationships and practices.
- Engagement of a broad range of community stakeholders including schools, early years services, child and family community services, local council and regional state and Catholic school department representatives.
- The model recognises the expertise of all participants, and the efforts currently in place to improve transition to school and children's capacity to engage in school.
- Local knowledge and other initiatives in place are used to complement LSEY activities, and vice-versa.
- The partnerships have the capacity to link with other projects within the community, and support engagement in new projects such as Smiles4Miles in Footscray, the Literacy Village in Hastings and the Extended Schools Hub pilot in Corio/Norlane.

Sections 3 and 4 describe the achievements and activities of LSEY in the previous 12 months, and are evidence of the strength of the model. This section describes the primary difficulties of the model, as experienced in the previous 12 months. These are time, the centrality of the facilitator to the partnerships, geography, a reliance on volunteerism, and differences in capacities, priorities and resources.

Time

Interview participants pointed to the length of time it took to establish activities, especially planning new activities. This required a lot of partnership discussions about what the shape of the project was going to be in each community. The funding and more importantly the facilitation by CCCH staff allowed the partnership time and space to develop the local framework.

I think that just expecting that this sort of activity would be able to be rolled out across the state without the resource allocation [is incorrect]. I think that because it's such a busy space, because there are so many other priorities at the moment that it could get a little bit lost. (Maria, practice/policy stakeholder)

The need for significant time to be invested in the partnerships by a large number of already busy people was identified by some interview participants as challenging. It takes time to build local partnerships and to engage the trust of vulnerable families. While the time spent in planning and discussion was recognised as valuable, it was also noted that patience and persistence is required.

Centrality of the facilitator to the partnerships

Even the most active of the LSEY communities felt that there was a need for resources, including a facilitator, to ensure that the links between services and schools are made. This is especially important over time with staff changes to ensure continuity and the preservation of LSEY organisational memory. It is felt that, without these specific resources, the partnership model is likely to meet less frequently and lack the same drive:

We're working in a way we've never worked before and we will continue to work in that way. But the actual getting together and meeting regularly with a facilitator who keeps the minutes, does the research, then develops things like the forums, you know they take quite a bit of time to put together. (Tanya, principal)

In Victoria there is a lot of activity and development around the early years service area. LSEY is one of many initiatives and without specific resources it could become one priority among many and lose momentum.

Geography

The experience of implementing LSEY so far is that the rural and regional settings where the community participants are known or clearly identifiable has provided an easier environment than the metropolitan site. This does not mean it cannot work in metropolitan settings but it indicates that different approaches and models are required for different geographical areas.

I think there is a significant difference between the way that rural environments could implement the transition [and] busy metropolitan environments [...] It's much easier to be going in a rural environment where the number of players are really well identified. (Maria, practice/policy stakeholder)

As stated in the 2010 report (Eastman et al, 2010), Footscray has a highly mobile population who will transition to schools outside the Footscray area, and a highly mobile teaching population. This makes the implementation of some aspects of the model more difficult than in the other sites.

A reliance on volunteerism and differences in capacities, priorities and resources

The nature of the LSEY model, in common with most comparable initiatives, is that participation is largely voluntary, and much of the energy invested in activities comes from people acting beyond their core responsibilities. This brings about many benefits, but it also means that if people do not have the capacity to make this extra effort, there can be a substantial impact on progress.

One of the strengths of the LSEY model is its capacity to align with broader policy goals and other programs and interventions occurring in the community. However, this also risks losing sight of LSEY's specific principles and goals. While this has not happened, there are areas where the alignment of LSEY and other initiatives has been inexact. For example, while the Best Start-LSEY partnership in Corio/Norlane has had many benefits, described above, it has also created some tensions due to competing priorities.

The indicators for Best Start are slightly to a tangent from [LSEY] ... So what has hindered is that Best Start guidelines don't include transition as an indicator. They include things around literacy and numeracy, but not specifically related to transition. (Maria practice/policy stakeholder)

Implementing some of the transition activities has meant putting additional pressure on colleagues not directly involved with LSEY.

They were going to have a planning day for two hours with the [children from early years services] and just the parents, but we also have to then forgo lessons with our own children on those particular days, and also find staff that can take our children for us. (Corinne, prep teacher)

In two of the sites, engaging staff who are senior enough to make decisions on behalf of their organisation has been difficult to sustain. This is important because the model necessitates what was described as a quite heavy commitment of meetings and planning activities, and consistent attendance from senior staff can mean that meetings are more efficient and recognised as time well spent by participants.

My only problem with it I suppose is really meetings. And I think that's just a time constraint. Everybody's so busy you know people want to go to something and they won't go to it again unless they're getting something worthwhile out of it. I know quite a few of the kindergarten teachers have actually pulled out for that very reason (Helena, Child and family service provider)

Many of those interviewed found the time and commitment to LSEY increased their workload. This requires a degree of goodwill and commitment to the Partnership Group that may not be sustainable in the future.

6 Summary and conclusion

The last 12 months have seen a consolidation of LSEY planning and partnerships, and in several instances the embedding of key LSEY activities, such as peer swaps, into the normal

routines of schools and services. The interview participants noted that they have seen a shift from 'planning' to 'doing'. Each of the LSEY sites has acted on local priorities. It is notable that there are also a number of examples of integration of LSEY with other policies and programs for early education and schools, and of LSEY supporting the initiation and development of new initiatives from state and Commonwealth programs.

Despite the increasing confidence of the local partnerships, the role of the CCCH facilitators is seen as extremely important to the successes and ongoing sustainability of the initiative. Early childhood and transition to school is a priority for state and federal governments, and there are a number of changes happening and anticipated in the sector. This brings a lot of opportunities, but also places additional demands on already busy teachers and practitioners. The facilitators have ensured that the LSEY goals do not become lost in the currently crowded field of early childhood policy and practice.

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