

# Linking Schools and Early Years (LSEY)

## Case example highlights

- ✓ For children: greater responsiveness to their health, wellbeing needs, and planning to improve children's learning and development outcomes
- ✓ For parents: improved access to services and support that enable greater engagement in their children's health and wellbeing, learning and development
- ✓ For the early years service system: greater capacity to respond to local children and families as an early years profession

All children arrive at primary school with knowledge and experiences because they grow up within families, neighbourhoods, services and communities. Traditional concepts of school readiness placed emphasis on a child's skills. More recent thinking about the transition to school includes supporting children and their families in the move to school. It is also recognised that "school readiness does not reside solely in the child, but reflects the environments in which children find themselves" (Kagan & Rigby, 2003) - their families, early childhood services, schools, health and community services and broader communities. It is now widely acknowledged that schools and communities should be ready to respond to all children and their families and that this can be done in partnership with all services and supports that work with children and their families.

Linking Schools and Early Years has been a six year project, funded by the R.E. Ross Trust and Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) and is led by the Centre for Community Child Health, Murdoch Childrens Research Institute. LSEY is working with three Victorian communities; Corio-Norlane (City of Greater Geelong), Footscray (City of Maribyrnong) and Hastings (Mornington Peninsula Shire) towards three specific outcomes for children and their families:

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

An external evaluation has been built in from the beginning with data collected in 2008, 2010 and in 2012. The evaluation will enable the project to contribute to Australian evidence around how effective local partnerships can support improved service coordination for children and their families enabling improved outcomes for children's individual health, wellbeing, learning and development.

As stakeholders in children's health learning and development, communities are well placed to work together to lead local service system change. The LSEY project is being implemented within a 'place-based community partnership' framework and follows an action research model. This approach aims to support the project communities to reconceptualise how early childhood services, schools and child/family health and community services work together to create a more coordinated service system that can support children and their families as a collective early years profession, as opposed to individual services. In each community the project is led by a partnership group that consists of local schools, early childhood education and care (ECEC) services, child/family health and community services, and local and State government.

The partnership groups work together by using evidence and community level data/information to plan how the local early years system can strengthen their practice

through greater coordinated and integrated support for children and their families by responding to their needs as an early years profession.

The community partnerships include the following key stakeholders as formal and informal partners:

## **Corio-Norlane**

### **ECEC services**

- City Learning and Care – Corio, City Learning and Care - Trudy Moritz, Corio Bay Senior College Childcare, Corio Kindergarten, Corio South Kindergarten, Norlane-North Shore Kindergarten, Norlane West Kindergarten, Rosewall Early Learning Centre, William Hovell Kindergarten

### **Schools**

- Northern Bay P-12 College - Hedy Street Peacock Avenue, Tallis Street, Vermont Avenue, Wexford Court, St Francis Xavier PS, St Thomas Aquinas PS

### **Child/family health and community services**

- Barwon Health, Bethany Community Support, Batforce, CatholicCare, City of Greater Geelong (Early years team, Best Start, Maternal & Child Health), Corio Library, DEECD (Partnership division, School Nursing, Extended Schools Pilot), Geelong Kindergarten Association, Glastonbury Child & Family Services, Northern Bay Family Centre, Scope Specialist Services, The Smith Family, Wathaurong Aboriginal Cooperative.

## **Footscray**

### **ECEC services**

- Angliss Children's Centre, Brenbeal Children's Centre, Church Street Children's Centre, Empire Early Learning Centre, Hyde Street Kindergarten, Saltwater Children's Centre, Scots Presbyterian Kindergarten, Victoria University Footscray Park Child's Centre, Victoria University Nicholson Street Children's Centre, Western Bulldogs Children's Centre

### **Schools**

- Footscray City PS, Footscray PS, Footscray North PS, Footscray West PS, St Monica's PS

### **Child/family health and community services**

- City of Maribyrnong (Early years team, Best Start, Maternal & Child Health), DEECD (Partnership division, School Nursing, Preschool Field Officer), Western Region Health Centre.

## **Hastings**

### **ECEC services**

- Fun 4 Kids Early Learning Centre, Hastings Childcare Centre, Hastings Preschool, Pelican Park Recreation Child Care, Westernport Childcare Centre, Wallaroo Child and Family centre

### **Schools**

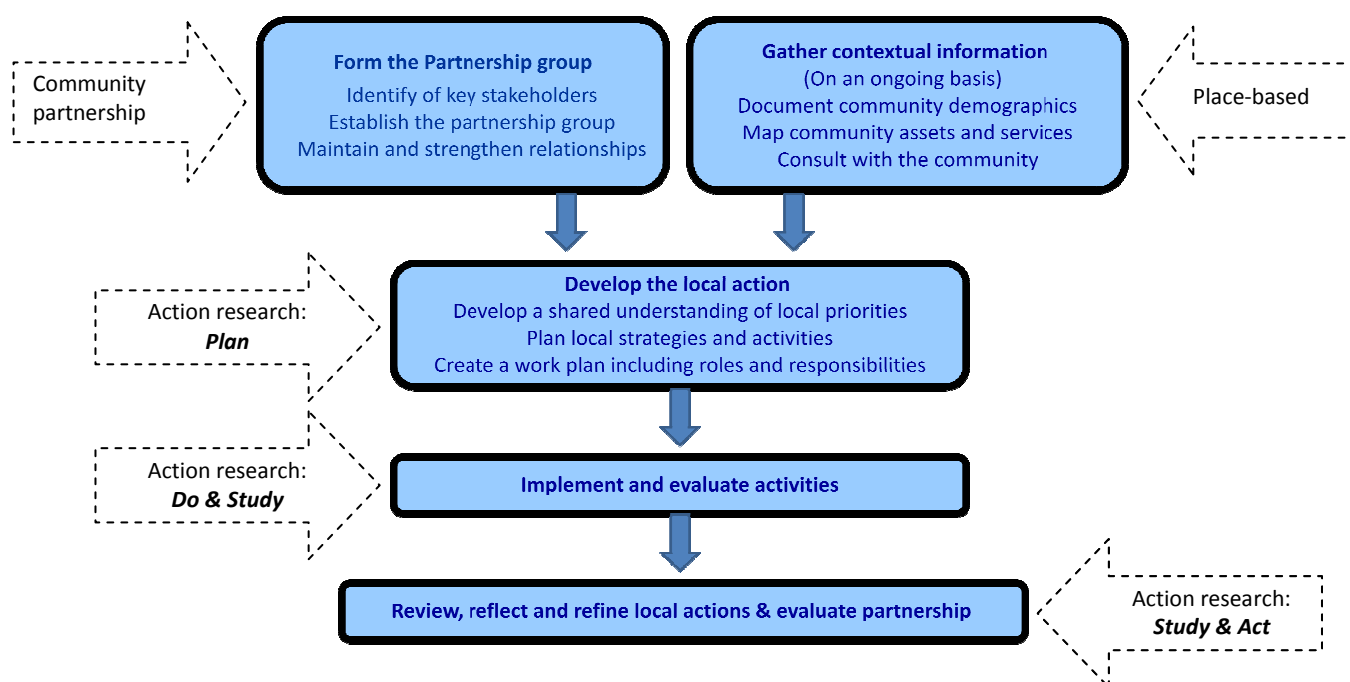
- Hastings PS, Hastings Westpark PS, St Mary's PS

### **Child/family health and community services**

- Biala Peninsula, Connections, DEECD (Partnership division, School Nursing, Preschool Field Officer), Early Childhood Development worker, Good Shepherd, Mornington Peninsula Shire (Early years team, Best Start, Maternal & Child Health), Neighbourhood renewal, Peninsula Community Health (speech pathologists, program managers).

It helps me enormously to connect with other services in the area at meetings and events. I meet people and hear their discussions about their work and what programs they're working on ... the information sharing is a really important thing – Primary school nurse.

**Figure: Place-based community partnership approach and action research model**



The LSEY partnership approach, activities and external project evaluation findings to date are highlighted throughout this case study framed around the three project goals.

### **Goal one: Children and families make a smooth transition between early years services and school**

The three project communities have developed and implemented consistent transition programs, resources and learning experiences across early education and care services, school programs and home learning environments. Some of these activities include:

- **Peer Swaps** which enable early childhood and prep educators to spend time in each other's services building a shared understanding of their role in children's learning.
- **Community-wide transition programs** that are jointly planned and implemented by ECEC services and schools and incorporate informal and formal school orientation opportunities.
- **Consistent transition information** for families that is collaboratively developed by ECEC services, schools and child/family services and distributed through transition calendars, information packs and through conversations with families.

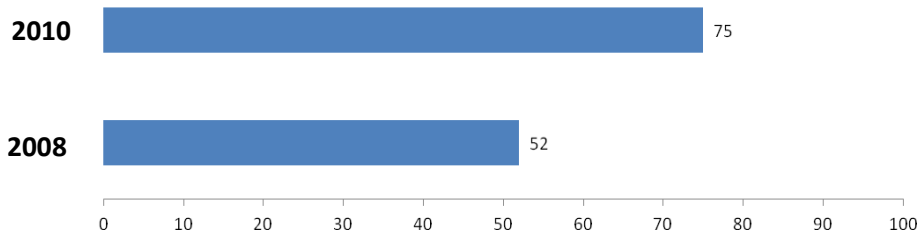
### Working together to support a smooth transition

In Hastings the early childhood and prep educators worked with Biala, a local child/family health and community service, to develop activities and supporting resource folders to support children with additional needs throughout the transition period and throughout the prep year. These activities and resource folders were also applied universally within the early years and prep programs for all children.

Educators reported that the visual teaching aid folder developed by Biala was very useful and had wide application in their programs. The experience of working together created and strengthened connections between educators and community health staff which has enabled ongoing communication between these groups.

The external project evaluation demonstrated the range of activities implemented by the LSEY communities contributed to an 18% increase in children participating in transition to school programs, with 68% of children's transition experiences involving time at school over a number of days and weeks. This is consistent with the finding of an increase in the percentage of children visiting the school more than once before formally starting school.

**% of children visiting school more than once before starting school**



### Goal two: Early years services and schools actively connect with families

The LSEY evaluation information has enabled communities to create a profile of family engagement and interaction with ECEC services, schools and child/family health and community services. This information has been used to inform family engagement strategies that have included:

- **Formal and informal opportunities** for families to spend time in ECEC services and schools have included, playgroups, social events, classroom participation, information sharing, interviews and information sessions regarding their child's educational program. Many of these have been joint ECEC-school activities, which also supports the transition to school.
- **Consultation with families** and **ECEC/school family-friendly self-reviews** have collected information on ECEC service and school operations, programs and practices. This information from families and self-reflections of ECEC services and schools has informed activity planning to enable greater engagement with families.
- **Family places/spaces** within ECEC services and schools have been organised, decorated and facilitated by parents or facilitated by the school to gain greater engagement from families. This aims to provide comfortable places within ECEC services and schools for families that will encourage

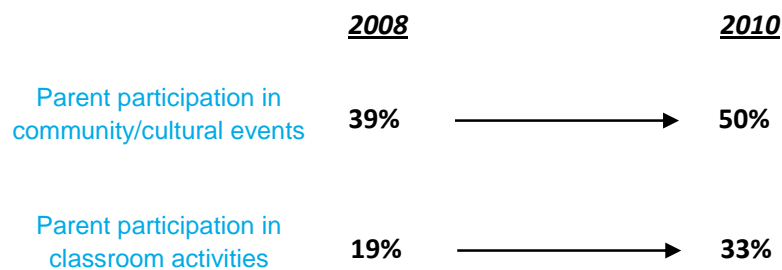
engagement in more formal activities and as partners in their children's educational program and learning.

### **A shared understanding for engaging families**

All LSEY communities have held professional development for ECEC services, schools and child/family health and community services to enable the local early years profession to have a shared understanding around the need for and practice of actively engaging families. This has been followed-up with ongoing local discussions and mapping/reviewing engagement strategies and practices at a community level and individual service/school level.

Ensuring that engaging families remains at the forefront of all local discussions and planning has enabled each community to explore and respond to the unique strengths that families have and to address areas where services/schools can improve on in terms of establishing respectful and responsive relationships with families.

Strategies implemented across the project sites have contributed to consistently high levels of satisfaction in relation to communication and information sharing with families, information provided and relationships/interactions between parents and their child's educators. There has been an increase in parent participation in schools:



### **Goal three: Schools are responsive to the individual learning needs of all children**

The LSEY project communities have demonstrated that greater connections, effective communication and collaborative planning can provide greater responsiveness to children's learning and development experiences and improved health and wellbeing outcomes, which are interrelated and inseparable.

### **Responding to children as individual learners**

In the early years children's learning, health, wellbeing and development are inseparable and interrelated. In Corio-Norlane local educators and allied health practitioners are working together to pilot a new way of working collaboratively to effectively support and respond to children's learning, health and development.

Allied health practitioners from Scope Specialist Services have visited ECEC and prep programs to explore children's learning/development areas where educators could benefit from additional practical strategies to enable them to respond to individual children and strategies that could be applied universally within their programs for all children. The support will be both face-to-face joint professional development for early years and prep educators, led by allied health practitioners, and ongoing telephone mentoring support for educators.

The aim of the pilot is to build the capacity of early years and prep educators to respond to children as individual learners. By bringing together the expertise and knowledge of educators and allied health practitioners the pilot aims to demonstrate

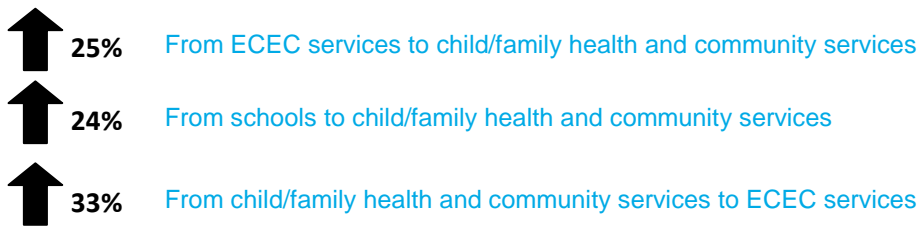
how to implement an effective and ongoing model for coordinated approaches to supporting children's learning and development.

Other project activities that work towards achieving this have included:

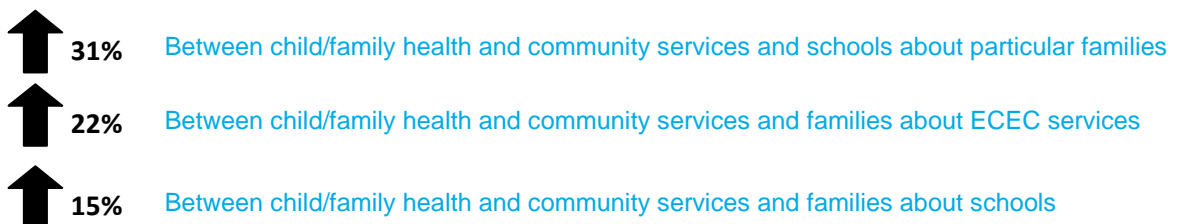
- **Joint professional development** and forums to bring together the birth–8 early years profession in planning and professional learning, supporting the capacity for and value of collaborative planning approaches.
- **Information sharing** between ECEC services, schools and child/family health and community services has enabled joint development of meaningful information–sharing tools and processes.
- **Peer planning** between ECEC services and schools has led to collaboratively developed and delivered inquiry–based educational programs for ECEC and school settings. Local educators also draw on the expertise of child and family services to plan diverse and responsive learning experiences.

The project's external evaluation showed a significant increase in time that ECEC services, schools and child and family services spent learning and planning together at the management and educator/practitioner level which is thought to have contributed to increased communication, information sharing and referrals between these early years professionals.

*Increased referrals from 2008 to 2010*



*Increased communication from 2008 to 2010*



**Next steps for LSEY**

The LSEY project's place–based community partnership approach has demonstrated that when communities work together to plan and implement strategies for children and families, local relationships strengthen and enable more effective and responsive support, builds capacity in education and health/support service practices and develops community level leadership and governance. The three communities will continue to work towards improving outcomes for children through a place-based community partnership approach, and the shared vision across the early years profession within the LSEY communities is enabling the development of more formalised governance structures and partnership arrangements. Ongoing evaluation and review are processes built into the LSEY approach. The local and external evaluation information will begin to be shared more broadly across wider non-project communities. The final round of LSEY evaluation information will be available in October 2012.

For further information about the project and to subscribe to the newsletter see [www.rch.org.au/lsey/](http://www.rch.org.au/lsey/)