

EVALUATION OVERVIEW

'No child misses out': Education Pathways Program

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Overview

Launch Housing's Education Pathways Program (EPP) is aimed at improving the educational outcomes for children experiencing homelessness and/or family violence. In late 2018 the Launch Housing Research and Service Sector Reform team completed a detailed evaluation of the program's impacts, a summary of which can be found below.

What is the Education Pathways Program?

In 2015, Launch Housing's Children's Specialist Support Service (CSSS)—which provides flexible and immediate support for children accessing the homelessness service system—developed the Education Pathways Program (EPP).

An innovative specialist early intervention program, the EPP includes a multidisciplinary team comprising social workers, a psychologist, volunteers, and a speech pathologist who provide valuable cognitive and educational assessments, counselling and classroom support. This team also develops partnerships with schools and helps parents navigate the education system.

The EPP targets children who are in short-term accommodation and are not enrolled in school. Children are provided with short-term school enrolment at a local primary school and accompanied to school in the mornings on a walking school bus. This encourages interaction with their peers, a sense of belonging, the development of social skills, and participation in a range of recreational activities.

A daily nutritious breakfast and lunch are available, along with school supplies (such as books and uniforms) and other material aid.

Why is it important?

Homelessness is harmful to children's development and is especially damaging to their education. Participation in education is severely disrupted, leading to learning difficulties and disengagement.

The evaluation found that the EPP's intensive program of support for children's re-engagement with mainstream education was fundamental to their ongoing educational development and overall wellbeing.

According to the latest figures from the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare there were 6,246 primary school students supported in specialist homelessness services in Victoria in 2016-17.¹ This represents an increase of more than 280% since 2011-12 when there were around 2,000 primary school students.²

Meanwhile, the Victorian Government's significant policy platform *Education State* emphasises the government's commitment to the provision of quality and inclusive education. An important focus of the *Education State* is to break the link between disadvantage and poor educational outcomes. However, there is no mention of children who are experiencing homelessness, a highly disadvantaged and marginalised group.

For some, Launch Housing's EPP is one of the very few interventions in the specialist homelessness sector dedicated to re-engaging children with mainstream education and providing much needed material and financial assistance.

Key Findings

Overview

The detailed evaluation demonstrates how the EPP delivered tangible and effective outcomes for primary school-aged children, up to 12 years of age experiencing homelessness, by successfully supporting their engagement or re-engagement with mainstream education. It also achieved other significant positive outcomes for children who were disengaged from primary school.

Evaluators analysed data from multiple sources, including program documents and case files, and insight provided by EPP staff through interviews or self-completed surveys.

Profile of children

Between October 2015 and June 2018, 187 children between the ages of three and 16 were supported by the EPP. The vast majority (164 children) were primary school children, aged between five and 12 years. Eighty children were born in Australia, including a number of children from an Indigenous background. Slightly more (89 children) were born overseas, generally in non-English speaking countries.

All the children and their parents, mostly sole parent mothers, were in crisis and multiple adversities were common: 72% (135 children) had experiences of family violence or child protection, and 25% (46 children) had experienced *both* family violence and child protection involvement. All struggled financially and relied on either the Newstart Allowance or the Parenting Payment.

Substantial extent of educational disadvantage

Classroom teacher assessments indicated that many of the students were 'below/well below' their peer level in the areas of numeracy (74% or 92 children) and/or literacy (70% or 87 children). Many children also presented with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties (58% or 59 children), and/or had an intellectual disability (20% or 25 children).

1 AIHW, Specialist homelessness services 2016-17, Supplementary tables – Victoria.

2 CHP (2018) Victorian Homelessness Election Platform. <http://chp.org.au/electionplatform2018/>

More than half of the children (58%) were identified with a multiplicity of ‘very high needs’ which included a history of chronic absenteeism from primary school, numeracy and literacy levels that were well below their peers, and social, emotional and behavioural difficulties. Worryingly, these children were typically *many* years behind their peers.

Improved enrolment and attendance

The EPP increased both school enrolments and school attendance. Of the 187 students, 159 were not attending school at first contact. However, of the 159, the EPP subsequently enrolled 79% (n=125) of the children at the local primary school. All 125 children enrolled over the 2015-2018 period attended school regularly.

To ensure the children got to school, EPP workers used the ‘walking school bus’ approach whereby staff physically accompany the children to school each day.

Despite the learning delays experienced by **all** of the children enrolled by the EPP, only 23% met the criteria for financial assistance under the state-funded *Program for Students with Disabilities* in the category, *Intellectual Disability* (PSD-ID).

The rest missed out, deemed ineligible by the funding criteria, even though they had substantial learning gaps. Without financial support to access intensive assistance with education, the gaps in learning will not only remain, but will be exacerbated as the children get older.

Support for parents is important

The parent-child relationship is very important to positive outcomes for children.³ But the stresses of homelessness and family violence can overwhelm and affect parents’ abilities to care for and nurture their children.

The EPP works on the premise that the best way to respond to parents living in crisis is with practical help and support. This proved particularly important in the case of the children’s education.

Simply taking charge of their children’s schooling, and physically getting the children to school each day, was significant for the parents, and it had the immediate effect of reducing the excessive stress that overwhelmed parents as a result of their homelessness.

School relationships matter

The strong partnership established with a local primary school ensured access to education for the children. EPP staff shared information with teachers on site, and answered any queries or concerns about how the children were settling in. The school relied on this support, especially given how many children at their school had an experience of homelessness and family violence.

The EPP increased understanding of homelessness and family violence amongst teachers and principals, enabling them to engage positively with the families. As a result, parents felt more

3 Justin Barker, Violet Kolar, Shelley Mallett, Morag McArthur. (2013) *What works for children experiencing homelessness and/or family/domestic violence?* Part 1: Literature Synthesis. Melbourne, Hanover Welfare Services, February.

valued and accepted. Children also had a more positive school experience which encouraged ongoing engagement.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It's clear that supportive intervention programs like EPP work. However, more needs to be done to address the educational exclusion of children experiencing homelessness:

1. Government policies must recognise children experiencing homelessness as a unique group that require tailored and intensive support to overcome significant educational disadvantage.
2. Commonwealth and state departments of education and training should invest in the expansion of the EPP model.
3. Consistent, year-round funding for schools is needed to support children experiencing homelessness who are enrolled after the school Census date.
4. The education and other support needs of children experiencing homelessness must be properly tracked to minimise the risk of them falling through the gaps, including a detailed intake and assessment process.
5. There is a dire need for more safe and appropriate housing paired with ongoing educational support for children experiencing homelessness.

About Launch Housing

Launch Housing is a Melbourne based, secular and independent community agency formed in July 2015. Launch Housing's mission is to end homelessness. With a combined history of over 75 years serving Melbourne's community, Launch Housing provides high quality housing, support, education and employment services to thousands of people across 14 sites in metropolitan Melbourne. Launch Housing also drives social policy change, advocacy, research and innovation.



IT'S TIME TO END
HOMELESSNESS