

# THE VICTORIA INSTITUTE



## An Evaluation of a School Focused Youth Services Initiative

**Creating contexts of support through educational assessments for young people experiencing homelessness and/or domestic violence**

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 **VICTORIA  
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# AN EVALUATION OF A SCHOOL FOCUSED YOUTH SERVICES INITIATIVE

CREATING CONTEXTS OF SUPPORT THROUGH  
EDUCATIONAL ASSESSMENTS FOR YOUNG  
PEOPLE EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS AND/OR  
DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

APRIL 2016

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# About

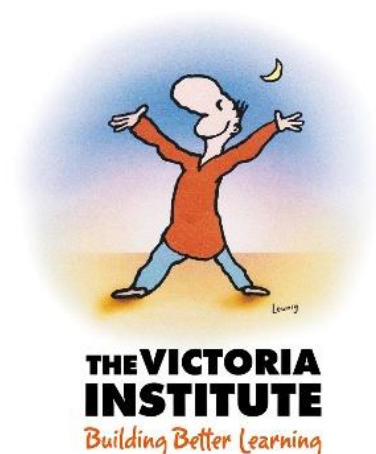
## The Victoria Institute

**The Victoria Institute is a research unit with a focus on inclusive education. We work collaboratively with a range of government departments, policy makers, philanthropic organisations and community groups to improve educational experiences and outcomes for all.**

Well placed within Victoria University, The Victoria Institute has social justice as a key focus. Our targeted research program aims to build better learning and greater participation and success for students from diverse and disadvantaged backgrounds as well as those who are disengaged or excluded.

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# Contents

Figures.....	i
Abbreviations.....	ii
Executive Summary.....	iii
1. OVERVIEW: EVALUATION BRIEF .....	1
1.1 Project Context .....	1
1.2 Community agency collaboration with local schools.....	2
1.3 Description of the intervention.....	2
2. LITERATURE SNAPSHOT .....	4
2.1 Impact of homelessness (and domestic violence) on young people's education .....	5
3. EVALUATION METHODS AND APPROACH .....	7
3.1 Data analysis .....	7
3.2 Participants.....	7
4. COLLECTIVE PROFILE OF YOUNG PEOPLE AND THEIR FAMILIES .....	9
4.1 Family structure and living arrangements.....	9
Case Study 1: Simon .....	12
5. EVALUATION FINDINGS.....	13
5.1 Consequences of homelessness and family violence on young people's educational experiences .....	13
5.2 Connecting young people to education: Parents and teachers use of assessment results in school and home contexts. ....	16
Case Study 2: Cara.....	18
5.3 Young people's progression as a result of the program .....	19
6. CONCLUSIONS .....	21
6.1 Building connections: A relational approach.....	21
6.2 Bridging multiple contexts: An ecological approach to intervention for children/young people experiencing homelessness and domestic violence .....	21
6.3 Partnerships and interagency collaboration at the local level .....	22
7. RECOMMENDATIONS .....	24
References .....	29





# Figures

Figure 1: Participants' current family structures.....	9
Figure 2: Participants' current housing type for Wave I and Wave II.....	10
Figure 3: Students' grade level performance (Wave I and Wave II).....	15

# Abbreviations

**ABS** – Australian Bureau of Statistics

**HCSSS** – Homeless Children's Specialist Support Service

**SFYS** – School Focused Youth Services

**SKYS** – St Kilda Youth Service

**WIAT-II** – Wechsler Individual Achievement Test - II

**WISC-IV** – Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children – IV

**VU** – Victoria University

# Executive Summary

## Brief overview of project

This evaluation research aimed to examine the effectiveness of an initiative that provides educational support for young people and their families who have experienced homelessness and/or domestic violence. This intervention program was delivered through Hanover Welfare Services (which has merged and become Launch Housing) and involves free educational assessments (cognitive and achievement) for young people. For this group of young people, whose education journey has likely been disrupted (i.e. through school changes/transience), these assessments aim to offer information to schools, service providers and parents/carers that enable them to develop and implement targeted educational support. In addition, educational assessments are important for linking young people in need to financial resources, allowing them to access extra support in the classroom.

This evaluation was commissioned by the School Focused Youth Services (SFYS) (Inner South) program, which covers the cities of Stonnington, Port Phillip and Glen Eira. The primary objective of this research was to document whether or not this program was able to improve young people's educational outcomes by providing targeted support for their educational progress, and training for providers and parents. This evaluation used de-identified data from participants collected by Launch Housing to explore the effectiveness of the program. It should be noted that initial funding for this program was provided through the SFYS initiative, however, the program was subsequently sustained through a philanthropic funding source.

## Methods

This research used a case study methodology, which explores the patterns across the individual cases in this cohort in addition to developing a collective profile of their experiences of the intervention. This evaluation has been conducted using the extensive data collected by the psychologist as a part of the intervention program, which involved two waves of data from children and young people aged 8 to 15 years. The data analysed in this research includes demographic information, results of the cognitive assessment data for each young person, and the pre and post intervention questionnaires completed by parents/young person and teachers.

## Summary findings

The collective profile of this cohort highlighted a number of challenges faced by young people and their families. Many of the young people had experienced significant school disruption and were also struggling with social skills and connections with peers. Similarly, the analysis also showed that the majority of participants were below grade level on several of the subtests completed as part of the initial cognitive assessment. Participants also had difficulty concentrating. The evaluation has identified a number of important gains for children and young people, their families and the schools involved in the intervention. For

the majority of participants, their attendance improved as a result of the intervention and there was also progress made in terms of establishing a routine across home and school contexts. Similarly, parents reported adopting the strategies recommended by the psychologist and noted that overall they more aware of their child's educational needs and how it might be improved. A number of parents requested more assistance with modelling homework sessions and developing practical ways to support their child/young person.

Finally, looking at the model of intervention more generally also highlighted a number of strengths, including the importance of a relational approach that focuses on building rapport and connections with young people and their families who are homeless and/or have experienced domestic violence. In addition, the intervention does not focus solely on the individual (child/young person), taking an ecological approach that bridges educational support across the home and school contexts. This bridging provides a range of individual and family benefits as mentioned above, but it also builds capacity and awareness within the school. Finally, this program appropriately takes a partnership approach, which favours interagency collaboration at the local level. The involvement of three local councils, community services (through Launch Housing) and schools brings together resources and allows for a coordinated response to assist this population through educational support.

## **Recommendations**

The key message from this research is that the SFYS initiative provided by the Launch Housing program Homeless Children's Specialist Support Service (HCSSS) – Educational Assessments, is an intervention that provides vital educational support to children/young people who have experienced domestic violence and/or homelessness. This service works with one of the most vulnerable cohorts of young people and their families to ensure they have access to educational assessments, which are essential to developing targeted strategies across school and home contexts to improve their educational outcomes. Given the wide range of benefits provided to young people and their families, it is recommend that this program be re-funded and should maintain its current model, taking into consideration the recommendations below:

1. To continue funding the HCSSS program– Educational Assessments stream as it is currently being offered through Launch Housing and to maintain the support of current partners if possible (i.e., local councils and local schools)
2. To continue and build upon the strong bridging work that is taking place between schools and community agencies in improving education outcomes for young people experiencing domestic violence and homelessness.
  - Maintain the relational approach and focus of the program, which establishes essential connections between teachers, parents and children/young people.
3. To continue to monitor and develop strategies for young people outside the traditional academic skill sets, including social connectedness and emotional gains.

4. To ensure school staff continue to be well informed and share knowledge by formalising a system/ process that allows for students' changing circumstances to be monitored.
  - Formal processes may also involve communication with community services (Launch Housing) if the child/young person has left the school so that the assessment and school reporting can be sent to the child's next school.
5. As implemented in Wave II, continue to provide additional information/ mentoring/ modelling sessions with teachers and parents (between pre and post assessment) for specific ways to apply the psychologist's recommendations.
6. To consider expanding the program with a place-based focus in which sessions or additional activities are held with children/young and parents/carers residing in Housing Commissioned properties. This could include educational sessions for parents (i.e., on how to give homework help, modelling reading strategies) or a homework club for young people.
7. To continue research into the program to track progress and developments of child/young people, as in some cases it was premature to determine the true impact of implemented recommendations at the time of post-assessment. Rather, a more longitudinal approach would benefit the program. Being able to document the impact of the program across a longer timeframe would show how the educational trajectory for children and young people might change after the assessment process. It may also highlight the need for additional responses to working with this cohort.



# 1. OVERVIEW: EVALUATION BRIEF

The SFYS initiative spans across the cities of Stonnington, Port Phillip and Glen Eira (Inner South) and aims to develop and support programs that assist the most vulnerable young people in the local area. Launch Housing (formally Hanover Welfare Services) partnered with these local councils to provide additional educational support for young people and their families who have experienced homelessness and/or domestic violence. For this group of young people, whose education journey has likely been disrupted (i.e. through school changes/transience), these assessments aim to provide information for schools, service providers and parents/carers that enable them to develop and implement targeted educational support. In addition, educational assessments are important for linking young people in need to financial resources, allowing them to access extra support through government provision.

The brief from Inner South was to conduct an independent evaluation of this SFYS initiative. The primary objective is to ensure education and training providers (and parents) can better support young people to achieve educational outcomes. The research evaluation used de-identified data from participants collected by Launch Housing to explore the effectiveness of the program. The evaluation research aims to:

- Document the initiative using assessment data collected by the psychologist, including case notes, teacher/parent/student interviews and pre and post intervention questionnaires to create a program profile.
- Locate how homelessness and family violence have impacted participant's educational experiences.
- Explore the extent to which service providers (primarily teachers) and parents use the assessment results in the school and home contexts to support the young person to reconnect/reengage with education.
- Through project documentation, track young people's progress (i.e. educational outcomes) throughout the program.
- Explore young people's perspectives on their recent education experiences at the end of the initiative.

## 1.1 Project context

SFYS is a state government initiative that recognises the need for “schools to work in partnership with community agencies with expertise to support young people with complex needs or emerging mental health issues to remain engaged or reengage in learning”. SFYS facilitates collaboration between schools and community organisations to develop initiatives that will support at-risk young people who require prevention or early intervention strategies to assist their learning, development, health and wellbeing. Within this context, youth services across Inner South aimed to address an issue faced in their locale by collaborating with Launch Housing, an organisation that supports young people and families who have experienced homelessness. In this project ‘at-risk’ young people aged 10 to 19 years are those who have experienced homelessness and/or family violence.

## **1.2 Community agency collaboration with local schools**

This initiative was guided by the belief that if children are not supported to address educational, health, social and emotional issues, they are at greater risk of experiencing ongoing issues, including ongoing homelessness and disengagement from education in their youth and adulthood. Through a range of programs, Launch Housing works with children, young people and families to improve employment and educational opportunities and mitigate the risk of continued homelessness. One of the services provided by Launch Housing is the HCSSS - Stream 4- Educational and Psychological Assessment. Given that young people who have experienced homelessness often have disruptions in education (i.e. sporadic attendance, school mobility) they are often not in one school long enough to access educational assessment offered by the State due to long waiting lists. This initiative seeks to prioritise the needs of these young people by working with them through Launch, but in partnership with local schools and education providers [for instance, St. Kilda Primary and St Kilda Youth Services (SKYS)].

## **1.3 Description of the intervention**

Children, young people and their carers are recommended for this intervention program through a number of school and community channels. Some children/young people are identified and subsequently referred by Launch Housing (i.e., they may be involved in other programs provided at this agency), Inner South Community Health Centre or schools in the local area. The psychologist initiates the process by making contact with parents over the phone to discuss the possibility of their child participating and makes arrangements to visit the family's home for the first appointment which involves getting family background and detailed information about the child's life history.

### **1.3.1 Role of the psychologist**

The role of the psychologist in this initiative is very intensive and the program centres on this individual being able to build rapport with children/young people quickly and establish trust with both parents and teachers. The activities completed by the Launch Housing psychologist are listed below:

- An initial 60-minute interview with the young person and caregiver to collect background information about their development, education history as well as family and living circumstances.
- 2 x 60 minute sessions with young person to administer the WISC-IV (cognitive assessment).
- 2 x 60 minute sessions with young person to administer the WIATT-II (achievement assessment).
- A detailed report was prepared and tailored to the social, behavioural and educational needs of the young person (information to young person, parent/caregiver and teacher).



- A 30-minute Student Support Group feedback meeting conducted with the young person, their caregiver, teacher and school welfare coordinator to discuss report and recommendations. Individual wellbeing plan were also discussed at this time.

As part of the intervention, the parent and/or young person also had the option to choose to engage in one-on-one counselling with the psychologist.

### **1.3.2 Adjustments made to the program**

This program evaluation is based on the intervention, which was delivered in separate school terms in 2015, which are referred to as Wave I and Wave II in this report. It is important to note that the program changed based on feedback from parents and teachers in Wave II to include an additional session between the assessment and the final follow up. The parents and teachers were requesting more information about how to implement the recommendations of the assessment into specific practices in the home and school environment. The psychologist organised for additional sessions that served as scaffolding activities for parents, such as modeling homework help and developing specific strategies around reading and organisational skills.



## 2. LITERATURE SNAPSHOT

On any one night it is estimated that approximately 105,000 people are considered to be homeless (ABS, 2012). Thus, homelessness is an unfortunately significant and widespread issue within Australian communities (Moore & McArthur, 2011). In recent times there has been an increase in the number of children and families experiencing homelessness, in particular women and young children (AIHW, 2008; Moore & McArthur, 2011). This increase in families experiencing homelessness has also been observed internationally (Kilmer, Cook, Crusto, Strater, & Haber, 2012). However, it has been asserted that such families experiencing homelessness are considered to be a “relatively invisible population” as they are often housed in temporary accommodation (such as, crisis accommodation, transitional housing, friends’ homes etc.) rather than ‘sleeping rough’, which is the stereotypical image of homelessness (Tischler, Edwards, & Vostanis, 2009; Tischler, Rademeyer, & Vostanis, 2007).

Historically, homeless children’s educational needs have been overlooked by the homelessness sector and education services (Rossiter, Mallett, Myers, & Rosenthal, 2003). However, there has been a growing awareness that children who are homeless and/or have experienced family violence have specific needs due to disruption in housing, education and access to resources (Savelsberg & Martin-Giles, 2008). Causes of homelessness are varied and often complex and multifaceted. However, domestic and/or family violence has been found to be the primary cause of homelessness for women and children (Commonwealth of Australia, 2008). Family and domestic violence is understood as the “actual or perceived conduct that results in reasonable fear or apprehension about wellbeing or safety” (Roberts, Chamberlain, & Delfabbro, 2015, p.600). This understanding is encompassing of all forms of violence including (but not limited to), physical, verbal, psychological/emotional, social and financial violence, as well as “the exposure of children to family violence” (Roberts et al., 2015, p.600). Domestic violence increases women and children’s susceptibility to experiencing homelessness in multiple ways. That is, as explained by Spinney (2013), for women and children, “[domestic] violence disrupts and violates the sense of safety and belonging that are associated with the home, even before they leave; and secondly, because when women and children make the decision to leave a domestic violence situation, they are usually required to lose their homes” (p.399). Thus, it is imperative to consider the compounding and co-occurring trauma that women and children who are homeless as a result of domestic violence experience.

Experiences of homelessness alone are disruptive for individuals and families alike and have a number of negative consequences for one’s social, physical and emotional wellbeing. Feelings of loss, fear, anxiety and powerlessness are inherent in experiences of homelessness (Tischler et al., 2007; Tischler et al., 2009). For children, experiencing homelessness can lead to poor educational outcomes, behavioural issues as well as overall poor physical and mental health (David, Gelberg, & Suchman, 2012). While homeless mothers are also vulnerable to a range of psychological and physical ailments and challenges (David et al., 2012; Tischler et al., 2007). It is also necessary to consider the impact homelessness has on the family structure and parent-child relationship. Therefore, “the stress of homelessness negatively influences important parenting behaviors that are essential to children’s physical and psychological development” (Marra,

McCarthy, Lin, Ford, Rodis, & Frisman, 2009, p.349). However, it is important to recognise that such negative outcomes for both homeless mothers and their children are further exacerbated and complicated by preceding (and/or simultaneous) experiences of family and domestic violence. It has been widely reported that domestic and family violence has wide reaching and significant ramifications for a woman's (and her children's) mental, physical, social and fiscal health and wellbeing (Roberts et al., 2015). In regards to children and young people, experiencing homelessness "combined with other co-occurring risk factors" such as domestic and family violence, leaves them "more likely than their peers to evidence poor physical, emotional, and academic wellbeing" (Perlman, Cowan, Gewirtz, Haskett, & Stokes, 2012, p.402). As outlined by Spinney (2013), together with the negative impacts domestic and family violence have on the psychological and cognitive development of children, "the homelessness that still so often results from leaving situations of violence [too] brings trauma, and affects routines and friendships" (p.398).

## **2.1 Impact of homelessness (and domestic violence) on young people's education**

Experiences of homelessness and domestic/family violence have compounding negative impacts on children's health and wellbeing including limited school engagement and ability to develop relationships with peers (Moore & McArthur, 2011; Murphy, 2011). The high mobility inherent in children's experiences of homelessness often impedes their consistent engagement and participation in education (Moore & McArthur, 2011). Research has found that children experiencing homelessness are more likely to have high levels of absenteeism from school as well as reduced academic success (Fantuzzo et al., 2012). Furthermore, experiences of homelessness or unstable housing often require children to make multiple school moves. It has been estimated that when such disruptions occur to children's education (they make a school move) their academic progression is set back by four to six months (Murphy & Tobin, 2011; Wynne & Ausikaitis, 2013). Thus, it is clear the cumulative negative impact multiple changes to a child's learning environment would have on their educational and social attainment, without taking into consideration additional risks homelessness poses to children's overall physical and psychological wellbeing. As prior research has shown, children and young people experiencing homelessness are at greater risk of a number of psychological and emotional problems including anxiety, depression, social isolation, low self-esteem and developmental delays (Hinton & Cassel, 2013; Keys, 2009; Murphy & Tobin, 2011). It has also been documented that high levels of stress are associated with learning difficulties (Evans & Schenberg, 2009, cited in Tobin, 2014). As explained by Keogh, Halpenny and Gilligan (2006), "mental health issues are likely to impact on children's participation in school, even if they are attending regularly" (p.366).

Thus, when considering the consequences of homelessness on participants' educational experiences and accomplishment, it is imperative to consider the cumulative educational disadvantage that they are exposed to. This is supported by a number of studies that show that various factors "combine to affect homeless children's chances of participating in the school system and in gaining an adequate level of education" (Moore & McArthur, 2011, p.149; Tobin, 2014). For instance, Tobin (2014) has identified four distinct effects of homelessness that together "decrease the likelihood that homeless children will attain school success" (p.3). These four barriers include, logistical issues regarding enrolment, poor physical health, high rates of mental health problems and issues concerning educational readiness (including developmental delays) (Tobin, 2014). Fantuzzo et al. (2012) examined that combined effects of homelessness and school mobility

on educational achievement and classroom engagement in third grade students. It was concluded that the continual experience of homelessness and school mobility has a more detrimental impact on students' educational outcomes (achievement and classroom engagement) than incidents of homelessness or school mobility alone (Fantuzzo et al., 2012).



### 3. EVALUATION METHODS AND APPROACH

This research used a case study methodology, which explores the patterns across the individual cases in this cohort in addition to developing a collective profile of their experiences of the intervention. This evaluation has been conducted using the extensive data collected by the psychologist as a part of the intervention program, which involved two waves of data from children and young people aged 8 to 19 years. The data analysed in this research includes demographic information, results of the cognitive assessment data for each young person, and the pre and post intervention questionnaires completed by parents/young person and teachers. In following Victoria University (VU) and Launch Housing research ethics requirements, all data was compiled and de-identified by Launch Housing before it was handed over to VU researchers for analysis and report writing.

The questionnaires (pre and post intervention assessment) consisted of 10 questions, including five questions in which parents/young people and teachers had to rate the young person's school attendance and overall school experience (i.e. school connectedness, satisfaction with learning experience etc.). The intervention used the Weschler Intelligence Scale for Children (WISC-IV), which is designed for children aged 6 to 16 years and can be completed without reading or writing. This assessment takes 45-65 minutes to complete and for this project was often completed across two to three sessions depending on the young person involved. The intervention also used Wechsler Individual Achievement Test – II (WIAT-II). This test measures basic reading, math, writing and oral language skills and can be used with individuals from 4 to 85 years of age. It can take 45 to 90 minutes to complete and for the purpose of the current intervention the psychologist often worked across two 60-minute sessions with the young person.

#### 3.1 Data analysis

As outlined by Yin (2014) case study approaches require analysis that takes into account individual cases and involves analysis that identifies patterns across cases. Archival data from different sources was used to see what strategies and modifications teachers, parents, and young people made based on the assessments, the educational assessment and the overall plan of action for students generally. The researchers coordinated all relevant data linked to each student, including; psychological and education assessments, and follow-up information provided by the young person, the young person's caregiver and teacher. This information was triangulated to examine on a case-by-case basis, the difficulties the student was having, what recommendations were made, what actions were taken (by teachers, parents, and additional actions taken such as psychotherapy) and what the 'outcomes' have been for the student. The outcomes for students will be explored across the data available, focusing in on improvement in attendance as perceived by parents/teachers/young person.

#### 3.2 Participants

For the purpose of the current evaluation report, Launch Housing has completed 18 assessments for which consent was obtained from the young person and/or their caregiver(s) for the release of data to be used in this research. These 18 cases were collected from participant cohorts across both Wave I and Wave II. Launch Housing is also currently working with a third set of participant data (Wave III). However, at the time of this report these evaluations remained incomplete and not provided to the researchers for further analysis.

A detailed collective profile of the young people who participated and their previous and current living circumstances as well as educational experiences is outlined in the following section.

**Table 1: Number of participants per data Wave.**

<b>Intervention &amp; data collection</b>	<b>Number of young people</b>	<b>Parent pre and post test</b>	<b>Teacher pre and post test</b>
Wave 1	6	6	5
Wave 2	9	11	11
Wave 3*	9		

\* These data are not reported on in this evaluation



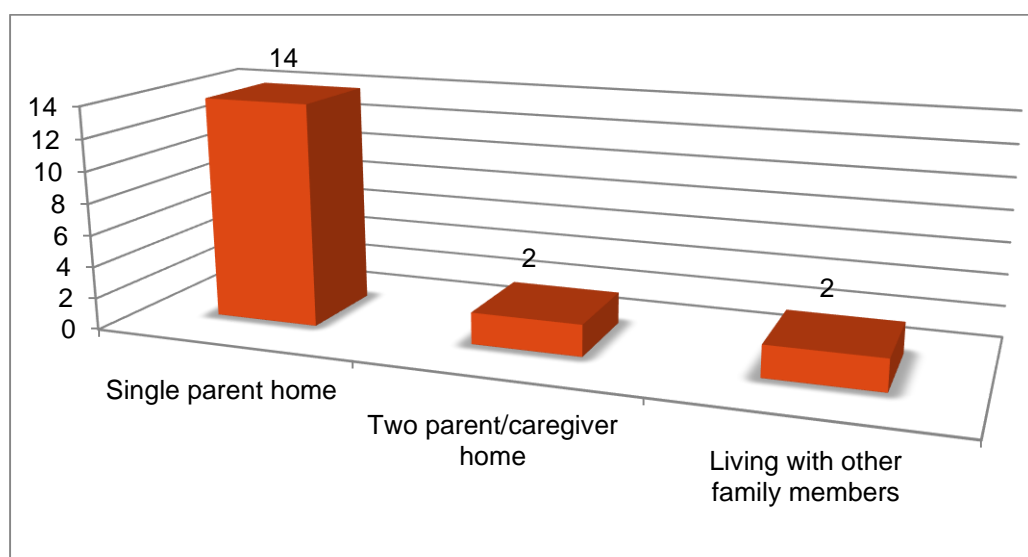
## 4. COLLECTIVE PROFILE OF YOUNG PEOPLE AND THEIR FAMILIES

Participants in this research included six children and young people aged 6 to 15 years (Wave 1) and 12 children and young people aged 6 to 13 years (Wave II). In Wave I, four participants were male and two were female. In Wave II, there was only one female participant. It is important to note that Wave II initially included an additional four participants, however consent to use their data was not obtained due to disengagement from the program as result of either losing contact with the young person and their family, the family moving house, as well as children being removed from caregiver's custody. Although these participants will not be reported on any further, it is imperative to note that these barriers to continued education and assistance are all too common amongst young people who are experiencing homelessness and the accompanying challenges (for instance, exposure to family violence and drug abuse).

### 4.1 Family structure and living arrangements

In terms of family structure across both Wave I and Wave II, the majority of participants lived in single parent households. One young person lived in a two-parent home (plus a live-in grandparent), whilst one lived together with a parent and grandparent. Although, a number of young people resided with their fathers, the majority of participants lived with their mothers. Two participants resided with other family members including one participant that lived with his sister and another who lived with her grandfather. A small number of young people had previously spent time in the care of other family members or within the foster care system. That is, approximately four participants at the time of the assessment were or previously had Child Protective Services overseeing their care arrangements to some extent. In addition, a small number of young people had a parent who was currently or had been previously incarcerated.

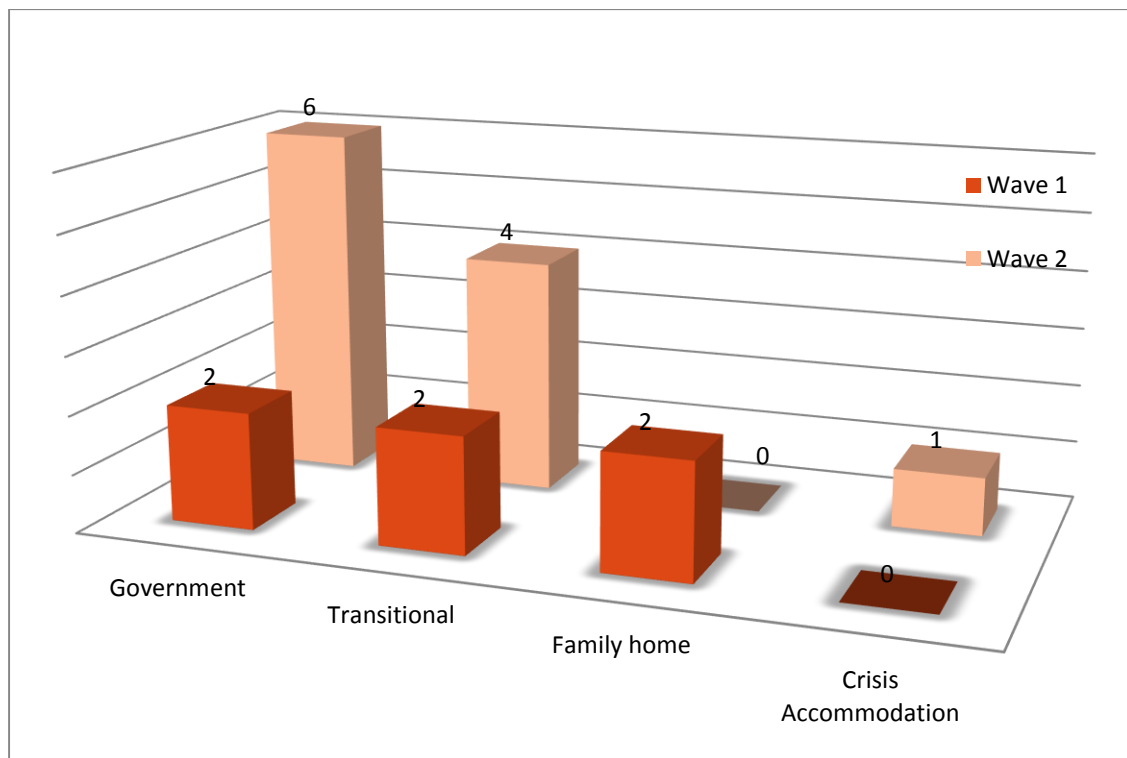
**Figure 1: Participants' current family structures\***



\*Figures include both Wave I and Wave II data collated.

The children and young people who participated in this initiative experienced homelessness and disrupted housing in a range of ways. It was reported that many children witnessed as well as experienced family violence including physical, psychological and verbal violence. Nine participants from Wave II alone experienced and/or witnessed various levels of family violence. Thus, family violence was often (but not in all cases) reported to be the primary reason for such experiences of homelessness. That is, children often fled the family home (usually with the mother) to prevent further abuse and exposure to drug and/or substance effected caregivers. Approximately, four participants reported to have been exposed to drug and/or substance abuse within the family home. Two participants from Wave II were reportedly born with drug dependency issues, for which they were hospitalised at birth. Children and young people who participated in the program often spent considerable time in temporary living arrangements, moving between multiple housing/accommodation settings including, refugee camps, refuges, hotels, friends' homes, private rentals, crisis accommodation, transitional housing and government housing. Many children had lived in such conditions since birth, including being born whilst their mother was residing in crisis accommodation. One young participant had experienced living in a refuge, followed by multiple short stays in hotel rooms before being placed in transitional housing. Similarly, a pre-school aged participant had moved between four transitional and government housing properties at the time of the assessment. These experiences of unstable and inconsistent housing were shared by the majority of the children and young people participating in the program (see Figure 2 for details on housing type for participants).

**Figure 2: Participants' current housing type for Wave I and Wave II**



Apart from experiencing unstable housing, living arrangements were often over-populated, with some parents reporting limited availability of child friendly spaces for play and to complete homework. For instance, in numerous cases it was reported that six or seven individuals (ranging in age) were living together in transitional housing. In their study of homeless families in Ireland, Keogh et al. (2006) found that overcrowding and limited living space had a number of negative consequences for children and their educational outcomes, including increased health concerns, difficulty in establishing and keeping daily routines, inability to get sufficient sleep (due to multiple people sleeping in one room) and free play areas.

Young people in this project also experienced a range of social and emotional difficulties as a result of unstable living conditions. A number of current participants reported exhibiting some signs of psychological and emotional problems, such as sleeping difficulties, aggressive behaviour, toileting issues, social withdrawal and other mental health concerns such as severe anxiety, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, panic attacks and phobias. This is consistent with research that has shown that children and young people experiencing homelessness are at greater risk of a number of psychological and emotional problems including anxiety, depression, social isolation, low self-esteem and developmental delays (Hinton & Cassel, 2013; Keys, 2009; Murphy & Tobin, 2011).

# CASE STUDY 1: SIMON

Simon is 11 years of age and is currently repeating Grade 2 at his local primary school. This is Simon's third primary school to date. Simon and his family have been experiencing homelessness for the last 18 months because he had to flee the family home with his siblings as his father had been hitting his mother Katherine. Now Simon is living with his mother, two older brothers and his younger sister in transitional housing.

Katherine's relationship with her children's father has been both physically and psychologically abusive for a number of years. Simon and his siblings often witnessed severe family violence and were also victims of verbal and psychological violence. Although his father never physically hit Simon his older brothers often were hit, as they would try to protect their mother. Simon was scared of his father and is happy to no longer see him. But he does miss his old house, the friends he used to have next door and especially his dog Toby.

After leaving the family home, the family spent time in crisis accommodation, followed by a number of stays in various transitional housing locations across Melbourne. The house that the family currently lives in is small and Simon shares a room with his older brothers. He doesn't mind sharing a room with them because they make him feel safe. Simon has always had trouble sleeping (especially when his parents were fighting) but since leaving his family house he has been having nightmares. Katherine is worried about Simon because she feels that he has become more reserved and anxious and has lost interest in playing video games and other activities he once loved.

This instability in the family's living arrangements has required Simon and his siblings to move schools three times in the last two years. This has resulted in extensive lost learning time for Simon who is now repeating Grade 2. Simon did not mind going to school but now he wants to stay home more. Simon does not like maths and reading but enjoys music class. His teachers have reported that he is a very quiet and polite student in the classroom but has trouble focusing and does not interact well with his peers. Simon's school attendance was very poor at his previous school (less than 20%) and Katherine really did not like the punitive approach the teachers at his previous school took with his attendance. Katherine did not feel comfortable confiding in the school principal about the family's situation and therefore she admits that was not very motivated to get Simon to school. Since moving to his new school, Katherine has been trying to get Simon to school more often and on time. The mornings are hard for Simon and he often does not want to go to school, some mornings Katherine needs to dress him to get him there on time. However, both he and Katherine really like his new teachers and they have been helpful in assisting Simon in class. Katherine is hoping that by being at this new school Simon will eventually make friends and start to enjoy school again.

## 5. EVALUATION FINDINGS

### 5.1 Consequences of homelessness and family violence on young peoples' educational experiences

Consistent with the previous research (for example, Fantuzzo et al., 2012), the experiences of homelessness and family violence described are considered to have negatively contributed to participants' educational experiences and overall learning and progression in a number of ways.

#### 5.1.1 Attendance

For many participants very poor to moderate attendance was reported by teachers. It was apparent in the findings that parents often over estimated their child's school attendance. For instance, while some were reported to have a high attendance rate (between 70-100%), many teachers reported low rates of attendance, including less than 10% in one case. In Wave II, two participants were completely disengaged from school at the time of the assessment. Including one young person, who after attending five different primary schools, continues to be completely disengaged from secondary schooling and has been for a number of years. It has been acknowledged that difficulty in sustaining regular school attendance is unfortunately common for families and children experiencing homelessness (Keogh et al., 2006; Moore & McArthur, 2011). For some younger participants, parents also highlighted signs of school refusal including difficulty in getting their child ready for school.

Apart from impacting on learning, poor school attendance could also contribute to lack of established routine. For children experiencing homelessness, schools can be a stabilising influence as well as providing them with an increased sense of belonging (Moore & McArthur, 2011). That is, the routines instilled by regular school attendance can act as "a counterbalance to the instability and disruption being homeless can cause" (Moore & McArthur, 2011, p.147). In a qualitative study of children and young peoples' experiences of homelessness in Australia, Moore and McArthur (2011) found that participants highly valued their schooling as it provided them with stability, opportunities to interact with peers and importantly "it provided them with a sense of normality" (p.154). The level of connectedness a child or young person has to their school is considered to be an essential factor in their wellbeing, including social and educational outcomes (Waters, Cross, & Shaw 2010, cited in Moore & McArthur, 2011).

#### 5.1.2 School disruption

Furthermore, children and young people who participated in the SFYS program were reported to have experienced school disruption, with many participants having attended multiple schools within a short period of time. For instance, one primary school aged participant had (to date) attended four schools within their first few years of schooling due to changes in housing. While a high school aged participant reportedly had attended six different schools (to date) within a three-year period due to homelessness and educational disengagement. Such changes may further exacerbate lost learning time, confidence within the learning environment and instability. Previous research has estimated that each school move effectively delays a

child's educational progression by four to six months (Murphy & Tobin; Wynne & Ausikaitis, 2013). Thus, the cumulative impact of frequent school moves would be significant for participants' educational outcomes, including their ability to successfully perform at the same level as their peers once settled within the learning context.

### **5.1.3 Social skills and peer connections**

For a number of children and young people, teachers and parents raised concerns regarding their social skills and ability to develop friendships with peers. Many teachers and parents reported that children or young people had no known friends. Issues related to homelessness and more specifically school mobility, have been found to impact children's ability to develop and maintain positive friendships and peer relationship (Fantuzzo et al., 2012; Moore & McArthur, 2011). Further to this, throughout the pre-assessment and assessment interviews with parents there was no mention of children and/or young people being involved in any extra-curricular activities. It is understandable that limited financial resources and lack of stability would inhibit opportunities for children and young people experiencing homelessness to partake in such extra-curricular activities (Moore & McArthur, 2011). However, it is suggested that this may also contribute to participants' limited social skills exhibited within the educational context.

### **5.1.4 Educational achievement, engagement and progression**

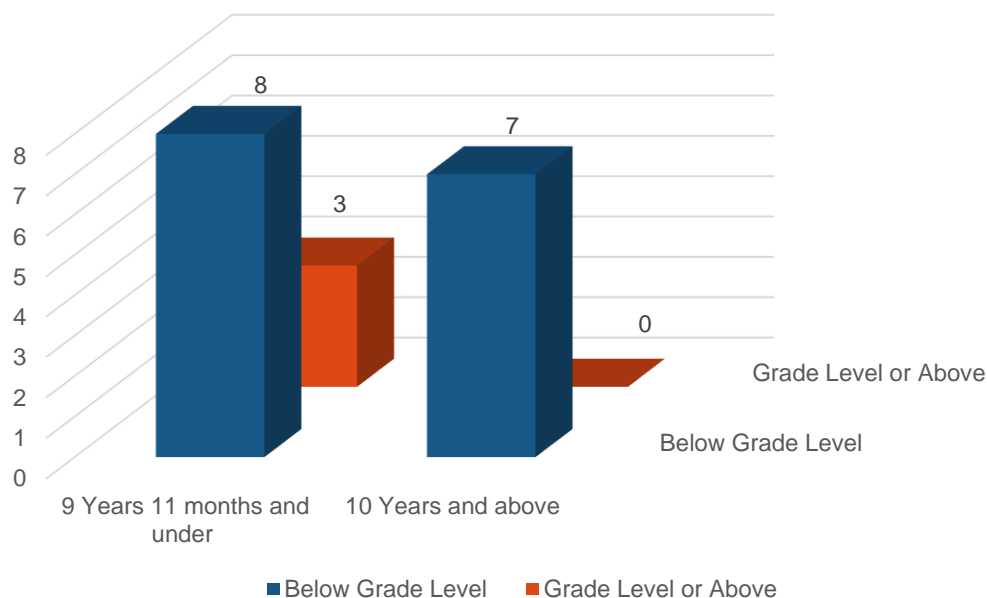
In regards to students' performance on tests of cognitive development and achievement, these findings highlight the difficult living circumstances these young people are currently in and the impact of cumulative disadvantage on their educational experiences and progression. That is, homelessness is only one aspect of disadvantage experienced by young people in this intervention. Rather, for many participants these cumulative factors include homelessness, family violence, school mobility and absenteeism together with psychological, social and behavioural issues. Thus, it is the compounding effects of repeated family violence, school mobility, poor school attendance and decreased wellbeing that make it very difficult for young people to reach their educational targets. The significance of educational disruption, homelessness, family circumstances and experiences of stress on participants' achievement was highlighted during the assessment process for a number of cases. For instance, one primary school aged participant although he/she does not demonstrate any significant cognitive deficit, is performing significantly lower than expected (based on his/her age and cognitive functioning) in a number of areas, such as reading comprehension, numerical operations and spelling. This participant has a history of homelessness and unstable housing, family violence, mental health issues, sleeping difficulties, school mobility, poor school attendance and signs of school refusal were being demonstrated at the time of the assessment. Thus, it is evident that not just homelessness alone has contributed to his/her low academic achievement and ability to catch up to his/her peers, but a number of compounding factors. In his/her psychological assessment report it was also alluded to the possibility of his/her past life experiences hampering his/her ability to concentrate and absorb information in the classroom.

In regards to learning delays and/or presence of intellectual disability, majority of young people were not considered to have significant disabilities, however, were often placed within borderline, below average or average ranges on test of intelligence and achievement. As a result of the psychological assessment, four

participants in total had applications submitted for further assistance under the Program for Students with Disabilities (Intellectual Disability). One of these participants had previously qualified for this assistance, however moved schools prior to being informed, effectively going without assistance for a further 18 months. This signifies the challenges that children experiencing homelessness endure due to school mobility and how it impedes on their ability to progress at the rate of their peers. In addition, as a result of the psychological assessment, one participant was found to be eligible to apply for the Program for Students with Disabilities (Severe Behaviour Disorder).

Despite the absence of intellectual disability among majority of the participant cohort, in general poor school attendance often resulted in children and young people missing important learning concepts and assessments, which would presumably impact their successful academic progression. Deficits in particular skill areas such as reading comprehension, written expression and numerical operations to name a few were common across the participant group. This is consistent with previous research that has found that homeless children often exhibit lower reading and maths scores than their peers (Fantuzzo et al., 2012), and overall perform below grade level expectations (Murphy, 2011). The majority of current participants were also reported to be performing significantly below grade level (and age) expectations. This was particularly evident for older participants, pointing to the cumulative effect extensive experiences of homelessness, school mobility and absence can have on a young person's long-term educational progression and success.

**Figure 3: Students' grade level performance (Wave I and Wave II)\***



\*Participants were considered to be performing below grade level if year-based equivalency was found to be below expectations on four or more WIAT-II subtests.



Previous research also points to the increased likelihood of homeless children and young people displaying significant behavioural problems as well as reduced task focus and social engagement within the classroom (Fantuzzo et al., 2012). Likewise, teachers reported that students displayed a number of behavioural issues including disruptive behaviour in class. Also, in the majority of cases, teachers reported that children and young people demonstrated limited attention and task focus and inability to work independently. Parents often supported such teacher observations.

Overall, it is clear that current participants' educational achievement and overall engagement in schooling have been impacted by a number of combined factors that speak to the underlying issues of intergenerational poverty and the cyclical nature of educational disadvantage. It is vital not to overlook that experiences of domestic violence and homelessness need to first be addressed (or simultaneously addressed) when designing interventions aimed at assisting children achieve positive educational outcomes. This is particularly significant for those children and young people who do not formally qualify for educational assistance and funding.

## **5.2 Connecting young people to education: Parents and teachers use of assessment results in school and home contexts**

In general, from the follow up interviews, parents and teachers accepted all the assessment results and recommendations outlined by the psychologist. For the most part, such recommendations were successfully implemented both within the school and home context, supporting the young person's reengagement with education. Again consistency in responses, routines and behaviour management approaches across school and home are essential for children's wellbeing and security— especially those having experienced high levels of instability due to homelessness and family violence. Parents' comments indicated that they were highly receptive to the assessment results and perceived this intervention as a highly valuable experience. Parents' positive engagement and responsiveness to the program is vital for children and young people's educational progression and achievement. Children and young people experiencing homelessness are often reported to receive limited parental support with regard to learning and homework, due to the number of personal stressors parents are managing (Fantuzzo et al., 2012; Moore & McArthur, 2011). Positive application of the assessment results included targeted responses for educational assistance and support and improved communication between the school, young person and their parent/caregiver.

### **5.2.1 Targeted responses for educational assistance and support**

As a result of the assessments conducted, parents/caregivers and teachers were more informed about the young person's particular strengths and weakness. Furthermore, the assessment provided clear recommendations to be implemented in the classroom as well as at home to assist in engaging the young person in learning and how to best achieve positive academic, social and behavioural outcomes for the participant. However, it is often the case that due to school interruption and mobility, children experiencing homelessness often miss out on vital educational and cognitive assessments and as a result do not access sufficient services (Murphy, 2011). Thus, the assessment process itself has potential benefits for the current participants, along with the more targeted responses and approaches implemented by teachers and parents



as a result of the assessment. This process is also essential for obtaining additional support needed for some children or young people who have an identified disability (intellectual and/or behavioural), which has positive implications for these participants' educational progression. Other recommendations and interventions actioned included but not limited to, private tutoring, counselling, further assessments, instructions around discipline and specific teaching strategies. As a result of the assessment many parents commented that they felt more informed about their child's needs as well as feeling that teaching staff were more responsive to such needs.

### **5.2.2 Improved communication between parents and teachers**

From the pre-assessment to the follow-up interviews, it was evident that the assessment process has led to increased communication between teachers and parents/caregivers. The school environment can often be a challenging context for parents experiencing homelessness to enter and operate within. However, the SFYS program in many cases effectively assisted in breaking down such barriers for caregivers. From the pre-assessment interviews/questionnaires there were clear discrepancies between teachers' and parents' assessment of the young person's school attendance as well as overall engagement with learning and peer connectedness. Prior to participating in the program (in particular the feedback sessions) parents were often unaware of how behind children's educational development was as a result of missed learning time.

Furthermore, in the pre-assessment questionnaires, teachers often indicated that there was a learning and wellbeing plan in place for the student. However, parents were seldom aware of these plans being in place for their child. This lack of shared knowledge about children/young people's situation at school brings into question the lines of communication between school staff and the parent/caregiver prior to the assessment. However, as a result of the assessment and feedback session with all stakeholders (child, parent and teacher) signs of improvement in communication were evident, providing much needed support for students. For example, in the follow up interviews with parents and teachers, discrepancies between teacher and parent evaluations of children's attendance and progress were reduced. Parents also commented that they were more aware of what was happening in class and were in contact more frequently with teachers. One parent explained how she had been invited into the classroom since the feedback session, while another nominated the feedback session as the catalyst for starting the conversation between her and the school. Many caregivers also expressed that as a result of the post-assessment feedback they felt more confident that the school was supporting their children and understood their needs.

The assessment process also highlighted some possible issues around the way student information and assessment results were communicated amongst teaching staff. For instance, there were times that assessment information and feedback was given to the principal (or other senior staff) but not the primary classroom teacher. Also, information was not seemingly well passed on to new members of teaching staff and the way or when information was passed onto relevant specialist teachers was inconsistent. Thus, it is essential that all necessary teaching staff is well informed and the knowledge sharing procedures around student needs be well established.

## CASE STUDY 2: CARA

Cara is 14 years of age and is currently disengaged from schooling. She currently resides in government housing with her mother Anita, her sister and their Grandmother. Cara has experienced unstable housing for majority of her life. Anita gave birth to Cara whilst residing in crisis accommodation when she left Cara's father due to domestic violence. Cara has never had contact with her father but recognises her sister's father as her own. During her childhood Cara spent time living with family members and then in foster care due to exposure to drug abuse and family violence. Anita states that she was a happy baby when she was in her care and satisfied all developmental milestones. However, it was reported that Cara did have issues with bed wetting in late childhood and was described as an anxious child. Cara and her sister have been back in Anita's care for the last two years since Cara's stepfather was incarcerated and Anita has addressed her own substance abuse issues. In the last two years, the family have moved from a short stay in a private rental to two transitional housing properties before moving into a Government housing property along with Anita's mother. Cara is happy to have her Grandmother living with them.

Due to experiences of homelessness and housing mobility Cara has previously attended six primary schools. This school mobility and infrequent attendance has significantly affected Cara's learning and educational progression. She repeated Grade 5 but successfully completed Grade 6. Cara started Year 7 at a local high school but had difficulty completing the work. When she was forced to move to a new high school due to moving house, she decided she no longer wanted to go to school. Cara has been disengaged from school for approximately the last 20 months and has been advised that she may need to repeat Year 7. Cara does not want to be older than everyone else in her class. Anita has tried to encourage her to return to school but she refuses. Cara has no known friends but does get along well with her sister. Anita and Cara's relationship is strained. Anita feels that she has a lot of anger towards her and she does have trouble appropriately disciplining her. Cara has at times had difficulty regulating her emotions often "losing her temper" primarily with Anita. Cara has low self-esteem and can be withdrawn at times not wanting to leave the house. She also been diagnosed with anxiety and depression but Anita does not want her to be medicated and Cara is not willing to see a psychologist.

Cara reluctantly agreed to complete some cognitive testing to assist with educational re-engagement. Cara was not found to have any intellectual or behavioural disabilities although she is performing cognitively within a borderline range. The impact of her cumulative lost learning time is evident when considering her achievement scores for particular skills, which are well below her age/grade expectations. For instance, Cara is reported to be performing at Grade 2 level for maths reasoning and numerical operations, at a Grade 4 level for reading comprehension and Grade 5 level for oral expression.

### 5.3 Young people's progression as a result of the program

Young people's educational progression and outcomes as a result of the program are relatively mixed. That is, the follow up interviews with teachers and parents indicate young people have demonstrated areas of improvement or at least promising signs of improvement, while little progress has been exhibited in other areas. Also, in many cases parents were notably more optimistic about their child's progression than teacher's assessment of student progress as a result of the program. However, this intervention was rolled out over a relatively short time frame, which is essential due to the mobility of the students and their families, however, a longitudinal study of this cohort would provide invaluable information about this program as a 'critical intervention' over time and show how it specifically influences the lives of children/young people.

#### 5.3.1 Improved attendance

One such area of promise is in student attendance rates. Following the assessment and implementation of recommendations, a number of teachers reported improved attendance and educational engagement. In one case, a teacher reported student attendance improving from approximately 70% to 100% attendance, while in another case student attendance improved from 60% to 90% attendance.

For some children and young people, there were notable improvements reported by parents and teachers with regard to specific skill areas rather than wide spread development and achievement. For instance, one parent reported that their child was now starting to like learning more and had made improvements in reading and was receiving an award for his achievements. This also resulted in the student feeling proud of his achievements, making important gains in terms of self-confidence and motivation. Another parent reported that after the assessment, her pre-school aged child was doing well and demonstrated signs of engagement, including starting to read and talk about homework. However, progress was not as evident in other cases. One teacher reported that despite the strategies put in place after the assessment process, the child had not demonstrated any improvement in task engagement and learning. Parents and teachers reported some progression with regard to children's social skills and ability to connect with peers, however were seemingly less optimistic than when commenting on areas of academic skills.

Thus, based on the follow up reports from teachers and parents it is evident that participation in the SFYS program had positive impacts on many participants' educational experience at least in the short-term. The long-term impact of such progression is unknown at this stage or what impacts further changes in housing and schooling environment may have on these young people and their educational progress. Furthermore, despite participation in the program there were also reports of limited progression for some students. It is important to keep in mind that at the time of follow up, some recommendations were still to be fully implemented such as at home tutoring, follow up paediatric appointments and counselling. Therefore, evaluation of participant progress may be premature in some cases. Thus, the true impact of the program and recommendations actioned may have yet to be realised.

The follow up reports with teachers and parents seldom reported on the progression young people were or were not making in other behaviours of concern and their overall wellbeing. Despite these being raised in the assessment process and recommendations commonly made to assist with wellbeing and behavioural concerns. As outlined above, for children experiencing homelessness a number of compounded risks including poor social and emotional wellbeing have significant impacts on their educational experiences. Thus, it would be essential to also monitor young peoples' progression outside of traditional academic skill sets.

## 6. CONCLUSIONS

The findings from this evaluation provide strong evidence for the continuation of this initiative, revealing a multitude of benefits for children/young peoples' education in terms of providing immediate knowledge, resources and support to both their families and schools. This section draws out the conclusions of the findings, taking into account individual gains, but also broadening the focus to consider the contributions of the program, the approach and underpinning values.

### 6.1 Rebuilding connections: A relational approach

One of the most detrimental aspects for families experiencing domestic violence and/or homelessness is the loss of social support and networks for parents and their children. For example, Raikes and Thompson (2005) note that isolation and meaningful social connection are major issues for parents experiencing homelessness and family violence. Loss of networks and relationships with those in the school and the community erodes the resources and social support available to these families. One of the main strengths of this intervention was the education 'network' formed between the parent, young person, teacher (and other school staff) and the psychologist, breaking down barriers of isolation, stigma and developing strategies that span across the home and school contexts. Social networks provide important opportunities for parents to share ideas and resources, with high mobility and changing schools often, there are fewer opportunities to develop contexts for feedback, sharing and help. This intervention created a space for this crucial exchange of information and the implementation of educational strategies and routines, which were facilitated through a professional over a period of time. Such exchanges of knowledge and the co-development of strategies for the child/young person's education is a capacity-building process for parents. Swick (2009) notes that parent education approaches can be an empowering when implemented appropriately, particularly when negative judgements are checked at the door in favour of a strengths-based approach. In addition to the knowledge sharing between teachers and parents, the psychologist provided support through modelling (i.e., strategies such as assisting with homework), offering an important channel of social learning for parents.

### 6.2 Bridging multiple contexts: An ecological approach to intervention for children/young people experiencing homelessness and domestic violence

There has been a multitude of approaches developed to improve the educational trajectories of children and young people experiencing homelessness and domestic violence. Often interventions are carried out solely in the school context or through a community program working exclusively with parents or children. Working with families should be a major priority for schools and service providers. Similarly, bridging contexts has also been a feature of successful programs (Corner, 1980; Holt, Buckley, & Whelan, 2008). Research has highlighted the importance of reducing separation of "academic from social, moral, and emotional development", requiring the school, family and community to share a common focus and approach to education, which involves a focus on care and mutually reinforcing messages to children and young people (Crowson & Boyd, 1993, p.147). This current intervention created continuity between teachers/school staff and parents, while providing access to a specialised community support program (Hanover, now Launch

Housing) to ensure urgent issues related to homelessness and domestic violence were being addressed. Working at the individual and familial levels, while also addressing bureaucratic barriers in the school system such as delays in testing and the time it takes to implement assistance if the application is successful.

### **6.2.1 Individual and family benefits**

In summary, the intervention produced a number of positive outcomes for young people's educational progression and experience. For instance:

- Improved student school attendance rates were reported by both teachers and parents/caregivers.
- Increases in student engagement with learning were observed.
- It was reported that children/young people gained self-confidence in particular skills areas (reading, maths, etc.)
- Students and parents/caregivers reported increased satisfaction and connection to the learning environments. Improvements in students' social skills and peer relations were also reported in some cases, however this area may require some further attention.
- Importantly, it was evident that the intervention increased parent/caregiver knowledge and capacity to support young person's educational progression and engagement.
- Increased parent/caregiver communication and co-ordinated support strategies with the school were demonstrated as a result of participation in the program.

### **6.2.2 School benefits**

In addition to the individual level benefits for students and their parents/caregivers, it was evident that the intervention also resulted in positive implications at the broader school level. That is, the following benefits were noted:

- The intervention provides an immediate educational profile of the child/young person for school staff including, the students' strengths and weaknesses as well as recommendations regarding learning strategies and behaviour management.
- Assists in obtaining classroom support for eligible students in a shorter period of time.
- Builds teachers' capacity to understand students' support needs and develop an awareness about the issues faced by young people who have experienced domestic violence and/or homelessness.

## **6.3 Partnerships and interagency collaboration at the local level**

In the current social and political environment there has been a tightening on funds given to children and young people in need of educational support. This constricting has seen the rise of partnership and interagency collaboration as one way of plugging the gaps in the education system. This program is an excellent example of such an approach, which pools resources and identifies assistance needs for the most vulnerable children and young people. This intervention works with a small cohort and is quite resource

intensive, making it successful at a local level. However, collaborations between local schools, agencies and families cannot be the panacea for complex issues, which have much deeper roots in societal structures that perpetuate inequality. While not in the scope of this project, it is clear from the research that policy makers must consider a preventative approach in order to circumvent interventions only at 'crisis points' when the task of closing the educational gap for children and young people is much more difficult.

This research identified a number of ways in which bureaucratic processes undermine educational support being put in place for children and young people in this project. For example, a few children/young people in this program had been on state waiting lists for psychological and cognitive assessment for years. Each time a parent flees family violence or is relocated and reenrols a child in a different school, the application process is reinitiated. Due to the transient conditions experienced by these families, it is highly unlikely they will be in the same location long enough to benefit from the in-classroom assistance which is implemented 12 to 18 months after the application has been submitted. Some research has documented approaches that aim to at least keep a consistent track of these young people using a database. Otherwise there is a reliance on individuals in schools passing on student records to the next school, something that often does not occur.





## 7. RECOMMENDATIONS

The key message from this research is that the SFYS initiative provided by Launch Housing's program HCSSS – Educational Assessments, is an intervention that provides vital educational support to children/young people who have experienced domestic violence and/or homelessness. This service works with one of the most vulnerable cohorts of young people and their families to ensure they have access to educational assessments, which are essential to developing targeted strategies across school and home contexts to improve their educational outcomes. Given the wide range of benefits provided to young people and their families, it is recommended that this program be re-funded and should maintain its current model, taking into consideration the following recommendations:

8. To continue funding the HCSSS program– Educational Assessments stream as it is currently being offered through Launch Housing and to maintain the support of current partners if possible (i.e., local councils and local schools).
9. To continue and build upon the strong bridging work that is taking place between schools and community agencies in improving education outcomes for young people experiencing domestic violence and/or homelessness.
  - Maintain the relational approach and focus of the program, which establishes essential connections between teachers, parents and children/young people.
10. To continue to monitor and develop strategies for young people outside traditional academic skill sets, including social connectedness and emotional gains.
11. To ensure school staff continue to be well informed and share knowledge by formalising a system/ process that allows for students' changing circumstances to be monitored.
  - Formal processes may also involve communication with community services (Launch Housing) if the child/young person has left the school so that the assessment and school reporting can be sent to the child's next school.
12. As implemented in Wave II, continue to provide additional information/ mentoring/ modelling sessions with teachers and parents (between pre and post assessment) for specific ways to apply the psychologist's recommendations.

13. To consider expanding the program with a place-based focus in which sessions or additional activities are held with children/young and parents/caregivers residing in Housing Commissioned properties. This could include educational sessions for parents (i.e., on how to give homework help, modelling reading strategies) or a homework club for young people.
14. To continue research into the program to track progress and developments of child/young people, as in some cases it was premature to determine the true impact of implemented recommendations at the time of post-assessment. Rather, a more longitudinal approach would benefit the program. Being able to document the impact of the program across a longer timeframe would show how the educational trajectory for children and young people might change after the assessment process. It may also highlight the need for additional responses to working with this cohort.

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