EVALUATION REPORT

'No child misses out': Education Pathways Program

JUNE 2019

Launch Housing

Launch Housing is a Melbourne based, secular and independent community agency formed in 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, employment and other specialist services to thousands of people from 14 sites across the Melbourne metropolitan area. Launch Housing also drives social policy change, advocacy, research and innovation.

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Executive Summary

This report documents an evaluation of the Education Pathways Program, completed in the latter part of 2018 by Launch Housing's Research and Service Sector Reform team. The central question explored in the evaluation was: *did the program achieve its objective to improve children's engagement with education?* The evaluation focus was on the outcomes related to school enrolment and attendance, which are central to improving school engagement.

The Education Pathways Program operates from the premise that homelessness is harmful to children's development and is especially damaging for their participation in education. Generally, children experiencing homelessness face multiple forms of disadvantage including: increased exposure to family violence, poverty, poor health and nutrition, and emotional and behavioural difficulties. Transience and uncertainty mean that access to education is severely disrupted, leading to disengagement and learning difficulties. This has the potential to severely impact on the future health and wellbeing of children by exposing them to increased risk of entrenched poverty, long-term physical and mental health difficulties, and social and economic exclusion.

Overall, the evidence shows that the Education Pathways Program has delivered tangible and effective outcomes for primary school-aged children up to 12 years of age experiencing homelessness. The Education Pathways Program achieved other positive outcomes for children who were disengaged from primary school. The evidence in this report corroborates a large body of literature that shows the devastating impact of homelessness and family violence for children.

Importantly, the findings highlight the value of the Education Pathways Program, which is especially relevant in the context of the Victorian Government's Education State, a key policy platform emphasising the State government's commitment to the provision of quality education for all.

An important focus of the Education State is to break the link between disadvantage and poor educational outcomes. Ultimately, housing, particularly a safe and stable home, is essential to ensuring the healthy development and wellbeing of children:

> While they are experiencing homelessness, however, it is essential that children remain in school. School is one of the few stable, secure places in the lives of homeless children and youth - a place where they can acquire the skills needed to help them escape poverty.[1]

The evaluation concludes that the Education Pathways Program is a quality child-focused innovative program with a deep and abiding commitment to children and strives to ensure that 'no child misses out'. Since October 2015, the program has assisted 372 clients, including 265 children who were supported to access and re-engage with mainstream education.

Evaluation

The evaluation explored the effectiveness of the Education Pathways Program (hereon EPP) for families, with a focus on what objectives were achieved by the EPP between October 2015 and June 2018. Specifically, did the program improve children's engagement with education; what impact did the program have for parents; and what was the role of schools? Also, what are the strengths, challenges and suggested improvements for the EPP?

The evaluation findings have been informed by the analysis of pre-existing data from multiple sources, including program documents and administrative files. The evaluation evidence is enriched by the extensive insight provided by EPP staff, collected via interviews or self-completed surveys.

It is important to note that this evaluation purposely did not obtain information directly from children and their parents participating in the EPP. It is anticipated that further evaluations of the program will conduct interviews, subjected to research ethics approval, with program participants and draw on their experiences and insights.

Key Findings

Profile of children

Between October 2015 and June 2018, a total of 187 children were supported by the EPP. Ages ranged from three years to 16 years but the vast majority (164 children) were primary school children, aged between five and 12 years. Around half the children (n=80) were born in Australia, but most (n=89) were born overseas, mostly in non-English speaking countries.

All the children along with 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 included 25% (46 children) who had experienced both family violence and child protection involvement. All struggled financially and relied on either the Newstart Allowance or the Parenting Payment.

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1   www.nationalhomeless.org/publications/facts/education.html

Extent of children's educational disadvantage

Educational development is an important foundation for children's overall health and wellbeing, and future opportunities to contribute to and participate in society. School enrolment and attendance are the basic requirements to participating in education. Regular attendance in primary school enables children to acquire the skills necessary for cognitive and social development, and health outcomes.[2] The broader research shows how disruptions to education can lead to poor educational attainment, which can affect future employment prospects and wellbeing.

The extent of educational disadvantage reported among this group of children is substantial. 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).

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 with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties. Worryingly, these children were typically many years behind their peers.

Children's engagement with school

Engagement was facilitated by increasing 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 125 children (79%) at the local primary school. All 125 children enrolled over the 2015-2018 period attended school regularly.

To ensure the children attended school, EPP workers used the 'walking school bus' approach whereby staff physically accompanied the children to school each day. This provided a great opportunity for children to interact socially with each other, and with EPP Workers.

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). If available for the other children, this funding would have provided targeted support for these students, including vital access to teacher's aides. 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.

While the State Government's commitment to quality and inclusive education is illustrated in the Education State reforms, one of the programs (LOOKOUT) focused on providing educational and financial support to disadvantaged students, is limited to children and young people in state care. There is seemingly no mention of children who are experiencing homeless. For some of these children, the EPP is one of the very few programs in the specialist homelessness sector dedicated to the provision of much needed educational support, including financial assistance

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2   Galina Daraganova (2012), Is it OK to be away? School attendance in the primary school years, LSAC Annual Statistical Report, Australian Institute of Family Studies. Melbourne.

While the longer-term impact of the EPP on the lives of the children, and their parents, is yet to be determined, the current evidence suggests that without the EPP, the trajectory for too many of the children is highly likely to be a lifetime of hardship and social and economic exclusion.[3]

Support for parents is important

It is readily acknowledged that positive parent-child relationship is fundamental to children's healthy development. But the stresses of homelessness and family violence can overwhelm and adversely affect parents' abilities to care for and nurture their children. Daily survival and the requirements of the service system, such as the need to search for private rental properties, are stressful and time-consuming.

The underlying philosophy of the EPP is 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, by enrolling and physically getting the children to school each day, was significant for the parents. It had the immediate effect of reducing the excessive stress that overwhelmed parents as a result of their families' homelessness.

Indeed, reducing parental stress is one of three key principles emphasised by international researchers as a critical means to improve family outcomes:

'The science of child development and the core capabilities of adults point to a set of "design principles" that policymakers and practitioners in many different sectors can use to improve outcomes for children and families. That is, to be maximally effective, policies and services should:

1. Support responsive relationships for children and adults;
2. Strengthen core life skills; and
3. Reduce sources of stress in the lives of children and families'.[4]

School relationships matter

Collaborations with schools and, building capacity of schools to better understand homelessness and its impact for students, are an essential component of the EPP. The strong partnership with the main local primary school ensured access to education for the children.

Workers from the EPP had a daily presence at the school each morning after accompanying the children with the walking school bus. This provided an opportunity for the EPP to share information with teachers, or answer their queries or concerns on how the children were settling in. The school relied on this support from the EPP workers, especially given how many children at their school were experiencing homelessness and had been traumatised by family violence.

3   Deborah A. Cobb-Clark and Anna Zhu (2015). 'Childhood Homelessness and Adult Employment: The Role of Education, Incarceration, and Welfare Receipt', Melbourne Institute Working Paper No. 18/15, September.

4   Centre on the Developing Child at Harvard University (2017). Three Principles to Improve Outcomes for Children and Families. Access at: http://www.developingchild.harvard.edu

The EPP helped to enhance an understanding of homelessness and family violence by teachers and principals, enabling them to better engage with the families. EPP workers reported that this resulted in parents feeling more valued and accepted. Consequently, children are more likely to have a more positive school experience which encouraged ongoing engagement.

Initially, the EPP had planned to do a number of presentations with as many schools as required to increase knowledge and understanding of homelessness and family violence. But the list of new schools that students had transitioned to was extensive; presentations at each of these new schools was simply not feasible given the limited resources. Nevertheless, communication remained a central goal. So new schools were informed, within applicable privacy requirements, about the context and particular circumstances of each new student, along with detailed assessments of their educational development and learning needs.

Key challenges:

Limited funding and capacity:

- Time-limited funding may not continue beyond any given financial year; this makes it difficult for the EPP to confidently offer supports in a consistent and ongoing way, and to be able to increase its capacity by employing more full-time staff;
- It limits the scale of the program so it cannot reach more of the many children experiencing homelessness[5] who are vulnerable to falling through the gaps of the education system. It is evident that the numbers of children supported by the EPP represent the 'tip of the iceberg'; and
- It was reported that important work on capacity building with parents and with schools was not fully implemented, due to the lack staff, time and funding.

System issues:

- The broader homelessness system is adult-focused, with many services and interventions designed primarily to respond to the needs of adult clients. This runs the risk that the specific needs of children and adults, as parents, are overshadowed or inadvertently undermined.
- Rules around evictions within the homelessness system especially for the payment of rent need to be balanced with the requirements to provide safe and stable accommodation for children. Whilst rare, evictions for one program participant for non-payment of rent was reported.
- The challenge for the EPP is to increase awareness and understanding in the broader homelessness system to ensure that services respond to the holistic needs of families, including the specific educational, health and welfare needs of children.

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5   AIHW Specialist Homelessness Services Annual Report, 2017-18, Data Tables, National https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/homelessness-services/specialist-homelessness-services-2017-18/data

RECOMMENDATIONS

System level

- Government policies must recognise children experiencing homelessness as a unique group that require tailored and intensive support to overcome significant educational disadvantage.
- The relevant Commonwealth department and the State Department of Education and Training should invest in the expansion of the EPP model.
- Consistent, year-round funding to schools is needed to support children experiencing homelessness who are enrolled after the school Census date.
- The education and other support needs of children experiencing homelessness must be properly tracked to minimise the risk of them falling through gaps in the service system, including a detailed intake and assessment process.
- There is a dire need for more safe and appropriate housing paired with ongoing educational support for children experiencing homelessness.
- Questions on school enrolment and attendance be included in intake and assessment processes, with education needs stipulated as specific goals in support plans for each child experiencing homelessness.
- Promotion of the EPP across the homelessness service sector to raise awareness and understanding of the impact and extent of educational disadvantage for children, to improve the service response.
- Alternate strategies to eviction continue to be developed with the view of balancing the need for rent payments and the need of children and their parents for secure and stable accommodation.

Program level

- Assertive outreach be expanded to reach out to children experiencing homelessness and at risk of not attending school, who may be accommodated in a range of short-stay motels/hotels.
- Dedicated Education Worker role be appointed to strengthen partnerships between homelessness services and local primary schools, and
  - To engage and work with a range of new schools that students move to, and
  - To monitor the progress and circumstances of those students.
- Given the significance of phonics to language comprehension and literacy skills, a speech pathologist should be appointed in a permanent ongoing capacity.

Data/Research

- Data collection processes be improved and simplified in consultation with data and research teams to capture children as individual clients, including their education status, history and support needs.
- The voices of children and parents be included in subsequent evaluations of the EPP.
- Development of a longitudinal research project that investigates the longer-term impact of the EPP on children's educational, health and wellbeing outcomes, and the trajectory of their lives more broadly.

1. Introduction

This report documents the findings from the evaluation of the Education Pathways Program (hereon EPP) conducted by the Launch Housing research unit in the latter part of 2018. The EPP aims to ensure that highly vulnerable young students who are homeless and may have experiences of family violence are not denied access to education.

The report includes an overview of the evaluation method, a description of the EPP, background context on homelessness and its impact on children's education. The evaluation findings are then presented, along with a number of recommendations.

1.1. Purpose of the evaluation

The purpose of the evaluation was to investigate the effectiveness of the EPP in meeting its key objective to improve the educational outcomes for children experiencing homelessness and/or family violence (refer to Appendix 1 for definitions of these terms).

The evaluation explored whether increasing school enrolment and attendance improved school engagement, which ultimately means better educational outcomes more broadly. The central question explored in the evaluation was: did the program achieve its objective to improve children's engagement with education?

The underlying theory of the EPP is that children experiencing homelessness are highly likely to not be attending school, and therefore, need a dedicated response especially in relation to education. Disruption to education needs to be addressed as quickly and as early as possible in order to reduce the risk of vulnerability to an ongoing cycle of homelessness and educational disadvantage. It is also vital to support parents in order to improve outcomes for children. Importantly, schools provide stability, normality and safety, which are especially important during periods of chaos, change and uncertainty.

Specific evaluation questions included:

1. Did the Education Pathways Program achieve its objective to improve children's engagement with education?
2. What impact did the Program have for parents?
3. What impact did the Program have on schools capacity to support children?
4. How could the Program be improved to enhance educational outcomes?

1.2. Evaluation methodology

The main focus of the evaluation was on the outcomes achieved for the children who were involved in the EPP from its inception in October 2015 to June 2018.

The evaluation was undertaken in the latter part of 2018. The evaluation framework was designed with input from senior management as well as from the Program Project Group. For details on the evaluation framework, please refer to Appendix 2.

The evaluation method relied heavily on analysing the extensive materials utilised as part of the day to day administration of the Program. The main data sources included:

- Document analysis – this included program reports sent to the group of philanthropic agencies providing funding for the program; validated cognitive and educational assessment tools; review of presentations made at schools and conferences; and survey data completed by schools;
- Administrative data – includes email correspondence between teachers and Program staff; emails from parents, and excel spreadsheet summarising the details of students who participated in the Program;
- Client data file analysis – accessed via the Service Record System, an online client management system, that provide further context to client support needs and housing circumstances; and
- Stakeholder consultations – occurred via an online survey emailed to several Program workers, with the option of completing this as a face-to-face interview.

1.3. Limitations of the evaluation

One of the key limitations of the evaluation related to the availability of client data in an accessible format. While extensive material is available, recent staff changes restricted the capacity of existing staff to maintain regular and up to date program monitoring, resulting in inconsistencies and gaps in the data.

A decision was made that interviews would not be obtained from children or their parents, for two reasons. Firstly, regular reports to philanthropic foundations indicated comprehensive information on outcomes for both children and parents. Consequently, it was felt that it was not necessary to intrude on children and parents, who were still experiencing the crisis of homelessness. While there may be some limitation to the overall evaluation findings as a result of this, the multiple data sources analysed provide valuable accounts of the benefit EPP provided for families, especially for the children.

2. Background

2.1. Homelessness and family violence

Based on the 2016 Census, a total of 24,817 people were enumerated as homeless in Victoria, of which 3,372 (14%) were children under 12 years of age. Children are also represented in Victoria's specialist homelessness services. During 2016-17, almost 20,000 children, 14 years and younger, were supported in specialist homelessness services. The vast majority, more than 14,000 children (72%), were aged nine years or younger.[6] Across Australia, more than 65,000 children (14 years or younger) supported by specialist homelessness services.[7]

Family violence is one of the leading causes of homelessness and the main reason why women and children escape from their homes. For children, family violence can involve a range of different experiences such as: experiencing violence directly, hearing conflict in another room, and/or seeing the aftermath.[8]

Nationally, almost 115,000 people (about 40%) reported family and domestic violence as a factor in seeking support from specialist homelessness services. Close to half (48%) were single parents with a child or children. In Victoria, specialist homelessness services assisted more than 50,000 people seeking support for domestic and family violence (a 10% increase from 2015-16).[9]

Both homelessness and family violence are profound and detrimental to healthy childhood development, due to the high levels of stress and trauma.[10,11]

When children are exposed to adverse life events and toxic stress, such as family violence and homelessness, "research finds corresponding subsequent impairments in learning, behaviour, and both physical and mental well-being"[12,13].

2.2. Homelessness and education

Homelessness has been found to severely restrict children's access to, and full participation in, education. The main obstacle that children experiencing homelessness appear to face is the high level of mobility experienced by their families and the consequent disruptions this causes to their

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6   Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) Specialist Homelessness Services 2016-17, Supplementary Tables Victoria

7   AIHW Specialist Homelessness Services 2016-17, Supplementary Tables National

8   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.

9   https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/homelessness-services/specialist-homelessness-services-2016-17/contents/client-groups-of-interest/clients-who-have-experienced-domestic-and-family-violence

10   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.

11   Tim Moore, Morag McArthur, and Debbie Noble-Carr. (2007). Finding their way home: children's experiences of homelessness. Canberra

12   Marci McCoy-Roth, Bonnie B. Mackintosh and David Murphey. (2012). When the Bough Breaks: The effects of homelessness on young children. Early Childhood Highlights. Volume 3, Issue 1. Child Trends, 11.

13   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.

schooling. However, evidence shows that once housing stability is established for families, children's engagement with, and performance at, school improves.[14]

Disrupted schooling amongst children experiencing homelessness is characterised by frequent changes of schools and irregular or nonattendance at school. In addition, Indigenous families are significantly more likely than non-Indigenous families to have children who do not attend school regularly; Indigenous children are also more likely to have attended multiple schools.[15]

Disrupted schooling has a direct impact on the academic attainment of children. Many overseas studies have found low levels of literacy and numeracy among children experiencing homelessness with some finding that these children are also at greater risk of having to repeat school years. Learning difficulties are also highly prevalent among children experiencing homelessness. This is concerning, as some studies have demonstrated that children with learning difficulties were at a greater risk of falling behind with their schooling when faced with disruptions such as changes of schools or irregular attendance. These children can often fall through the gaps of the education system, with academic and learning delays often left undetected and undiagnosed until they are difficult to reverse.[16,17]

Financial stressors and the living conditions of families experiencing homelessness also further compromise their children's participation in education. Inadequate finances mean that children are not able to go on extra-curricular activities or school excursions and many more do not have enough money to buy lunch. For those families residing in emergency or temporary accommodation, the lack of privacy or space to do homework negatively affected children's schooling. Parents were also less able to help their children with homework due to their own stressors and/or poor educational background.[18]

In this way, a number of factors combine to affect the chances of children who experience homelessness participating in the school system and in gaining an adequate level of education. Often all of these factors culminate in children leaving school at a young age compared to their peers. This not only impacts on children's opportunities and chances in the future, but also works to undermine children's self-esteem and the sense of belonging that the school community offers most children in our society.[19]

Children's learning and development is integral to their overall health and wellbeing, and their future productivity and contribution to society. There is a link between intergenerational poverty and educational attainment: low educational attainment is a common factor in Australia's most disadvantaged communities. It restricts job opportunities and increases the risk of social

14   Debbie Noble-Carr. (2006). *The experiences and effects of family homelessness for children*. Institute of Child Protection Studies, ACU for the ACT Department of Disability, Housing and Community Services.

15   Debbie Noble-Carr. (2006). *The experiences and effects of family homelessness for children*. Institute of Child Protection Studies, ACU for the ACT Department of Disability, Housing and Community Services.

16   Naomi McNamara. (2003). Once upon a time in SAAP – A report of the Northern Region Children In SAAP Service Data Collection. Merri Outreach Support Service Inc. Victoria.

17   Ralph Nunez. (2000). Homeless in America: A children's story. Journal of children and Poverty, 6(1)51-72.

18   Debbie Noble-Carr. (2006). *The experiences and effects of family homelessness for children*. Institute of Child Protection Studies, ACU for the ACT Department of Disability, Housing and Community Services

19   Debbie Noble-Carr. (2006). *The experiences and effects of family homelessness for children*. Institute of Child Protection Studies, ACU for the ACT Department of Disability, Housing and Community Services

exclusion.[20] Education is important in breaking this cycle: those with higher levels of education are more likely to be employed and to have higher incomes.[21]

2.3. Importance of development in the early years

The early years[22] of childhood and primary school encompass important developmental milestones. It is a major period of growth with significant changes occurring in children's educational, social, emotional and physical development. It is these early years, which will impact children's future wellbeing, social and economic participation.

Positive experiences in childhood generally mean better outcomes throughout a child's life, and produces participating and contributing members of society. In contrast, negative experiences in childhood including poverty, disadvantage, and homelessness have lasting impacts on children's long-term health and development. Neuroscience research has shown that children's brain development[23] is affected by the stress and trauma of homelessness and violence. These are frightening experiences for children who have to cope with ongoing and high levels of stress. This toxic stress means that the body's physical and neurological stress response system is overly stimulated, and this can be very harmful to children's developing brains.[24]

Intervening early in homelessness or family violence will achieve better long-term outcomes for children in education, health and wellbeing. Indeed, one study estimated a reduction of learning problems by up to 55%; socio-emotional problems by up to 59%; and physical functioning problems by up to 49%.[25]

The benefits of intervening early are illustrated in Figure 1, showing that the rate of return is greatest when investment occurs in the very early childhood years. It is more effective to address problems early, rather than trying to resolve them later.[26]

20   Tony Vinson and Margot Rawsthorne. (2015). Dropping off the Edge 2015: Persistent communal disadvantage in Australia, Jesuit Social Services, Australia.

21   Emily J. Callander, Deborah J. Schofield, Rupendra N. Shrestha and Simon J. Kelly. (2012). Sufficient education attainment for a decent standard of living in modern Australia, Journal of Social Inclusion 3(1)2012.

22   Tim Moore et. al., *The First Thousand Days: An Evidence Paper – Summary*, Centre for Community Child Health, The Royal Children's Hospital, Melbourne, September 2017.

23   https://developingchild.harvard.edu/brainarchitecture

24   https://developingchild.harvard.edu/brainarchitecture

25   Centre for Community Child Health, Research Snapshot: *Addressing disadvantage to optimise children's development in Australia*, May 2018. Access at: https://www.rch.org.au/uploadedFiles/Main/Content/ccchdev/CCCH-Changing-Childrens-Chances-Research-Snapshot-May-2018.pdf

26   https://developingchild.harvard.edu/resources/three-core-concepts-in-early-development/

Figure 1: Early Childhood Investment

EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT IS A **SMART INVESTMENT**

The earlier the investment, the greater the return

Source: James Heckman, Nobel Laureate in Economics

Source: Accessed via: https://heckmanequation.org/resource/the-heckman-curve/
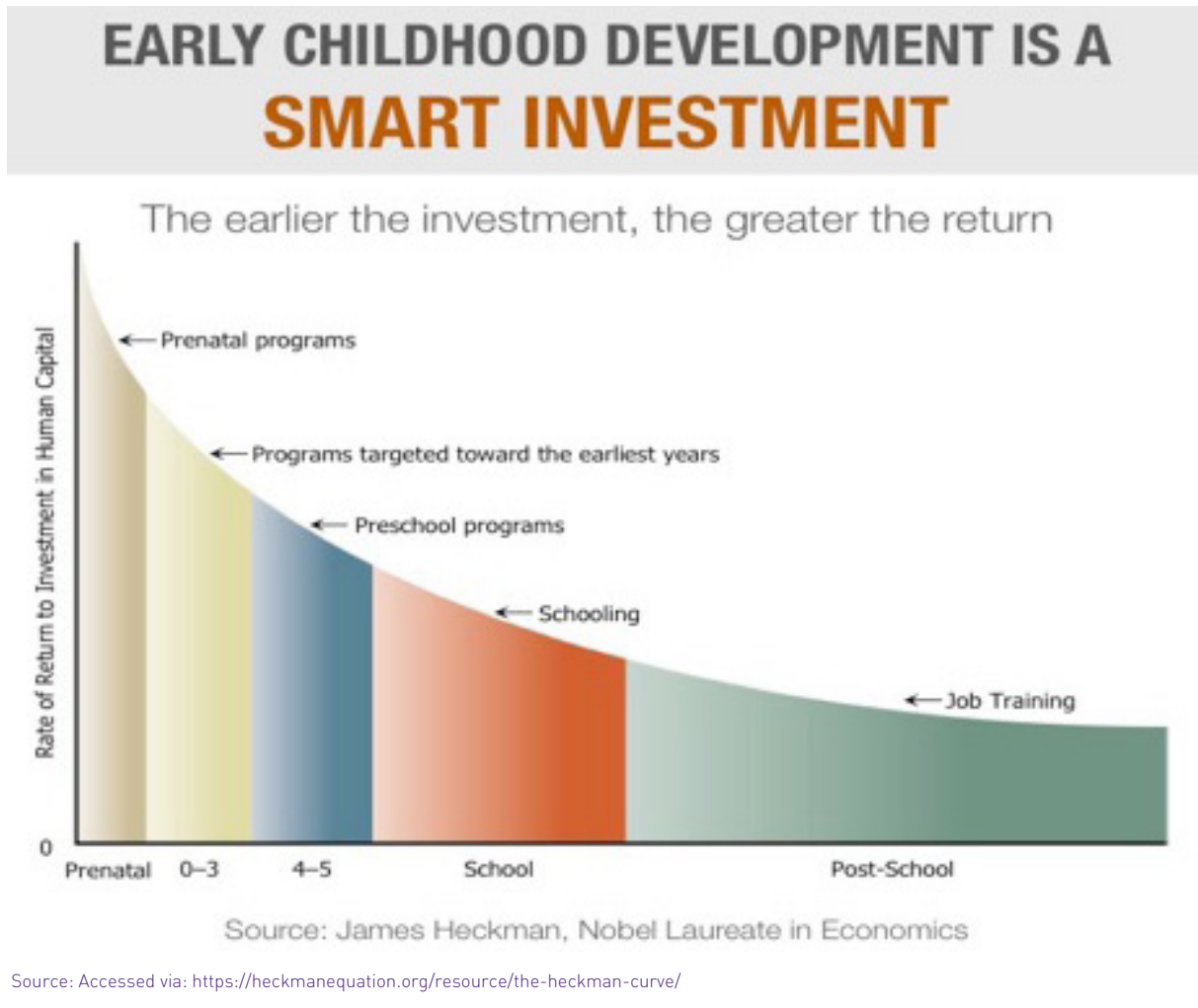
Intervening early to address negative childhood experiences also has broader societal benefits:

'For society, many costly problems, ranging from the failure to complete high school to incarceration to homelessness, could be dramatically reduced if attention were paid to improving children's environments of relationships and experiences early in life'.[27]

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27   In Brief: Early Childhood Mental Health, Access at:https://46y5eh11fhgw3ve3ytpwxt9r-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/InBrief-Early-Childhood-Mental-Health-1.pdf

2.3. Policy Context

At the time of the evaluation, key reforms currently underway in Victoria relate to the vital areas of housing and homelessness: *Homes for Victorians: Social Housing and Homelessness Reforms;* family violence: *Ending Family Violence: Victoria's Plan for Change*, and *Roadmap for Reform: Strong Families, Safe Children*; and education: *Education State*. A brief summary of each is provided in Table 1.

Table 1: Key Victorian Reforms
Education State
A key policy priority is to 'break the link' between disadvantage and poor student outcomes such as disengagement and early school leaving.; key initiatives include: • LOOKOUT – focuses on children and young people in out-of-home care; • Navigator –provides assertive outreach support to young people (12-17 years) who are not connected to schools at all, or those who are at risk of disengaging; • Equity funding – targeted at schools that support disadvantage students. (https://www.education.vic.gov.au/about/educationstate/Pages/initiatives.aspx
Homes for Victorians: Social Housing and Homelessness Reforms

The state government's response to Victoria's housing affordability crisis.
 	
• It involves the biggest ever investment by government into homelessness services and social housing
• Key initiatives include:
   – Social Housing Growth Fund
   – Social Housing Pipeline
   – Public Housing Renewal Program
   – Support for housing associations
   – Management transfer
   – Homelessness Reforms
   – Victorian Housing Register
 	
(https://www.education.vic.gov.au/about/educationstate/Pages/initiatives.aspx

Ending Family Violence: Victoria's Plan for Change
Details how the government will deliver the 227 recommendations made by the Royal Commission into Family Violence and build a new system that protects families and holds perpetrators to account.   – Rolling Action Plans: developed every 3 years, detailing how outcomes will be achieved; (https://www.vic.gov.au/familyviolence/rolling-action-plan.html)

Roadmap for Reform: Strong Families, Safe Children

Three key areas:

- A greater focus on prevention and earlier intervention (more targeted and timely intervention once at risk families are identified to connect them with the right support services);
- More visible and non-stigmatising entry points to services, making it easier for people to help themselves; and
- Proactively connecting people at risk to exiting services (early childhood services, schools, general practitioners, financial counselling and community health services) and informal networks (such as a trusted community member).

(https://www.strongfamiliessafechildren.vic.gov.au/about/faqs#25301)

3. Education Pathways Program Overview

The EPP is a component of the broader Children's Specialist Support Service (CSSS), run by Launch Housing. CSSS is the main service intervention in Victoria that seeks to fill the gap in funded case management for children and young people 18 years and under accessing homelessness and family violence services.

The CSSS provides a flexible and immediate service response for children accessing the homelessness service system through a combination of intensive one-on-one case management and therapeutic group work. The service also seeks to enhance the understanding and capacity of the homelessness and family violence service sectors to respond to the needs of children.

The CSSS is one of several service interventions in Victoria that arose from the National Partnership Agreement on Homelessness (NPAH). It is based in homelessness services located in four of the nine Department of Health and Human Service (DHHS) regions across Victoria. Launch Housing is responsible for CSSS in the southern metropolitan area and commenced service delivery on 1 February 2010. Overall, the CSSS supports about 20% of all children assisted at Launch Housing.

The EPP evolved from a volunteer tutoring program designed to assist children and young people experiencing homelessness with their education. Providing a supportive learning environment, the tutoring program worked with children, parents and schools to develop learning strategies. For more than a decade this program operated during school terms at two of Launch Housing's sites in South Melbourne and Cheltenham.

Recommendations from a 2004[28] evaluation were used by the CSSS to develop the EPP, with philanthropic funding received in 2015 for an initial 12 month period. Now in its fourth year, the EPP has provided outreach support to 265 children, plus 107 parents, who were accommodated in short-term motels by a range of services, as a response to the families' homelessness.

28   Michael Horn and Sharon Parkinson (2004), *Hanover Family Services Tutoring Program: A Response to the Educational and Social Learning Needs of Children and Young People Experiencing Homelessness, Evaluation Report, December.*

3.1. Vision

The EPP aims to improve educational outcomes for children experiencing homelessness and or family violence by supporting school attendance and engagement, and by working in partnership with schools and other agencies to better support children and their parents.

3.2. Specific objectives

Specifically, the EPP seeks to:

1. Improve children's engagement with education;
2. Improve parents' capacity to support children;
3. Improve schools' capacity to support children;
4. Improve wellbeing for children and their parents; and
5. Improve agencies' capacity to support children.

3.3. Target groups and referrals

The target groups for the EPP include primary school-aged children experiencing homelessness and/or family violence, and residing in emergency accommodation who are not enrolled in school, and their parents. In particular, the Program has a focus on children with complex or additional needs as a result of negative outcomes associated with homelessness and family violence.

Referrals to the EPP come from the CSSS assertive outreach team but are increasingly coming from notifications received from the service access points at Launch Housing, otherwise referred to as IAPs (Initial Assessment and Planning entry points). Three IAPs are located at Launch Housing sites in Collingwood, Cheltenham and St Kilda.

3.4. Components of the service intervention

A Program Logic for the EPP model is included in Appendix 3. This gives a detailed account of the components of the service intervention and the range of activities involved in delivering a practical service aimed at supporting regular school attendance, participation and wellbeing of children, and their parents.

The EPP is delivered by a multidisciplinary team that includes social workers, a psychologist, volunteers, and a speech pathologist. The work of this team is enhanced by a partnership between the Children's Specialist Support Service and a local primary school, represented by the principal and several teaching staff.

Key components of the EPP intervention include: assertive outreach, short-term school enrolment, walking school bus, the provision of breakfasts and lunches, educational assessments, speech pathologist, and transition support to new schools. Appendix 4 provides an overview of the support process and shows how some of these components are connected.

Assertive outreach

Assertive outreach means that families are not required to present at a service; the service goes to them. The assertive outreach team visits families residing in emergency accommodation to

provide a flexible service that includes material aid to reduce immediate stressors, initial service coordination and liaison to internal and external services (such as housing, health or child protection).

Importantly, it is through assertive outreach that children not attending primary school can be identified; it is especially important for those children whose non-attendance at school has been extensive. The assertive outreach team also refers children to the 'Long Table', a recreational group work program run by the CSSS, where children can interact with each other in a relaxed social setting. This gives them an opportunity to have fun and to build social skills through playing with peers.

Short Term Enrolment Program (STEP)

STEP is an arrangement between the Education Pathways Program and the local primary school for children who have been identified as requiring educational assistance and other supports after periods of absence from school. The arrangement ensures that the children are enrolled in a quick and timely manner to minimise any further disruptions to their learning. The period of enrolment has generally been short, lasting anywhere between one to ten weeks, while the family waits to secure long term affordable housing.

Children enrolled into school are provided with material aid that includes school uniforms, school books and other school supplies. Where necessary, they are also referred to the CSSS psychologist for comprehensive assessments to identify any gaps in learning, or cognitive, behavioural or social developmental needs. In some cases, referrals to external child-focused agencies are needed for longer term therapeutic counselling.

STEP also reduces the financial strain for parents by providing financial support for children's school fees, excursions and extra-curricular activities such as school sporting activities or school camps.

Walking School Bus

The Walking School Bus is integral to the success of the short-term enrolment plan. The Education Pathways Worker, along with a team of six volunteers, pick up the children and walk them as a group to the local primary school every day. This initiative increases school attendance, creates a morning routine, enables engagement with children to discuss their dreams and aspirations, and creates a sense of community for the children.

Healthy Eating Program

A nutritious breakfast and lunch are provided to children each day to ensure their nutritional needs are met so they can get the most out of their classes each day. The food is generously donated by community partners every fortnight. This vital component of the program also reduces financial stress for families, and provides an opportunity for parents both to socialise and contribute to their child's schooling by making lunches together at the local primary school following the Walking School Bus.

Educational assessments, counselling and classroom support

All children engaged in the EPP are provided with educational assessment packages, including cognitive and achievement testing, as required. For those children whose educational journey has

been disrupted, the assessments provide important information to teachers that enables them to better target support to more effectively engage the young student in education. In addition, educational assessments offer an avenue for linking young students and their families to access extra support (such as private tutoring, government funded teacher's aides, counselling services, and housing support).

Speech Pathologist

As of July 2018, a speech pathologist was engaged to work with children with literacy and language comprehension challenges. The main emphasis is to teach children phonics, which involves learning the phonetic value of letter, letter groups, and syllables. Without these essential language comprehension skills, which are only taught in the very early years of primary school, children will continue to experience ongoing learning challenges.

Assessments for comprehension disorders involve the use of validated tools that can only be completed by a speech pathologist. Once the assessments are done, the speech pathologist provides five weeks of intensive tutoring sessions (three times per week) for each child.

Transition support to new school

Once a family secures long term affordable housing, the EPP provides support to the parents to enrol their child/ren in a local school near their new home. The comprehensive transitional support to the new school involves assisting the family to navigate the enrolment process; providing the student's educational assessment and learning plan to the teaching staff; advocating for State Schools Relief for uniforms and fee plans; and ongoing monitoring of attendance rates of children with histories of significant absenteeism, as well as support to families.

3.5. Resourcing of the EPP

The EPP has been generously funded by five philanthropic foundations. Their combined contribution, totalling $220,000, initially enabled the employment of 1.6 full-time staff. It also covered the cost of providing young students with breakfast and lunches, as well as school uniforms.

To respond to increased demand and the changing needs of children, the EPP has grown and now employs up to 3.5 full-time staff as well as a psychologist. A speech pathologist was also employed on contract. These additional resourcing requirements have more than doubled the cost of delivering the EPP, increasing by $240,000. In reality, therefore, the amount needed to fund the EPP is at a basic level is really $460,000.

To make sure the delivery of this program is not compromised, Launch Housing directly contributes to the $240,000 shortfall; but this is an added financial impost for the organisation. Despite the very tight nature of the budget and the ongoing funding uncertainty, this innovative and specialised program has delivered clear and demonstrable outcomes for children experiencing homelessness.

According to some internal estimates, the funding needed to expand and scale up the EPP would cost up to $600,000. This would enable the EPP to reach a greater number of children experiencing homelessness and to provide a suite of specialist support services including brokerage. It is vitally important, however, that an expanded program is adequately funded; this will ensure the sustainability and benefits of the model for vulnerable children.

Launch Housing

Launch Housing has a strong ongoing commitment to investigating family homelessness. For the past two decades, the organisation has been at the forefront of undertaking innovative and ground-breaking research[29,30,31,32,33] into family homelessness and the substantial detrimental harm caused to children's health, development, education and wellbeing.

This accumulated and formidable evidence base has informed a range of programs and service interventions designed to address the harm caused by homelessness and family violence. It has also emphasised the organisation's commitment to improving outcomes for children, especially in relation to their learning and education.

Temporary motel accommodation

Families were generally referred to temporary motel accommodation by a range of agencies. The temporary motel accommodation used as an emergency response for family homelessness, was an ageing block of 50 tiny self-contained bedsits or one and two bedroom units.

When the EPP began in 2015, this accommodation was only used as an emergency response for about an eight week period until longer-term housing could be secured for families. However, the broader housing affordability crisis meant that longer-term housing was generally difficult to access. This resulted in many of the children and their parents staying in the block for three months or more; in a few cases, families had been living there for 12 or more months.

This consequently meant that the focus of the EPP had to change from a short-term intervention to one that could address the longer-term educational needs of children. In July 2017, this privately owned accommodation was sold to a community housing association; it is scheduled to be redeveloped in 2019. Any remaining families were due to be relocated by the end of December 2018.

Local zoned primary school

The strong partnership between the EPP and one particular primary school was originally facilitated through the School Focused Youth Service.[34] The EPP and the local primary school, zoned for the children being supported by the Program, received a small amount of seed funding to work together to better support the needs of at-risk students.

The School Focused Youth Service is an initiative of the State Department of Education and Training, and is designed to support students from years 5 to 12 who may be at risk of disengaging. Across the state, there are 34 School Focused Youth Service agencies that work with schools and community organisations to better support vulnerable young people to stay engaged in education.

29   Jean McCaughey, (1992) *'Where Now? Homeless Families in the 1990s'*

30   Efron and Horn, (1996) *'Can we stay here?': A study of the impact of family homelessness on children's health and wellbeing*

31   Kolar, V (2004) *'Home First': A longitudinal study of outcomes for families who have experienced homelessness, Final Report.*

32   Hanover Welfare Services (2009) *Education Development Project: Improving educational and housing outcomes for children for children experiencing homelessness, Final Evaluation Report, October.*

33   Martin, R (2014) *The empty lunchbox: the experience of primary schools with students who are homeless*

34   For more details, access at: https://www.education.vic.gov.au/school/teachers/behaviour/engagement/Pages/sfys.aspx

4. Profile of children in the Education Pathways Program

A total of 218 children were supported by the EPP during the first 2.5 years of the EPP; that is, from October 2015 to June 2018. However, the findings presented in this report are based on the analysis of data pertaining to 187 children.

This means that 31 children were excluded. The reason for this was that in a number of cases, children were connected to the EPP for an extremely short period of time, usually only for a week or less, resulting in almost non-existent data. In other cases, there were too many missing details, which made any meaningful analysis difficult.

This section, therefore, presents the common characteristics of 187 children for whom support was provided and recorded, including their age, gender, housing, cultural background, and family circumstances. The data have been informed by a review of administrative records and program documents.

4.1. Age and Gender

As shown in Figure 2, there were almost equal numbers of girls and boys, although girls (n=96) slightly outnumbered boys (n=91). This group of children ranged in age from three to 16 years, with an average age of eight years. Only eight children were aged three to four years, while the majority (164 children) were between five and 12 years of age. These are the important primary school years, a time of significant change for children's cognitive, emotional and behavioural development.

Figure 2: Number of children in the EPP by gender and age group, 2015 to 2018 (N=187)
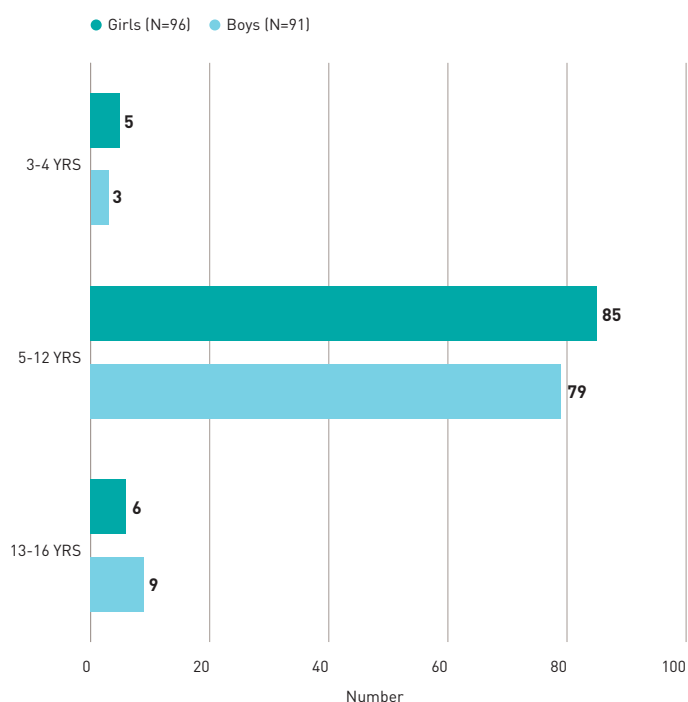
4.2. Housing

Safe, appropriate and stable housing is critically important to the health and wellbeing of children and families. Timely provision of housing is also central to the importance of early intervention in minimising the negative impacts of homelessness on children. A lack of housing not only has an effect on the wellbeing of the family, but also limits the capacity to make positive changes and to engage with services and other supports.[35]

Most families had lived in relatively secure housing immediately prior to their contact with the EPP. As illustrated in Figure 3, the data available for 165 children shows that a majority (64%, n=107) had mostly lived in private rental (50%, n=84), while some had rented in public housing (14%, n=23). A further 30 children (18%) had previously lived with family or friends. In the main, for most of the families who had previously had housing, homelessness was precipitated by family violence. For the remaining 28 children (17%), their accommodation was especially insecure or non-existent, having experienced homelessness living in cars, hotels/motels, refuges, or in transitional or emergency accommodation.

It was unclear from the administrative records, how long families had been homeless before their contact with the EPP. There were various specialist homelessness agencies involved in supporting the families located in the emergency hotel accommodation, but only limited referrals were made to the EPP when it first began. In a number of instances, the EPP connected with families and children by literally knocking on doors. Referrals from services have subsequently improved, and a positive relationship was established with a key access point.

Figure 3: Accommodation prior to the EPP, 2015 to 2018 (N=165)

Accommodation	Percentage
Private Rental	50
Family/Friends	18
Public Housing	14
Overseas	5
Car	4
Motel/Hotel	3
Refuge	2
Transitional Housing	2
Crisis Accommodation	1
Rehabilitation	1
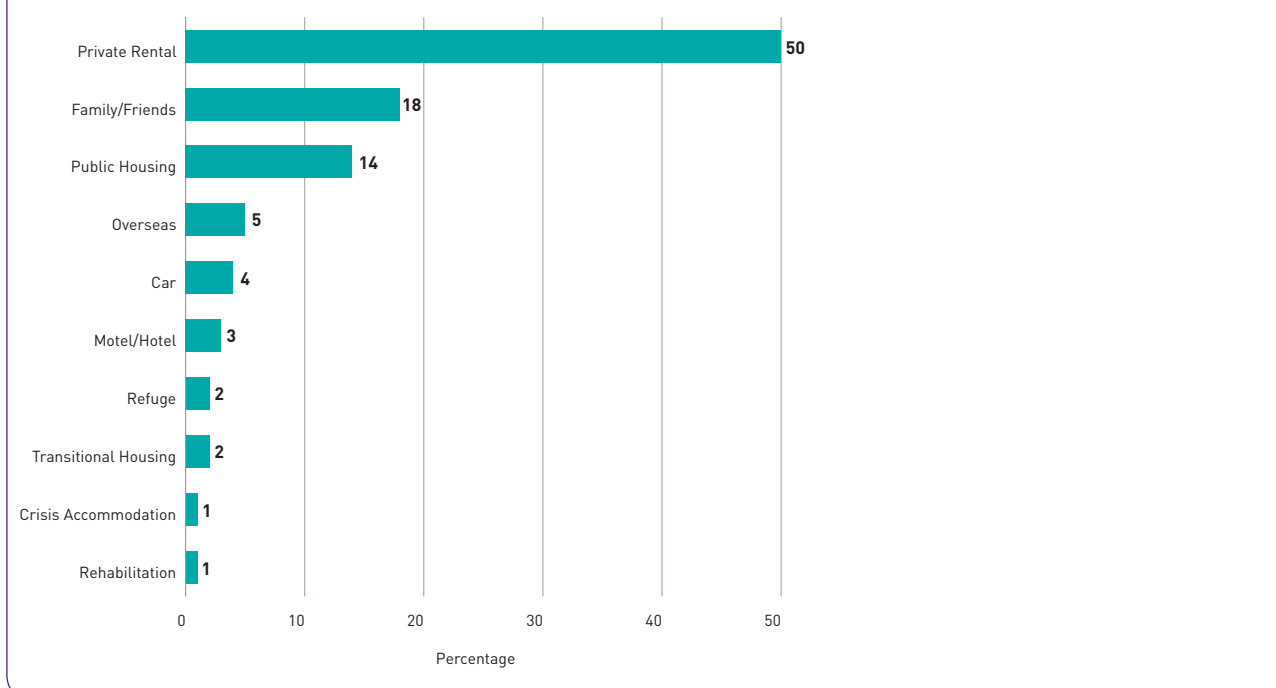
Accommodation outcomes

Figure 4 presents the housing outcomes for 152 children who had been transferred from their temporary lodgings to alternative accommodation between October 2015 and June 2018. It shows that in 33% (n=50) of cases, children and their parents were allocated public housing, 28% (n=42) of families were assigned to transitional housing, while 13% (n=19) moved into private rental. This suggests that for these children, continuity in education and learning was perhaps likely to be maintained.

For a number of children, however, accommodation remained precarious, making continuity in education and learning very difficult to sustain. In many cases, the only option was to stay with family or friends (13%, n=19). Some families left the state or moved overseas (9%, n=13), so for this group, the accommodation outcome is unknown. Four children (3%), and parents, ended up in a refuge, while another four children (3%) were removed from the care of parents by child protection.

Eviction from temporary accommodation

In the evaluation period, there was one reported case of eviction from temporary accommodation for rental arrears. It was reported that, as a result the child was subsequently removed from the parent's care by child protection. With her child placed in the care of her grandmother, further support for this parent was substantially limited, which would have impacted on their wellbeing.

Whilst rare, evictions highlight the dilemma faced by frontline staff and clients, and the operational pressures of temporary accommodation within a broader housing system that is manifestly unfair for vulnerable households.

Figure 4: Accommodation outcome, 2015 to 2018 (N=152)

Category	Percentage
Public Housing	33
Transitional Housing	28
Private Rental	13
Family/Friends	13
Overseas/Interstate	9
Refuge	3
Removed from Parents	3
Evicted	1
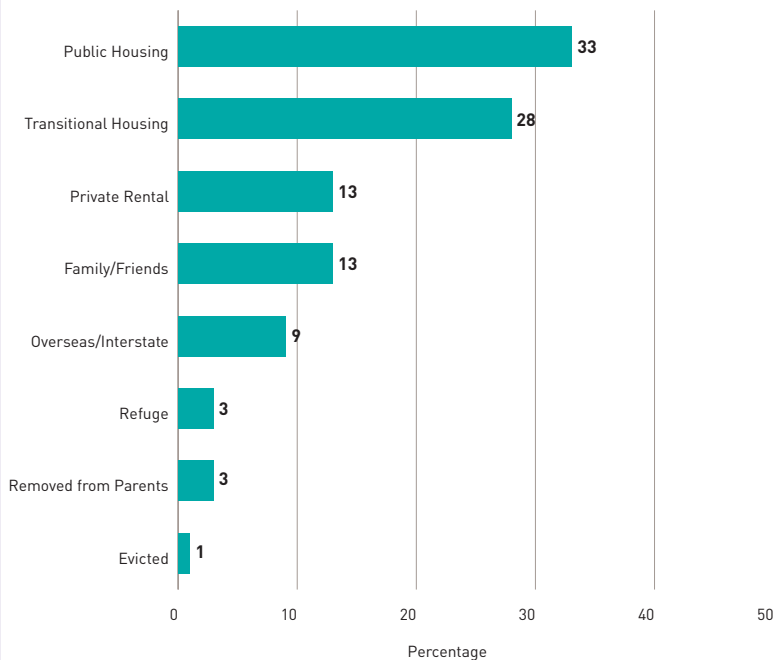
4.3. Cultural background

Information on cultural background was available for a total of 169 children. This data showed around half of the children (n=80), and their parents, were born in Australia; including a number of children from an Indigenous background.

More than half of the children (n=89), and their parents, were born overseas, mostly in non-English speaking countries (n=74). Indeed, the cultural background of this group was diverse, covering up to 11 non-English speaking nations. These were generally located in East Africa and a small number were in the Middle East, South Asia, Southeast Asia, or Southern Europe. Limited information meant that it was difficult to determine if any of these families were recently arrived refugees.

4.4. Family circumstances

In terms of family type, the majority of the children (n=163, 77%) in the EPP lived in sole parent families, predominantly with their mothers. Eighteen children (10%) lived in sole parent families headed by fathers. Only 24 children (13%) lived with both parents. Among the 187 children, many were, of course, siblings. It was estimated that, overall, 132 children were in families with one or more siblings. This suggests that those remaining 55 children were an only child.

All the families were in receipt of income support, either the Newstart Allowance or the Parenting Payment, but in at least one case, a parent was on the Disability Support Pension. All were struggling financially. According to the latest report into poverty, sole parent families are the most disadvantaged family group in Australia.[36]

....

36   ACOSS, Poverty in Australia 2018, ACOSS and Social Policy Research Centre, 2018, p.40

Typically, the families had left private rental or public housing because they had fled family violence; many were from interstate. It is likely that these families had to leave behind belongings, pets and social support networks, which would have exacerbated the stress and anxiety already felt by parents and children. Ending up in unfamiliar surroundings and without access to important social supports would be extremely disorienting for anyone, let alone for any family fleeing violence. Social support networks are a vital resource for families helping them to cope.[37]

An indication of the extent of adversity experienced by this group of children is presented in Figure 5. It shows the proportion of children who experienced homelessness as well as other complexities. The data suggest that for one group of children, the main hardship was homelessness. Fifty-two children (28%) had no reported family violence or child protection involvement. For the majority of children, however, multiple adversities were relatively common: 72% (135 children) had reported experiences of family violence and/or child protection. This included 25% (46 children) who had experienced both family violence and child protection involvement.

One family's experiences are described in Box 1 providing insight into the devastating impact of several years of family violence and homelessness on three young children and their mother. Having lost their public housing tenancy due to the violence, the family was homeless for a significant length of time, with the youngest child born into homelessness. This family desperately need safe and stable housing. Equally important, is the need for long-term therapeutic support to address the significant trauma experienced by the mother and her children. The experiences of the children will likely impact on their engagement with education in the long-term.

Figure 5: Experiences of family violence and child protection, 2015 to 2018 (N=187)
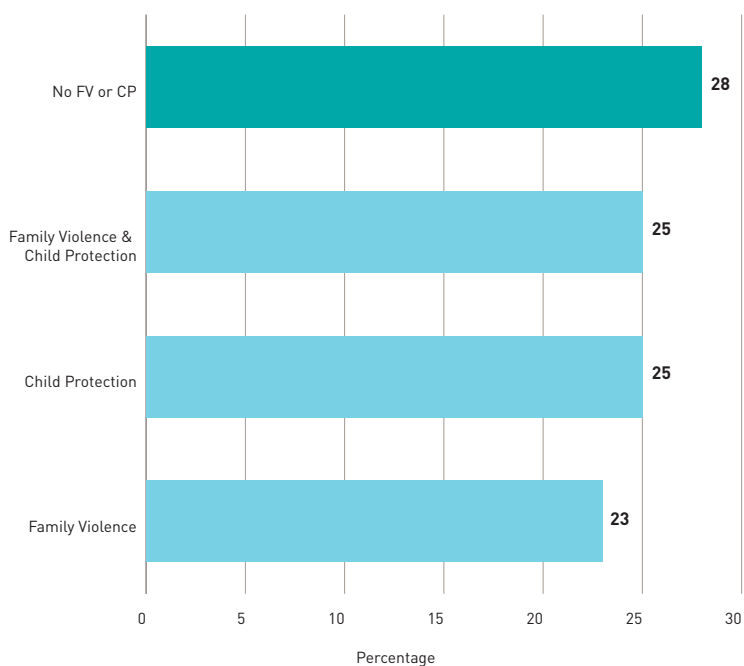
Box 1: Impact of homelessness and family violence

Sandy*, Lisa* 8 years, Ben* 5 years, and Joe* 3 years

Sandy and her three children have been homeless for four years; the youngest child, Joe, was born into homelessness.

Most of the accommodation the family stayed in during this time comprised short-term hotel places as well as couch surfing with a range of family members living in different parts of the state. Multiple moves meant the children moved schools frequently.

Sandy's last public housing tenancy (5 years ago) broke down due to family violence, which resulted in $20,000 damage to the property. Since the damage was a result of family violence, the debt was waived.

There have been multiple reports to child protection due to family violence.

The perpetrator has been incarcerated. Police, child protection and support services are working together to keep the family safe.

Family violence has occurred over the past several years and the children have witnessed the violence against their mother and have also been assaulted. They made multiple disclosures of physical and verbal abuse while at school and to the EPP.

Workers described the mother and children as 'withdrawn', 'not eating' and 'flat affect'.

Sandy is on medication for depression and anxiety, and 8 year old Lisa is underweight and has been linked in with a child psychologist.

Ben reportedly has a developmental delay, and Joe has displayed delays but this has not been medically confirmed.

*Names and some details changed to maintain anonymity

5. Children's participation in education

The underlying theory of the EPP is that children experiencing homelessness are highly likely to not be attending school, and therefore, need a dedicated response especially in relation to education. Disruption to education needs to be addressed as quickly and as early as possible in order to reduce the risk of vulnerability to an ongoing cycle of homelessness and educational disadvantage. Importantly, schools provide stability, normality and safety, which are especially important during periods of chaos, change and uncertainty.

This section does not explore educational outcomes per se. Rather, the findings focus on the Program's theory that increasing school enrolment and attendance leads to school engagement, which then leads to better educational outcomes more broadly. A central question explored in the evaluation was: *did the program achieve its objective to improve children's engagement with education?*

Providing important context, this section begins with an overview of the extent of the children's educational disadvantage. This is followed by the presentation of results related to improvements in school enrolments and engagement; and in social, health and emotional wellbeing. The findings presented here are informed by program documents, including formal educational assessments, as well as feedback from stakeholder interviews.

5.1. Extent of educational disadvantage

Figure 6 presents selected characteristics for the 125 children enrolled in primary school by the EPP. Assessments by classroom teachers indicate that many of the students were rated as 'below/well below' their peer level in the areas of numeracy (74% or 92 children) and/or literacy (70% or 87 children). Significant numbers also presented with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties (58% or 59 children), and/or had an intellectual disability (20% or 25 children).

Additionally, close to half (46% or 57 children) had histories of long absences from primary school, having missed one or more school terms, referred to as 'critical absenteeism. Indeed, 'critical absenteeism' was recorded for 6% of children who had not attended school for more than one year. Program documents indicate that only 10% of children did not have any gaps in their primary school education when they started EPP.

Figure 6: Selected characteristics for new enrolled students, 2015 - 2018 (n=125)
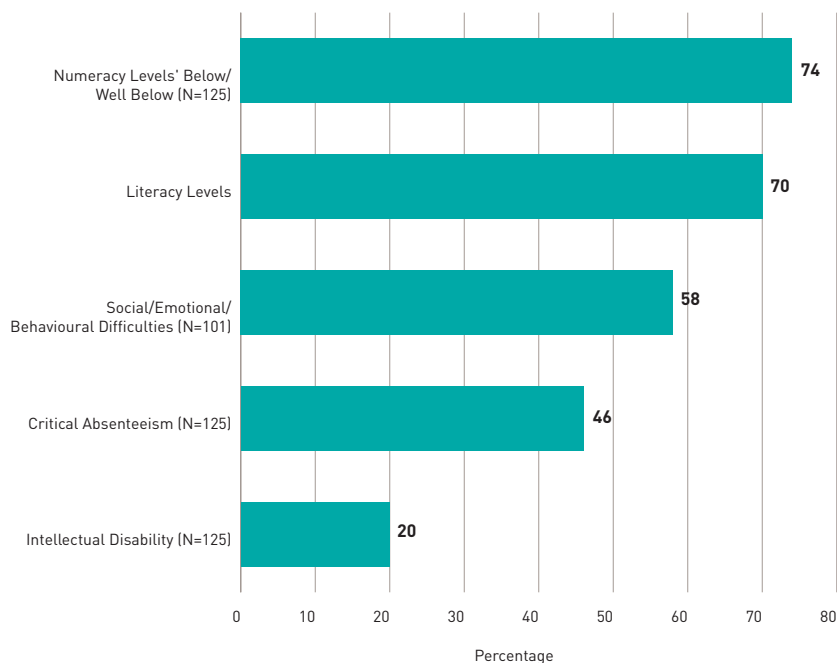
5.2. Improving school enrolments

Overall, of the total of 187 children and young people, only 20 were enrolled and attending school at the beginning of the Program. Among this group were 16 primary school students and four secondary school students.

A further eight children were aged three to four years, but none in the group were enrolled in kindergarten. Thus, there were 159 school-aged children who were not attending school at first contact by the EPP, as shown in Figure 7. Of this total, EPP subsequently enrolled more than three-quarters (79%, n=125) of the children at the local primary school.

There were various reasons why the remaining 34 children were not enrolled by EPP. In some cases, families enrolled their children elsewhere, while others left the motel accommodation (possibly because they got housing), and some went interstate or overseas.

Figure 7: Number of students enrolled by EPP, 2015 to 2018 (N=159)
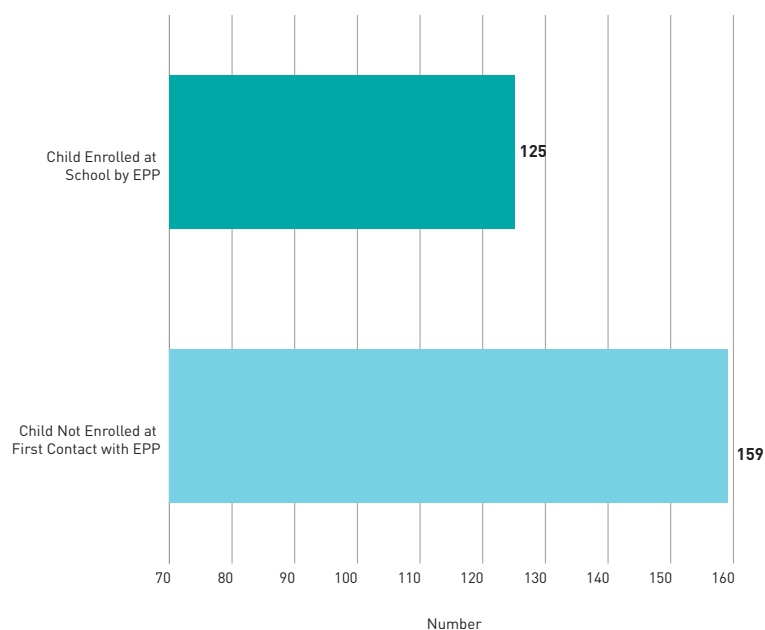
The extent of the success of increased primary school enrolments is based on a targeted and coordinated initiative between the EPP and the local primary school called *Short Term Enrolment Program* (STEP). As a major component of the EPP, this initiative ensured that enrolments occurred in a timely and efficient manner, delivering maximum benefit for the young students, and their teachers. This will be further discussed in the section on school outcomes.

Figure 8 shows that, from 2015 to 2018, enrolments occurred throughout the whole school year. It means that the Program's assertive outreach team had repeatedly connected with a steady stream of new families who had been placed in the short-term emergency accommodation, and had school-aged children who were not attending school. Such regular enrolments of new children

into one local primary school would invariably present challenges for any school community, especially given the children's difficult and traumatic experiences, and the extent of their educational disadvantage.

The busy times for enrolments were during the early years of EPP's operation, and peaked at the end of 2016 (Term 4) and the beginning of 2017 (Term 1). After this period, the numbers of new enrolments remained comparatively low during the last five school terms.

The fluctuation in school enrolments was related to the number of families moving into and out of the emergency accommodation. This accommodation changed ownership in July 2017 and was scheduled for redevelopment in 2019, as noted earlier under *Program Context* (section 2.3). As a consequence, families were staying longer than the original average period of eight to ten weeks, which meant that fewer new families were moving in.

This also meant that the children enrolled for a short-term period, had to attend the local primary school for longer than the EPP had envisaged. The focus of the EPP had to subsequently shift towards addressing the long-term education needs of the children while they were still in the temporary emergency accommodation, rather than waiting until the children had moved into more stable long-term housing.

Figure 8: Number of children enrolled by school term, 2015 to 2018 (N=125)
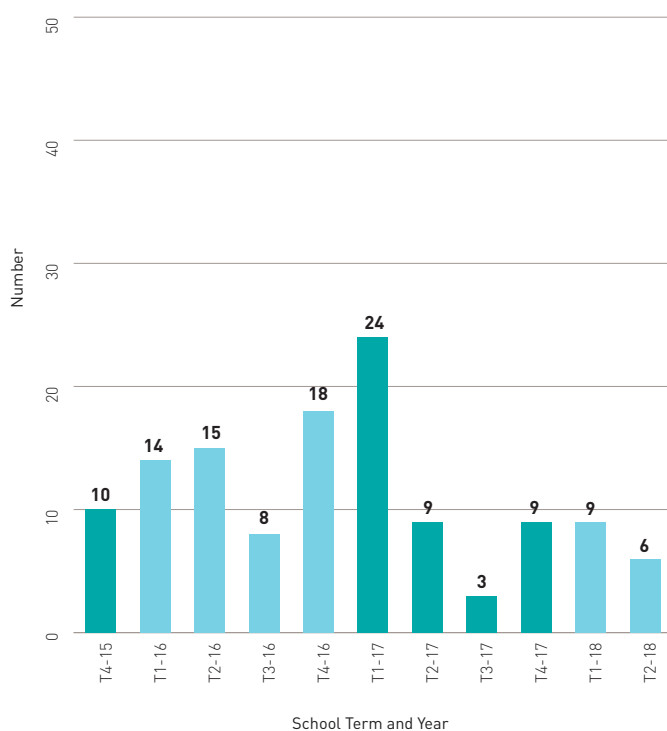
5.3. Improving school engagement

School engagement was measured by increased school attendance, the completion of educational assessments, positive attitudes towards school, and increased sense of belonging at school. The key sources of evidence informing the findings come primarily from worker reflections, and formal educational assessments completed by the EPP psychologist.

Ensuring school attendance - Walking School Bus

As soon as children were enrolled, they started going to school. Ensuring school attendance happened deliberately and methodically was achieved by the EPP workers physically walking the children to their nearby school each and every day. Better known as the Walking School Bus, this was the underlying mechanism for transporting the students to school.

Worker feedback confirmed that over the 2015-2018 period, all 125 students enrolled in STEP participated in the Walking School Bus and had, consequently, attended school regularly. Indeed, reducing school absences was seen as an overall benefit of the EPP. The success of such a practical response, including the provision of breakfasts and lunches, is highlighted in the comments below:

> 'We [the EPP] definitely, 100%, reduce school absences. I do the walking school bus every morning. So, I go and collect the children and take them to school and supply breakfast for some of the kids... and also lunches. So, overall, it definitely reduces absences. And with some children who may come from quite complex backgrounds, [they are] actually attending nearly every day...' [EPP stakeholder A].

> 'Due to [homelessness and] the transiency, they [children] haven't been physically able to access school, so we [the EPP] bridge that gap in just providing them the ability to attend school' [EPP stakeholder B].

> 'The Walking School Bus aspect of EPP allows children to develop a safety net, which means that they are more likely to attend school, and are more confident. EPP sees that children gradually develop more confidence at school, make friends, and want to get to school on time, look forward to certain things at school and ultimately want to go to school' [EPP stakeholder F].

> 'Children want to attend school each day - especially if they are coming on the Walking School Bus' [EPP stakeholder G].

Educational assessments – helping children to thrive

Overall, educational assessments highlighted the extent of the detrimental impact of homelessness on children's learning. For students observed by teachers to be struggling in the classroom and showing signs of delay, such as poor speech or difficulty following teacher instructions, validated cognitive and educational assessments were used to understand their level of intellectual ability, and to identify any potential learning difficulties.

These assessments generally occurred following about four weeks of the students attending school, and assisted with the development of individual learning plans that were provided to the classroom teachers. These would help to create a positive experience of school for children so they remained engaged, allow them to access critical classroom support, and to help them to thrive.

Completed by qualified psychologists, the assessments were done using one of two validated tools. The first tool comprised the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children, Fourth Edition (WISC-IV), which measures cognitive ability. It has four indexes and also calculates a Full Scale IQ (formerly referred to as IQ score).[38]

The second tool was the Wechsler Individual Achievement Test – Second Edition (WIAT-II), which summarises functioning in reading, maths, written and oral language.[39] Table 2 details the score intervals, the corresponding percentile ranking and how they are categorised. It compares the performance of a group of students with a general population of children the same age. Composite scores extending from 90 to 110 designate the average range, which applies to between 25 and 74 per cent of children of a given age.

Table 2: Wechsler Composite Scores		
Composite Scores	Percentile Rank	Category
130 and above	98 and above	Very superior
120 – 129	91 – 97	Superior
110 – 119	75 – 90	High average
90 – 109	**25 – 74**	**Average**
80 – 89	9 – 24	Low average
70 – 79	2 – 8	Borderline
69 and below	2 and below	Extremely low

Program documents show that a total of 43 children had one or other of the two assessments completed; 15 children were assessed using both. Results for cognitive assessments, undertaken by 26 students, are presented in Figure 9, while the results for the academic assessments pertaining to 23 students are shown in Figure 10. Both figures present the mean composite scores (the average of combined scores across individual items in each key area).

Figure 9 clearly shows the marked gap between the students' scores and the 'average range'. Their scores were in the 'below average' category for *Verbal Comprehension index, Working Memory index and Processing Speed index*, meaning they were in the bottom 24 per cent of same aged peers. On the Perceptual Reasoning index and Full Scale IQ, the students were in the 'borderline' category, putting them in the bottom 8% of same aged peers.

In terms of individual student results for the Full Scale IQ, program documents show that only three children achieved a score in the 'average range' and seven were 'low average'. Eight children were 'borderline'; a further eight scored 'extremely low' meaning they were significantly impaired in their cognitive development, indicating an intellectual disability. [40]

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38   For more detail, refer to https://strategicpsychology.com.au/what-is-the-wisc-iv/
39   For more detail, refer to https://strategicpsychology.com.au/what-is-the-wiat-ii/
40   For more detail, refer to https://achieveaustralia.org.au

As shown in Figure 10, of the nine academic items that students were assessed on, only *Pseudoword Decoding* (related to reading skills), with a composite score of 90.5, was within the 'average range'. A further six items, incorporating reading, and written and oral language skills, recorded scores that were in the 'low average range' (bottom 24% of same aged peers). And the final two items, both related to mathematics, had composite scores that were 'borderline' (which put these students in the bottom 8% of same aged peers).

Figure 9: Cognitive Mean Composite Scores, 2015 to 2017 (n=26)
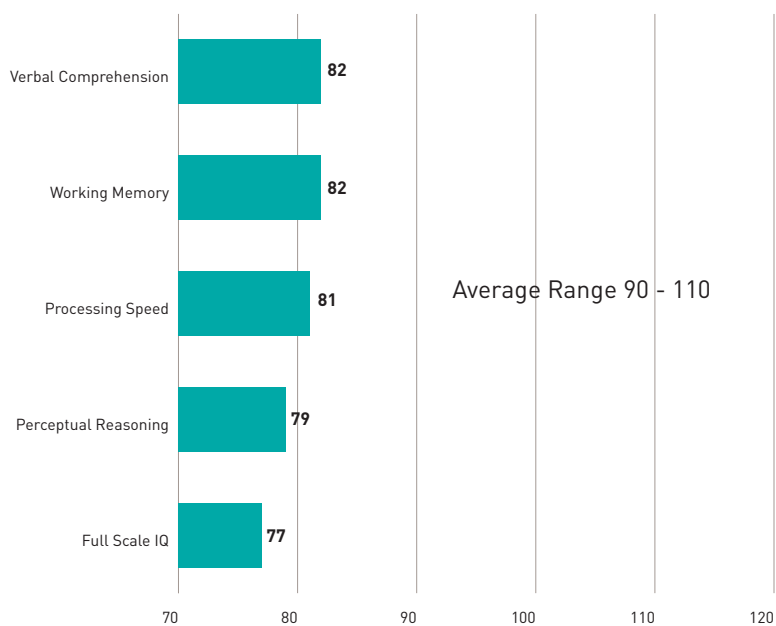
Figure 10: Educational Mean Composite Scores, 2015 to 2017 (n=23)
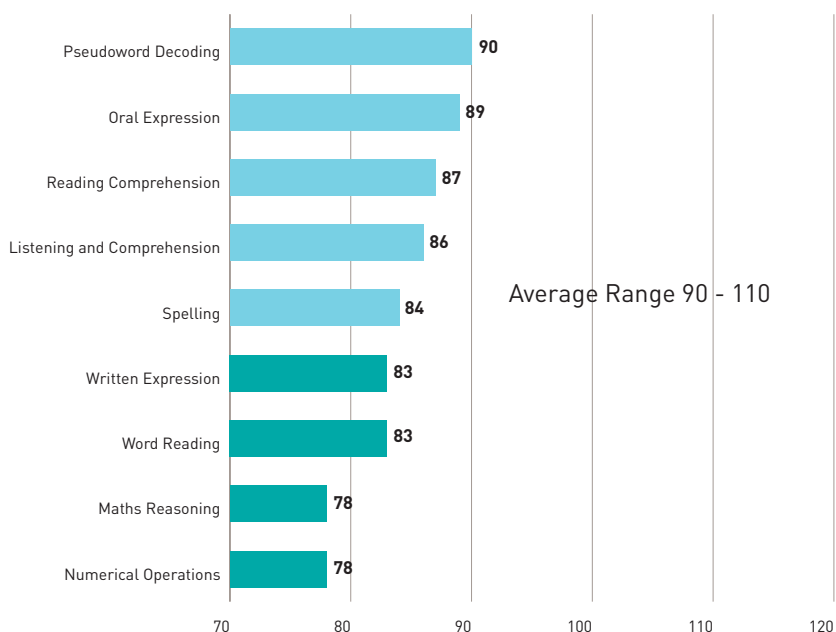
According to a 2017 summary document of the cognitive and educational assessments data, compiled by the program psychologist, a 'borderline' score means that a child is approximately two to four years (depending on the subtest) behind the expected standard for primary school students.

This has substantial implications for the wellbeing and future educational and behavioural development for this group of children. Indeed, the level of concern regarding the children's educational status is evident in correspondence from the psychologist to the EPP team (Box 2). As emphasised by the psychologist, the children were so behind their peers that cognitively, they were not able to keep up in the classroom.

A critical point to note is that despite the learning delays experienced by all of the children, only 23% met the criteria for financial assistance under the state funded Program for Students with Disabilities in the category, Intellectual Disability (PSD-ID). This means that for the majority of the children, there was no access to funds to help reduce the significant gaps in their educational development. Without the financial capacity to access support, the gaps in learning will not only remain, but will be exacerbated as the children get older.

Box 2: Internal correspondence from psychologist to the EPP team, August 2017

Subject: Results of educational assessments

What I think [the results] highlight the most is that whilst ALL children have delays in cognitive development AND/OR in at least one area of academic achievement (if not all), only 23% of these children actually meet the criteria for the Program for Students with Disabilities under the category of Intellectual Disability (PSD-ID), and therefore the school will get funding for support in the classroom…but the learning challenges of all of the other children who do not meet the criteria [for PSD-ID] but are up to four years behind their peers in regards to academics, and on average have a Borderline IQ, meaning cognitively, they're just not able to keep up [with their peers].

This in turn makes it very difficult for these children to learn in the classroom without extra support…I think we need to somehow get this point across strongly and ask for extra support in classrooms to help with these kids' learning who [will] not receive funding for support.

Positive attitudes towards school

There was general consensus evident in worker feedback that children's attitudes towards school had improved. Most mentioned that children wanted to attend school, as highlighted in the following:

'Very significant changes [in attitudes towards school] – children are wanting to attend school, sometimes for the first time ever, and [they] generally become more confident and comfortable in the school setting' [EPP stakeholder C].

'The EPP sees that children gradually develop more confidence at school, make friends, [they] want to get to school on time, [they] look forward to certain things at school and ultimately want to go to school' [EPP stakeholder F].

Apart from the EPP, the local primary school also plays an important role in affecting children's attitudes towards school. As highlighted, a supportive and accepting school environment makes a big difference:

'What I've seen is that [the primary school] is a very compassionate school and I think that that has really made a difference on children and their sense of belonging and safety because children don't feel safe when they're in crisis accommodation a lot of the time, and school provides them that level of safety which is paramount to their functioning' [EPP stakeholder B].

'Children seem to enjoy going to school at [local primary school] and enjoy the teachers and classroom content' [EPP stakeholder G].

Sense of belonging at school

Additionally, workers had observed, and were in agreement, that children's sense of belonging and connection to school also improved. Indeed, in a couple of cases, creating a sense of belonging for children was identified as an important component of the EPP, as illustrated in the following:

'Despite negative past school experiences [that some of the children have had], EPP children loved the sense of belonging they got at [the primary school] more than anything, I believe. Many of these children, [and their] parents had never sensed belonging anywhere. This was the biggest goal of EPP when the program began – gradually supporting [the primary school] (teachers and administration staff) to understand the needs of EPP children so as they could create a sense of belonging' [EPP stakeholder E].

'It may take some time if a child has had several moves, but children eventually seem to own their school. I think 'Walking School Bus' helps with this, as there is a group of them that can own it together. [The primary school] is also fantastic at making this happen, and is very community minded. I think this is one of the most important parts of EPP, as the children have been displaced, and may not have a strong sense of belonging to any group or place. Connections and belonging is as important to children as it is to adults, and when children start to feel connected, they start to feel safe, which is essential for their development' [EPP stakeholder F].

School also provides for EPP children a safe, stable and predictable haven in a context of chaos and upheaval. It was reported:

'What I know about children who are in crisis accommodation is that it's very scary for them. There's not a lot of stability. They've been pulled from their community, mostly everything they know; friends, family. They've had to leave their toys behind so they don't feel very safe. They don't feel very secure...so school is something we can provide which is a safe place. It's stable for them. It's predictable' [EPP stakeholder B].

5.4. Improving social, health and emotional wellbeing

Stakeholder feedback confirms that the EPP achieved improvements in children's social, health and emotional wellbeing. Key activities central to achieving these outcomes include acknowledging the trauma experienced by children; the provision of appropriate supports/ programs for children; providing stability, consistency, routine; and importantly, keeping children safe. It was noted:

'Children...a lot of the time have experienced trauma, so that there are behavioural issues that we need to work with...and the biggest thing is that we need to stay consistent and put boundaries around behaviours to keep them safe and other people safe, and allow them the opportunity to make mistakes and to redo is really important, because they need to practise these skills' [EPP stakeholder B].

'Children are given the opportunity to talk about how they are feeling [in the EPP]. This is very rare, as most services are adult-centric, and do not see or speak to children. Children often open up quickly and interventions are put in place. Children's physical health is also prioritised, which is something that is often put on the backburner by adult services' [EPP stakeholder F].

'Children have the opportunity to be linked into psychological support through the CSSS [Children's Specialist Support Service] psychologist. This is a rarity in the service system. There have been many improvements in children's emotional well-being once this occurs' [EPP stakeholder G].

'The children involved with the EPP often present with interpersonal difficulties and social skills deficits. However, due to the modelling of appropriate behaviours, group programs and the encouragement of a positive peer social network by the EPP, there has been an observed improvement in the development of the children's social skills' [EPP stakeholder D].

'We've actually seen a really huge improvement in some of the most challenging children that we've worked with, with their behaviour. And also...linking them in with our psychologist...she does a lot of sort of assessments, the IQ and the cognitive assessments. So, that's just to make sure that the children are receiving the right support...also they get a lot of routine with us as well. So, even just seeing me every day, it [has a] really, really positive [impact]' [EPP stakeholder A].

The underlying ethos of the EPP is about inclusion, ensuring that children do not miss out on the opportunities offered at school for learning and social participation. This was well expressed in the following:

'I would say social inclusion is another really solid outcome that the program really tries and strives hard for...We have a no child misses out policy when they're in the STEP [Short-Term Enrolment Program], which means that they access absolutely everything that school has to offer and that will range from gala days to camp, to dressing up for Book Week, to swimming lessons. We provide two extracurricular activities in the afternoons, so that the child in crisis is still [able]...to fully participate in education, but also [can participate in] those things that a child who isn't experiencing homelessness would normally get to access' [EPP stakeholder B].

5.5. Development and support of education transition plans

Program documents show that over a two year period, from 2015 to 2017, the average length that a child was enrolled and attended the local primary school was 23 weeks. This was based on a total of 76 STEP students who had left the local primary school because their families were allocated long-term housing. This invariably necessitated moving to a new area, and therefore, to a new school.

Facilitating a child's transition to their new school is an integral part of the work undertaken by the EPP. Each child transitioning to a new school has a detailed education transition assessment, completed by the current teacher for the new teacher. An example of this is provided in Appendix 5.

The limited available data shows that during the 22 month period (Oct 2015 to August 2017), 52 children transitioned to a new school. In all, this group of children enrolled in 27 new schools. Additionally, it was reported that 90% were attending their new schools regularly.

The EPP's commitment to nurturing school engagement and ensuring a positive transition and experience at a new school is explained as follows:

'...we try really hard when [children are] moving into their [new] school to set up the best transition we possibly can for them because one thing that I am fairly sure of, which is common sense, is that if they have a good beginning at a new school, then that's going to impact on their willingness to continue to go to their school, and their sense of belonging and safety and that, "This school really cares about me," and, "They want me here, therefore I want to be here."

So, we put a lot of effort into that, in trying to speak to as many teachers as we can that are involved with this child and the welfare team and anyone else within the school to really educate them around what this child needs, what they're good at, what they're going to need to succeed.

And we try and provide the child with a thorough orientation to the new school, which is trauma-informed. We really try, before they're just thrown into a classroom, we get them to meet the teacher beforehand. We try and introduce them to the welfare team. We talk to them about the school, how they might get there, what that might look like, so that they're not just being enrolled and put in school and then there you go, and that most importantly, that I think the classroom teacher really has the best understanding that they can of that child and what to expect' [EPP stakeholder B].

Even where children had transitioned to new schools, their progress continued to be monitored by the EPP, as illustrated in the following case studies.

The following case studies (Box 3, Box 4, Box 5 and Box 6) highlight the remarkable resilience of children. Despite the difficulty of their circumstances and the trauma endured, the evidence from the EPP shows that with appropriate support, stability, and routine, children can thrive and their outcomes improve.

Box 3: Teacher's update to the EPP on 7 year old Paul's* progress

Edited email

Hi EPP,

I am Paul's Grade 5 teacher this year and I am just keeping you updated on his progress in the classroom this semester. He has socially been a delight and works well with pretty much anyone in the grade. He has settled in very well and has made some great new friends who are also great role models for working in the classroom. He definitely is making a great deal of progress and with his consistent work, is improving and building on his skills quickly.

It is clear that Paul loves maths in particular. He consistently makes a great deal of effort with all tasks. He is keen writer and is producing longer and more personal writing pieces. Overall I am so pleased with his work and his attitude this semester. His cheeky sense of humour shines through often and his confidence continues to develop. All in all he has been a great kid to have in the class so far this year. I hope I've managed to give you a clear picture of Paul this year. What a great kid.

Best regards,
Grade 5 Teacher
[Name] Primary School

* Name and some details changed to maintain anonymity

Box 4: Correspondence between the EPP and new school regarding 7 year old Cathy's* progress

Email request from EPP:

Just touching base again in regards to Cathy. We are trying to follow-up all little people that have had any contact with the Education Pathways Program in regards to their ongoing school attendance/functioning. Are you able to tell me if Cathy is getting to school every day and how she is doing in this sphere??

Response from new school:

'Cathy is doing really well at school both academically and socially. She is still academically behind in all areas (between 12 to 18 months) but is making progress in all areas. This will continue to be a pattern for an extended period of time due to the substantial amount of schooling Cathy has missed over the last 4 years.

This year she has missed a total of 11 days, where her average over the last 4 years has been around 50 days per semester."

* Name and some details changed to maintain anonymity

Box 5: School's update to the EPP on 8 year old Finn's* progress

Finn has had a great year. He has formed friendships with many of his classmates. He is honest and kind and cheery. His attitude to his learning has shifted to a positive place and thus his learning is really growing, as evidenced here, in the report from his reading support teacher:

Finn came to the LLI (Levelled Literacy Intervention) program from language support work…as even the first stage of Blue LLI was too difficult for him. Finn improved so much with intensive support from S, A, M and I that he showed the capacity to join the LLI program from the lowest level; and he has worked his way through 4 levels in about 6 months. This is explosive progress and although he is still way behind (10 levels, or 2.5 years) he has caught up almost 12 months in 6 months.

Finn describes himself like this:

'I'm proud. I'm a learner now. I can write words I couldn't and I try hard now. I am a great runner and I'm good at climbing trees. I made Jess laugh so hard he cried. And I'm kind. Yeah, I think I am kind.

* Name and some details changed to maintain anonymity

Box 6: School's update to the EPP regarding 6 year old Tom's* progress

Tom has made very strong gains. He can still have very big physical reactions to things and sometimes does not know his own strength (which has resulted in some…challenging behaviours…, but he is really working on this. He can now come inside when he is angry and knows that drinking water really helps shift his energy. He is calming down so much quicker and is talking about how he is feeling and what he can do about it.

His focus in class is really developing, as is his confidence to try new things. He has been part of Reading Recovery this year and next year he will be part of the LLI (Levelled Literacy Intervention)…

Tom describes himself like this:

'I can walk away from problems now. Not all the time, but it's still smaller. I know how to cool down. I go inside and get water. I can write now. It's easy for me to try. It's also easy for me to do handstands and climb trees… and skateboard. My Dad taught me to skateboard…

* Name and some details changed to maintain anonymity

6. Support for parents is important

The parent-child relationship is very important to positive outcomes for children.[41] Parents bear the responsibility for ensuring the health and wellbeing of their children. What happens to children matters significantly to parents. However, the stresses of homelessness and family violence can overwhelm and affect parents' abilities to care for and nurture their children. The necessity for day-to-day survival can also make it difficult for parents to recognise children's educational needs.

The literature shows that reducing stress for parents improves outcomes for families.[42] In one study, parents felt less stressed and more motivated when their children's needs were adequately met.[43] By creating positive outcomes for children through child-focused practice, parents may be better able to address their circumstances.[44]

Indeed, the EPP, while child focused, recognises the traumatising and stressful impact of homelessness and/family violence for parents, and that it can affect their ability to fulfil their parenting role. Parents may need assistance to support their children during times of crisis, especially to help their children connect, or reconnect with school.

This section explores the benefits the program had for the children's parents. Specifically, the evaluation question asked was: what impact has the program had for parents/caregivers regarding their child's education?

Benefits for parents included practical assistance, reduced stress, changed attitudes, and increased confidence. For some parents, this resulted in increased involvement in certain activities, such as joining in the Walking School Bus. The findings presented in this section are informed by feedback from EPP stakeholders, all of whom were staff involved in the delivery of the program.

41   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.

42   https://developingchild.harvard.edu/resources/three-early-childhood-development-principles-improve-child-family-outcomes/

43   N. McNamara, 2007, *Assisting children and families who are homeless*, Project Report for the Department of Human Services Housing Support Services, Victoria.

44   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.

6.1. Practical assistance

There was consensus among the EPP stakeholders that a key benefit of the program for parents was the very practical assistance, including material aid, provided by the Program:

'The EPP provides children with basic needs, such as lunches, school uniforms etc. This is essential, as parents may not have the resources to do this; EPP takes some stress off parents, which is very important, [this] allows parents to focus on finding housing' [EPP stakeholder F].

The practical assistance also included organising interpreters, or helping parents understand the school system. As one stakeholder reported:

'...when we do the enrolments we try to make it really as smooth as possible and really support the parents – we kind of get things organised and go with the parent and introduce them to everyone [at the school] and they know familiar faces. And [we] make sure they have all the contact details if they need to contact the school...' [EPP stakeholder A].

This stakeholder further explained:

'...with other families where maybe English isn't their first language, I think it really opens the door for those families, for us to sort of be that link. So, we provide interpreters for parent teacher meetings or other things like that. Or even when they get letters home [from the school], they have no idea what they mean, they can come to us and we sort of help them understand and sort it out. Just [helping them in] understanding the school, the school system, a bit more. So, I think that really opens the door for those parents' [EPP stakeholder A]

6.2. Reducing stress for parents

Reducing the stress experienced by parents was an immediate outcome of the practical support offered. This point was clearly expressed by one stakeholder:

'What we hear from parents overwhelmingly is that...they're very grateful because most of our parents really highly value education, they want their children to attend school...[but] because of their circumstances, [they] can't get them to school, due to financial [difficulty] or just not knowing where they're going to be from day-to-day...we understand that it's really hard to parent when you're in crisis and when you're in poverty...we come in with a very non-judgmental attitude, and it's around providing practical assistance in a family's time of need to get kids [to school]...what I've seen is that parents just need help...just like everyone else...the biggest impact is that it's a stress that they don't have to carry...[this then] has a direct result on a child's level of risk in homelessness, because a parent is then able to be more attuned to what's happening to their child...So, one of our aims within the Program in working with parents is to really look at what their biggest stresses are and then really try and reduce as much of that as we can within that crisis space...So, I think, in that crisis phase, that's the biggest...help for parents' [EPP stakeholder B].

6.3. Changing attitudes

There was general consensus among stakeholders that parents' attitudes to school changed as a result of the Program. This resulted in parents feeling more comfortable and taking part in activities, as the following observations note:

'I've just observed parents feeling more comfortable to attend school, so picking up their children, engaging with teachers. We have had some parents who attend the parent-teacher nights, which is something they've said they've never been able to do before' [EPP stakeholder B].

'It has been observed that some parents have held a negative attitude toward school, however, having been involved with EPP, parents/caregivers are able to articulate their reluctance and feel supported to address any concerns with EPP's assistance' [EPP stakeholder D].

'Yes, they are keen for their children to attend school and want the best for their children. They will also feel comfortable going to the school and may even attend the Walking School Bus' [EPP stakeholder G].

6.4. Changes in confidence

A lack of confidence, due to past adverse experiences presented very real obstacles for parents. As one stakeholder noted:

'Often, parents with negative school experiences do not feel confident to enter the school grounds. I enrolled some children without parents at initial interview to get the child started. Some of our more complex needs parents would take a few days to get in the school grounds - once they felt their children were accepted and supported and doing well in [the local primary school] – their confidence and capacity to engage would increase' [EPP stakeholder E].

This stakeholder further added that increasing confidence takes time and the important role that the primary school plays in helping to change this:

'...it is a slow process at times, but this is the advantage of having a base school like [name primary school], whereby all the teachers are on board with the needs of the parent living amongst homelessness/poverty/daily hardship. It is a process of building their confidence in a school that understands their needs, which can then transfer to another primary school. While half of our EPP cohort will have parents with capacity to engage [with] teachers, half of the EPP cohort will not' [EPP stakeholder E].

Another stakeholder noted:

'Many parents have come a long way with this. When parents are supported to get involved, and when children are feeling connected to their school, parents build their confidence' [EPP stakeholder F].

Parent involvement in school activities (e.g. helping in the classroom)

While Program staff talked about some parents' participation in the Walking School Bus, or helping to prepare lunches, they also noted the limited capacity for greater involvement such as helping in the classroom. One key reason for this related to service system requirements:

> 'In a crisis phase, there's just not the capacity. Ideally, that would be an amazing outcome but I think the realities of being in crisis and the quite strict obligations that they have to fulfil in terms of looking for housing to stay in crisis just doesn't allow them to do it. There's a blanket rule that they need to look for three private rentals a week...most of our families can only access public transport and the properties that they can afford are [a long] way away...So, it causes them a significant amount of stress...there isn't capacity for it...there's very little support in terms of transport to get them there [to see the private rental]. [Inspections]...are all afterhours, normally, like 5:30, which is hard because if parents have to pick up kids, that can be really hard to then get there, and most of our families have little kids, so they're getting prams and things on trains and trams...If you're not looking for [private rental], then they...won't pay for...[the crisis] accommodation anymore. So, they live week to week...and our kids are significantly aware of that. They talk about that stuff' [EPP stakeholder B].

And a second factor that limited parents' capacity to be involved related to their own personal difficulties:

> '[Involvement in school activities] varied depending on our particular group dynamics. Largely our parents did not get involved. Living amongst homelessness, and often with other children was taxing. Mostly our parents presented with mood disorders, family violence, alcohol and other drug issues, mental health issues and/or other random complexities which impacted their wellbeing. Largely, our parents' moods were low with the daily stressors/complexities that nearly all were going through (even our better functioning cohort). It was not conducive to involvement in school activities. For one period we did have a group of parents doing school lunches, but it was short lived' [EPP stakeholder E].

> 'It really depends on what the parents have going on, and how complex their needs are. Some parents will never get to this place, and that's ok. Some parents get there really fast, and that's ok too' [EPP stakeholder F].

In one case, however, a parent was actually employed at their child's school:

> '...We did have one mother who at the [her child's new school] ended up getting a job at the school, which was amazing...' [EPP stakeholder B].

Feedback from parents once they transitioned to longer-term housing, and their child was settled into a new school, has not been routinely collected. But, review of program documents revealed an email from one parent whose child was supported by the EPP in 2016 (Box 7). It is a powerful example of the benefit of the EPP.

The parent emphasised the importance of having a central person to be the initial contact with a school, which greatly reduced the family's anxiety, and thereby ensured a smooth transition to a new school. Practical supports made a big difference; providing a school uniform meant that the child felt included and connected to the new school. Also emphasised is the huge impact a school has for new students, simply by the way they welcome new students into their school community.

Box 7: Parent feedback to the EPP regarding impact of program (May 2016):

Edited extracts

What was most helpful to you?

I found having a key person who has established a prior rapport with any school or organisation is very important as it made the transition less intrusive and confronting, which then minimized any anxiety and allowed both [my child] and I the ability to focus clearly.

Most of all providing Ryan* with his very own school uniform helped develop and encouraged his sense of purpose and importance that he is a part of something, he is significant and relevant to what might be happening/going on.

The school lunches is a fantastic idea, giving Ryan the opportunity to select his own lunch was exciting and helpful, having someone to walk with the children each morning to school helped and enabled me to make and attend appointments. I found this also very helpful and again being included, being part of inclusion is equally important I feel.

What was your child's experience during their time at the local primary school?

I feel Ryan has flourished and become so much more settled due to less anxiety, the predictability and routine, also feeling a part of the normality. Ryan enjoyed going to school each morning and the fact there was consistency each and every day, he knew what to expect and the fact he made friends and was a little sad when we left showed me there was lots of positives.

How has your child settled into their new school?

Ryan had attended this school previously and was very excited to return, [he] has settled remarkably well at… [the] primary school, he was moved into a class with some wonderful children and his teacher…is wonderful and has feedback that [he] has settled in and has made friends incredibly well showing great enthusiasm and participation, when we arrived for the first day he was greeted with open arms and the show of support and encouragement was overwhelming and beautiful at the same time.

* Name and some details changed to maintain anonymity

7. School relationships matter

The third objective of the EPP was to improve the capacity of schools to support children's educational engagement. The underlying premise of this objective was that if school staff, teachers and principals, better understand homelessness, this will lead to better engagement with parents and students, which will lead to better school engagement and, therefore, better educational outcomes.

The importance of working with schools and improving their capacity to support children and their parents experiencing homelessness surfaced in the first 12 months of the programs commencement. Program documents reported that many parents described feeling blamed, by school staff, members of the school community and support agencies, for their child's lost learning. This impacted on parents' self-esteem and confidence in their parenting abilities; it also heightened their sense of social exclusion and mistrust of support agencies.

To address this, the EPP began investing more time and resources into communicating and building the capacity of school staff, teachers and principals, to better understand the challenges faced by families experiencing homelessness (such as trauma, financial hardship, transience, and social marginalisation). It also focused on the leading causes of homelessness for families, including family violence and the critical shortage of affordable housing; and the impact of all this on students' learning such as absenteeism, lost learning, and developmental challenges.

Informed by program and survey data, and stakeholder feedback, the findings in this section are presented according to three main themes: understanding homelessness; partnerships with schools; and engaging with transition schools.

7.1. Understanding homelessness

To increase understanding about homelessness, the EPP had planned to do a series of presentations at a range of schools, which focused particularly on the scale and nature of family homelessness in the broader structural context. As noted below, the issues were a shock:

'We've held education presentations around…what parenting in poverty looks like and that homelessness is a structural issue…people are very shocked to hear about the extent of

homelessness and the amount of families that are experiencing homelessness because it's usually not something that is visible...' [EPP stakeholder A].

An email the EPP received from a teacher following a presentation (Box 8), illustrates the importance of engaging with schools to increase awareness and understanding of the issues of homelessness, family violence, and the impact this has on children's learning. And it shows the appreciation gained that comes with greater understanding.

Box 8: Teacher's email to the EPP following presentation on homelessness (2016)

I just wanted to drop you a quick note to say how relevant and on point I found your presentation in our staff meeting this afternoon. It made me feel that what we can do for the kids from... [the EPP] can really make a difference in their lives. Thank you for making the time to come and talk to us.

Primary School Teacher

In general, there was consensus among EPP stakeholders that knowledge amongst schools had increased. Mostly, this had occurred as a result of working closely with schools, especially communicating regularly and having ongoing meetings. The following observations were reported by stakeholders:

'I feel like [the school has] got a really good understanding of where the families are coming from...we're sort of that link where we explain [what's happening for families] and then keep them supported. So, I think they've got a great understanding. And we have regular meetings where we will discuss how to move forward with some of the children and make sure they're properly supported [at school]' [EPP stakeholder B].

'The EPP staff work closely with schools in providing support to assist teaching staff to gain an understanding of the impact homelessness, family violence, parental substance misuse, early trauma, etc. has on children's learning and social/emotional wellbeing. Whilst regular meetings are held, EPP are readily available to assist with any individual issues on a daily basis' [EPP stakeholder D].

'...teachers have received great [professional development] from EPP staff and much knowledge and information regarding homelessness/family violence. When EPP workers started emailing...teachers regularly about a child or family, we saw that teachers' understandings deepened and they were more inquisitive about how they could support the child in the classroom. Also, the school principal and welfare team...[meet]...weekly with EPP staff, CSSS coordinator and psychologist, this has definitely improved their understanding too. We have seen this at other schools too; however, [with] some schools it can be a longer process. The culture comes from the top, the principal, and some schools that we have worked with already have an incredible understanding of the support needs of the EPP children and have supports already in place' [EPP stakeholder G].

In May 2018, teaching staff at the local primary school were invited to complete a survey that asked them to rate their understanding of homelessness and its impact on students. Surveys were completed by 18 school teachers. Figure 11 shows that, overall, most of the participants rated their understanding of homelessness as 'very good/good'. Further, nearly all reported they had 'very good/good' understanding of its impact on students' health and wellbeing, how it affects behaviour, and the impact on students' education. These positive results likely reflect not only the benefit of the presentations done at the school, but also of the regular and ongoing contact between the EPP and the local primary school.

Figure 11: How would you rate your understanding of each of the following (N=18)
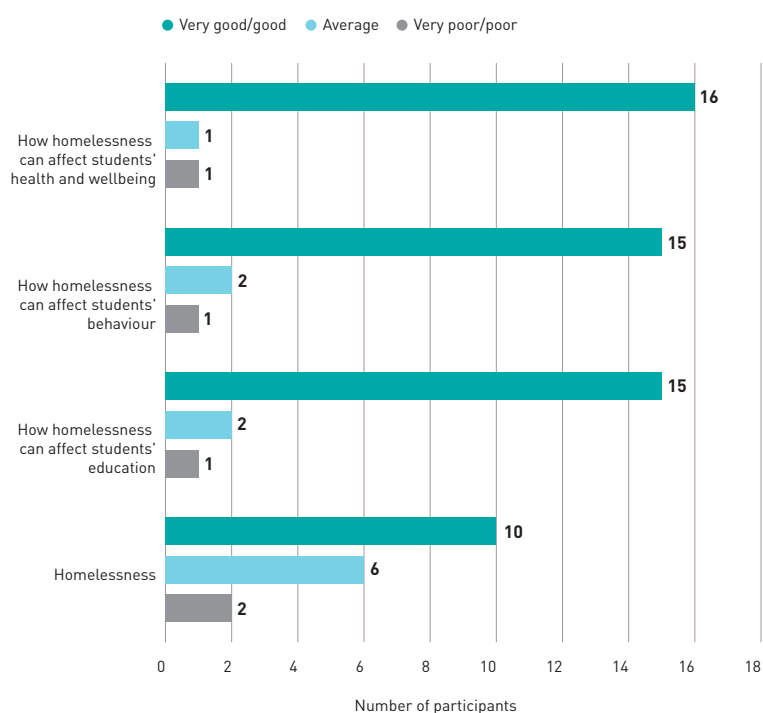
Nevertheless, there were some areas in which teachers needed more information. For example, teachers were lacking in knowledge and ability to provide support to students. Specifically, Figure 12 shows that most participants reported their knowledge of resources available to support students experiencing homelessness was 'very poor/poor'. Many reported their knowledge of how to support students as 'average' or 'very poor/poor'. Similarly, participants rated 'average' or 'very poor/poor' their ability to support students to transition from primary to secondary school. And while half were positive about their confidence to engage with students' parents, half rated their confidence as 'average' or 'very poor/poor'.

Figure 12: How would you rate each of the following (N=18)

Very good/good ● Average ● Very poor/poor

Category	Value
Your knowledge of resources available to support students who are homeless	5 / 2 / 11
Your knowledge of how to support students who are homeless	6 / 8 / 4
Your ability to support students who are homeless to transition from primary to secondary school	5 / 4 / 9
Your confidence to engage with parents of students who are homeless	8 / 5 / 5

Number of participants

A lack of resources and capacity limited the number of presentations that the EPP has been able to undertake. This is particularly the case with new (or 'transition') schools that children in the program enrol in once they are relocated to more stable housing. As program documents show, there were 27 new schools that children had relocated to between 2016 and 2018. Undertaking presentations at all these new schools would be impossible with limited capacity. Accordingly, the EPP engages with these schools using other means of communication, as one stakeholder describes:

'Because there have been so many transition schools…we can't go and do a presentation to each school; but what we do try and do is within the handover to the [new] school is provide a little bit of context around the [family's] homelessness…' [EPP stakeholder B].

The level of awareness and understanding of homelessness and family violence differs across schools. This could present difficulty for schools when dealing with young students who were experiencing homelessness, especially if they had no information about the circumstances of individual students:

'…what I have a really big appreciation for now and I didn't quite understand before, was that the schools have no information. They just get these kids in the classroom and…they don't know anything about the parents; they don't know anything about the children, so they just get these children for five, six hours a day and what the school has said they really value from us is that we're able to provide context to these children…a little bit of context as to what's happening really goes a long way for both the teachers and the school and it's something that schools don't get very often. So, that was something that I didn't really understand before and you assume that they have all that knowledge and they don't' [EPP stakeholder B].

For the most part, the level of awareness and knowledge of the issues was influenced by the community context in which schools were located. Consequently, working with schools to raise awareness and understanding could be challenging, and according to the following stakeholder, generally requires a nuanced approach:

> '[Working with schools is] quite nuanced...Sometimes you get a school in a lower socioeconomic area, schools are used to [the issues] and they get it, and they've got good welfare teams. But in an area where they...don't see a lot of homelessness or [child] protective issues or things like that, they just don't get it and so, when you don't understand something you become a bit jarred. So, sometimes you need to read between the lines and [we] talk to schools differently, dependent on where you think their mindset is around homelessness' [EPP stakeholder B].

Benefits for children and parents

The increased awareness and understanding by teachers and principals of homelessness and family violence benefitted parents and children. Schools engaged in much more positive ways, which meant that parents felt more valued and accepted and children were able to have a more positive experience at school. This provided the opportunity for ongoing school engagement. A range of opinions and views were expressed:

> 'More patient, understanding, empathetic' [EPP stakeholder C].

> 'I have personally observed positive changes in the way schools engage with children as a result of EPP. Teaching staff, provided with a better understanding of a child's presentation,... appear amenable to recommendations provided by EPP; this leads to a positive outcome for the teaching staff, child involved, and the wider school community' [EPP stakeholder D].

> 'Many of our children had negative school experiences [due to a lack of] understanding the level of support that the disadvantaged child...needs...the one positive school experience...provided [children] more resilience/success in their ongoing school experiences...[and] parents experienced...increased trust and enthusiasm in the education system...[The local primary school] showed compassion beyond belief to offer a sense of belonging and value to parents with the most complex needs' [EPP stakeholder E].

> 'Parents have positive experiences of their children's school, where they otherwise would not. This has flow on effects for their ability to be involved in their children's [new] schools, which makes children more engaged and more likely to attend [school]...[The local primary school] embraces children and parents, and has a lot of empathy for what they have gone through. This is very different from some other schools, which blame parents for experiencing homelessness' [EPP stakeholder F].

7.2. Partnerships with schools

The positive results achieved with improving enrolments was largely made possible by the strong partnership that the EPP established with the local primary school.

Strengths of partnership

Feedback from Program staff suggested three key components as central to the strength of this partnership including collaboration; mutual trust and respect; and shared values/commitment to improve outcomes for children. The following comments were made by stakeholders:

'Because we've been able to develop this STEP [Short Term Enrolment Program], I know that the teachers know what to expect in terms of these kids might have significant gaps in their learning, so they're not always going to be up to the same reading level, maths level that all the other kids are at, so they pitch the learning appropriately. There's a strong welfare team that makes sure that they check in on that child daily, weekly, to make sure that they're tracking okay, and then let us know, communicate with us, so if there's anything that we can do. They just give us access to their school. They're so generous...we get to make lunches there. They give us access to their second-hand uniform shop. We don't have to ask, we just go in and dress our kids if we need to. We have what we call STEP meetings where we talk about our partnership and talk about certain children and things that we might need to do in order to give them the best experience that they can have in school. So, that might be, "Oh, we think that this child might be a little bit delayed. Let's refer them for an educational assessment. I think the teachers reported that their speech is behind. Let's try and get them a speech pathologist." Any behavioural issues, we'll try and have a consistent, collaborative approach, so that the child is getting the same message at the Walking School Bus and at group and then at school' [EPP stakeholder B].

'Trust in how each other worked. Both [EPP and the school] had accountability for the child in need of support. Both were willing to keep persisting on the harder to reach parents in those initial stages of building confidence/capacity. A shared sense of commitment to the needs of the child and parent living amongst poverty. There is no way EPP could have started this program without the expertise [of the local primary school], but EPP ensures that outcomes are better than what [the primary school] could do by themselves' [EPP stakeholder E].

'Good communication, trust, wanting the best for each child, inclusiveness, non-judgmental support' [EPP stakeholder G].

Challenges of partnership

Based on the information available the evaluation found that the challenges of maintaining this strong partnership, in the main, related to children's behavioural issues and the pressure of time:

'Time...the school is just so incredibly busy and we're so incredibly busy, so that's challenging... with any partnership you've got to be really mindful that you've got to attend to it, keep it positive and to keep communication lines open...' [EPP stakeholder B].

'It takes a big investment, and a lot of time and diplomacy to maintain the partnership. [The] EPP takes responsibility for things that go wrong, and doesn't ever leave the school to deal with things alone' [EPP stakeholder F].

Children's behavioural issues

The impact of homelessness and family violence on children cannot be underestimated. As noted in section 2, these experiences expose children to high levels of toxic stress.[45] This can be overwhelming for children, manifesting in behavioural and emotional difficulties.

The EPP has, therefore, invested a lot of time and effort ensuring children attend school every day; and also in providing support to the school and teachers to help them deal with children's complex needs. Having one or more children with complex needs in a classroom increased the workload for teachers. Practically, the support for teachers required the regular physical presence of the EPP workers at the school as described by the following stakeholders:

> 'The financial and workload upon [the primary school] is enormous. Some teachers would have three to four complex students settling in at any one time...We could not expect to enrol a few children with complex behavioural and emotional needs each week and not support the school. The biggest support was [EPP] being available to the school/teachers and helping them understand the child's [and] family's needs and history. The more we did this alongside identifying/highlighting the teachers' strengths [and] successes, the better the system worked' [EPP stakeholder E].

> 'The only thing that we did come across is how to deal with challenging behaviour. So, the school take a very sort of strict approach and a punishment approach, whereas we...want to build capacity with the children to deal with situations in the future. So, we...don't punish anyway but we...do give consequences for bad behaviour if necessary but we also sort of take a more of an emotional coaching approach' [EPP stakeholder A].

7.3. Engaging with transition schools

While the main partnership is with the local primary school, transition schools represent an important component of the EPP model (as noted in Section 3). The Program ultimately is about ensuring a positive transition to a child's new school, so that the child remains engaged in education and learning. Work with the new (transition) school is important, therefore, because of the consequences it has for student outcomes.

Establishing good relationships take time, and as noted earlier, schools vary; some are reportedly more receptive than others:

> 'I think it depends on the school and their knowledge of complex children and their needs, as well as their resources and desire to assist. We have worked with some incredible primary schools... all share similar social justice frameworks to [the local primary school]' [EPP stakeholder G].

> 'It's harder with other schools just because maybe some of the schools aren't aware of exactly what our program does or they might be a more affluent school so sometimes they're not as welcoming of the families that we work with...Some schools are absolutely amazing...but it just depends on some' [EPP stakeholder A].

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45   https://developingchild.harvard.edu/guide/a-guide-to-toxic-stress/

Communication is important, both in terms of raising awareness and promoting the EPP, as well as providing schools with information and context on families, but as reported by stakeholders, this also takes time:

'…it's really important that we go and provide [the schools] with that…[background information on the child and family]…if you don't introduce yourself to the [new] school well and they don't fully understand what's happening, that can impact outcomes and successful transitions. And again, that takes time…developing those relationships' [EPP stakeholder B].

'Earlier in the program when I had capacity to do it, it could have worked as well as it did at [the local primary school]. My initial children [transferred to]…[name] Primary School…My initial experience at…[the school] with two highly complex boys was challenging. However I spent much time, including being available after hours, in the early days…Once they have the 'story' and the information, [the school] will absolutely go in to bat [for students]. [This new school was]…in fact an amazing school after this. The outcome for these boys was quite incredible to be honest…Schools love genuine support' [EPP stakeholder E].

'The EPP…place considerable importance on the children integrating to…[the new] school. As such handover information is provided. From my experience this appears to have strengthened partnerships with [the new] schools' [EPP stakeholder D].

8. Strengths, challenges, and suggested improvements to the Education Pathways Program

The final evaluation question was: how could the EPP be improved? The EPP is one of very few programs providing a dedicated response to the education needs of children experiencing homelessness. The EPP has many benefits, as evidenced by the positive outcomes achieved regarding children's engagement with education, as well as their social, health, and emotional wellbeing. But was the program as effective as it could be, and were there any areas that could be enhanced?

This section presents the insights from the EPP staff on the strengths and challenges of delivering this program, and suggestions for improvements. The EPP staff were best placed to reflect on these issues given their involvement with the EPP. Their professional experience and considerable understanding of the EPP, including of the broader homelessness system, are an invaluable contribution.

8.1 Strengths

When asked to reflect on the EPP's strengths, three main themes emerged from the feedback provided by the staff, which included: a child-centred program focused on educational and social engagement; having daily contact with children; and outreach with multi-disciplinary support.

8.1.1. Child-centred program focused on educational and social engagement

The specialist homelessness system is predominantly adult focused. Children and teenagers under 18 years of age make up 29 per cent of the client group compared to the vast majority (71%) of clients who are 18 or older.[46] Consequently, many services and interventions are not necessarily geared to supporting the needs of children, and this can inadvertently undermine their health and wellbeing.[47] To address the service delivery gaps, the literature has highlighted the need for services to be responsive to the holistic needs of families, including the specific needs of children.[48]

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46 AIHW, Specialist homelessness services annual report, 2017-18.

47 Parry, Y. K., Grant, J. & Burke, L. (2016). A scoping study: children, policy and cultural shifts in homelessness services in South Australia: are children still falling through the gaps?, Health and Social Care in the Community, 24(5), e1 – e10.

48 Barker, J., Kolar, V., Mallett, S., & McArthur, M. (2013). *What works for children experiencing homelessness and/or family/domestic violence? Part 1: Literature Synthesis.* Hanover Welfare Services, Melbourne.

A program such as the EPP, which is focused on the family but where the primary client is the child, is a critical component of the program. The dedicated focus on children's educational and social engagement, delivered in a flexible and adaptable way, was regarded as a major strength of the EPP.

Many of the children supported by the EPP, in a two and half year period, achieved improved outcomes in learning and school attendance. The EPP is dedicated to ensuring that the impact of those educational outcomes reaches into the future, based on the significant role that education has as a protective factor in preventing disadvantage and intergenerational poverty.

Many of these children had substantial absences from primary school, ranging from two, three, and even up to four years. Some also had difficult family histories, and it seemed that all had been failed by key agencies responsible for their welfare: Child FIRST (Child and family information, referral and support teams), Child Protection, the Victorian Department of Education and Training.

The EPP was in a unique position because it was able to reach these families, where key agencies seemingly could not, and provided essential links back to a key mainstream universal service (primary school education), and, importantly, nurtured in children and parents alike, a sense of belonging. The following opinions and views were expressed:

'From a systems approach, when you look at the housing system, I think the EPP is 100% dedicated to improving outcomes, longitudinal outcomes for children…the housing system isn't designed to meet the needs of children, so therefore they just miss out constantly. They're socially excluded and this is a time in their life when they don't have time to waste…with that lost learning. They usually can never recover and the whole system is not designed to meet those needs at all. In terms of children, it's a terrible system and it actually creates harm…So, I think that having a dedicated program specifically for children that's flexible and moves with the children, and we know that education is the biggest protective factor for children and is an element that can break cycles of poverty and homelessness. So, I think having a succinct service that keeps that on the agenda at all times is a big strength' [EPP stakeholder B].

'The EPP is engaging, and maintaining engagement, of many of the 'harder to reach' families and the child that has fallen through [the Department of Education and Training] and [Department of Health and Housing Support]. Other family services programs can and will identify children 'higher' up the [education] ladder… DET and DHHS place individual 'responsibility' for primary school attendance alongside their parents 'responsibility' to educate their child. Despite some children not attending school, I have emails from DHHS leaders advising that school attendance is the parents 'responsibility'. For parents that do not have capacity alongside their own complexities, poverty, trauma history, there is no system to identify this child…the EPP has capacity to identify and engage the child/family that no other service is engaging…it provides a positive whole-school experience for the child, and parents, from a 'harder to reach' family to create their often first sense of belonging' [EPP stakeholder E].

'Children are given the chance to positively and safely engage in education, which has the potential to improve a lot of other areas in their life, and the lives of their parents' [EPP stakeholder F].

'Improving social, emotional and learning outcomes of children' [EPP stakeholder C].

'Re-engagement with education, Walking School Bus, social inclusion…' [EPP stakeholder G].

8.1.2. Daily outreach and contact with children

A major strength underlying the EPP is that it provides outreach support to families and has daily contact with children. Importantly, this enables rapport and engagement to develop with families. It also provides a valuable opportunity for the Program to gain detailed insight and understanding of the dynamics of families' circumstances, and help monitor the day-to-day wellbeing of children.

Such an intensive outreach model of support enables the program to coordinate quickly and effectively to respond to the emerging needs of both the child and parents. The EPP has reportedly reached those families, many with very difficult issues, by strategically targeting all children who are not attending primary school. As reported in the following comments by stakeholders its approach has been inclusive and universal.

> '[The EPP]...engages because of the generic service delivery. All families in the crisis facility are engaged by outreach in regards to school support; thus a family is not referred and does not feel targeted (which often impedes service by inadvertently highlighting the families' capacity to cope). Daily generic service/engagement has the capacity to gradually engage. EPP provides a case coordination response to the student. Given the current program structure whereby daily outreach occurs, the EPP practitioner engages the family daily, [and] thus has the best information/understanding/relationship in order to case coordinate between DHHS, school and other services...[The] EPP daily contact is powerful in numerous ways .You can't do anything unless you develop a relationship and [outreach] allows for this. Outreach and daily generic interactions allows for engagement of the harder to reach parent' [EPP stakeholder E].

> 'The key strengths,...I suppose it's the rapport with...the workers and the clients. And also just having – I suppose it's being there on the ground so picking up the children, being there with the parents every day,...picking them up to go to the programs' [EPP stakeholder A].

> '...the ability to observe the children and their caregivers to provide intervention or referrals as required. Encouraging a collaborative and consistent message to the children that they are important; their education and social and emotional wellbeing is important' [EPP stakeholder D].

8.1.3. Multi-disciplinary support

As noted in the earlier description of the Education Pathways Program (refer to section 3.4), a distinguishing feature is that the support is provided by a multi-disciplinary team that includes social workers, a psychologist, a speech pathologist (as at July 2018), and schools.

The Program's ability to coordinate such a specialist team working to improve the educational outcomes for children was also seen as a major strength by stakeholders:

> 'There's a multidisciplinary approach where we've got a speech pathologist, a psychologist, and social workers because children have experienced lost learning time, have deficiencies in their communication, in their learning and they need those specialist services to come in and address those. We know that homeless children constantly miss out on that because most of those services are centre-based [located at a fixed service site] and children can't actually get to those appointments. They cost lots of money. Our speech pathologist, our social workers, and our psychologist travel to the child, wherever they move to, and they're free and they're outreach' [EPP stakeholder B].

'It highlights how the school and [homelessness agency] can work efficiently together to impact educational outcomes of the [socially and educationally excluded] child… the EPP is about a space to coordinate better than what a school can, and better than what a service can' [EPP stakeholder E].

'A great team that understands early trauma, [and a] non-judgmental approach to ensuring the children and their parents/caregivers are well supported. An ability to work closely with the families, gain trust and encourage participation in the school and wider community' [EPP stakeholder D].

8.2. Challenges

The feedback from EPP staff regarding the key challenges for the program highlighted two main themes: limited funding and capacity, and system issues.

8.2.1. Limited funding and capacity

Program staff focused on the limited resources available, including staffing and funding. A full financial analysis of the EPP was not an objective of this evaluation; however, an acknowledgement of the importance of funding to the delivery of the program is necessary. As reported in program documents, EPP receives relatively small amounts of funding from a range of generous and supportive philanthropic foundations. This philanthropic funding was critical to the implementation of a small and innovative intervention. While the funding for the program has evolved in an ad hoc and opportunistic way, it has enabled the EPP to evolve and adapt to the changing needs of each new group of children.

Despite the important role played by philanthropy in providing financial support, it does not cover the full cost of delivering specialised support to children who are homeless and who need intensive support to address significant gaps in their education and wellbeing.

The substantial discrepancy in funding is subsequently shouldered by the two key agencies involved in the EPP: the homelessness support agency and the local primary school, both highly committed to ensuring the program continues.

However, the financial burden on both impacts on how much support can, in fact, be provided. For example, the funding restrictions have limited the range of supports that can be offered to children, and also restricted the capacity of the EPP staff to do more in-depth work with parents.

The EPP is an intensive practical response that supports and interacts with children on a daily basis, and also provides support to the local primary school so it can more effectively support children's learning. But the financial impost on schools remains substantial. Correspondence from the principal at the local primary school (Box 9) illustrates the funding amount that the primary school receives from the Department of Education and Training Victoria for each student. The figures presented range from an annual $7,654 per student in the early primary school years, down to $6,532 for each older student. This works out to an average of $7,100 per student, per year, or $177 per week, for each student.

The amount of funding that each primary school receives is determined by student numbers, which are finalised on what is called 'census day'; this occurs on the last day of February every year. However, the children supported by the EPP are enrolled in the local primary school throughout the school year. Indeed, as confirmed in a follow-up email received by the EPP the next

day (Box 10), more than 90% of the children were enrolled at the local primary school after the census day.

These figures suggest that the local primary school potentially missed out on receiving approximately $795,200 dollars in funding for around 112 children, which is 90% of the 125 children who were enrolled by the EPP between 2015 and 2018. Further, it is likely that 'transition' schools may have also missed out on receiving funding for any new students transferred by the EPP, although amounts would have varied. The loss of such a substantial amount of money subsequently meant that the financial shortfall had to be shouldered by the local primary school in order to support those children enrolled by the EPP.

Box 9: School's email regarding funding for primary school students (16 July 2018)

Edited email:

Subject: Department of Education and Training funding for primary school students

'The following are the figures the school receives per child. There are different amounts according to the grade level.

Years Prep – 1 Students: $7,654.00 per child
Year 2 Students: $7,116.00 per child
Years 3 - 6 Students: $6,532.00 per child

School fees: $395 per year, basically $100 per term. This figure is to be reviewed this term in preparation for 2019'.

Kind regards,
Principal

Box 10: Follow-up email regarding funding for primary school students (17 July 2018)

Edited email:

Subject: Department of Education and Training funding for primary school students

Hi EPP,

We have census day for funding on the last day in February each year. Most of the STEP children come to us over the year as you know, so I would confidently say that more than 90% come after census day and we miss out on any funding for them.

Leading Teacher
Student Wellbeing

A range of experiences were reported:

'Children needing greater support in schools: ongoing counselling, speech therapy, teacher assistants in the classroom to assist with huge learning gaps' [EPP stakeholder C].

'Often the families have experienced considerable negative experiences, hence support may be required which goes beyond EPP's capacity. Unfortunately, there are not always services available when needed; childcare, etc' [EPP stakeholder D].

'The EPP is time poor and would like to be able to give the school more education around homelessness, but can't;...the EPP needs more EFT [equivalent full time staff], as staff are extremely pushed for time' [EPP stakeholder F].

'Being understaffed was one [challenge] because we couldn't really do everything that we wanted to do in the program design and a lot of that meant that the building parent capacity, we didn't have the time to do' [EPP stakeholder B].

8.2.2. System issues

As indicated in section 8.1.1, the homelessness system is ostensibly focused on the needs of adults. The strengths of the homelessness sector include: providing access to accommodation and facilitating contact with other supports to bring about some degree of stability, security and predictability. Research suggests however that the sector generally is less equipped to provide interventions and approaches aimed at supporting the emotional, social and psychological meeds of children and parents.[49]

Structurally, the system reinforces an action focused approach to supporting clients, which may be limited to particular and very pragmatic goals of clients. But this can sometimes conflict with the specific needs of children and parents and can inadvertently result in negative outcomes and on rare occasions, leading to eviction. Managing crisis and temporary accommodation entails an unenviable task of balancing the needs of parents and their children with the need for rent payments and adherence to other resident obligations.

Communication and relationship building across the service system were regarded as strategies for improving system outcomes for families.

The following views were expressed by stakeholders:

'[We need] time to go and talk to...housing workers about what we do...but we've challenged the system quite a lot in terms of decisions that are made around HEF [Housing Establishment Fund] being cut off or people being moved, so we'll advocate for the child and...the...EPP philosophy...is around the children having the right to attend education, and that's paramount for us...[so] having more time to go out and foster those relationships [with workers], so they really understand what we're doing...because they're just doing the best job that they can do as well. They've got limitations in working within a system. It's all a system issue. It's not a worker issue...if we don't challenge the system, these poor outcomes are just going to happen again and again, for these kids' [EPP stakeholder B].

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49   Barker, J., Kolar, V., Mallett, S., & McArthur, M. (2013). *What works for children experiencing homelessness and/or family/domestic violence? Part 1: Literature Synthesis*. Hanover Welfare Services, Melbourne.

'If families were deemed 'non deserving' it did not matter that they had children. There were so many children that could have been identified and yet they were turned away amongst horrific trauma. Thus, our most in need families were often not supported…It was personally challenging watching a homelessness support system evicting children to no housing' [EPP stakeholder E].

'It is hard for EPP workers in regards to the housing situations of families. Improved relationships with housing teams and children's training for those teams would be great' [EPP stakeholder G].

8.3. Suggested improvements

When asked about the improvements they would make to the EPP, the feedback from the staff closely aligned with the themes highlighted in the previous section on program challenges. Improvements related to increasing the capacity of the program to reach a greater number of children; increasing support for parents; more training and education for schools; and providing practical support for schools.

8.3.1. Increase capacity to reach a greater number of children experiencing homelessness

The evaluation shows that the program had positive benefits for primary school aged children by enrolling and engaging with school. Many of whom had not attended school for significant periods of time. However, the numbers of children the EPP has assisted is really just the tip of the iceberg. Homelessness is experienced by a substantial number of children.

According to the latest figures from the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare[50] there were 6,246 primary school students supported in specialist homelessness services in Victoria in 2016-17. This represents an increase of more than 280%[51], since 2011-12 when there were around 2,000 primary school students. Many of the children supported by services would have needed a dedicated response to remain engaged with education. It is likely that for many, such a response may not have been available.

The evidence presented in the evaluation indicated that two-thirds of the children were not attending school at first contact with the EPP. Extrapolating this figure to the 6,246 children in specialist homelessness services in Victoria would indicate that around 4,122 primary school-aged children may not have been attending school over a 12 month period. This is a substantial number of children, and far greater than the numbers assisted by the EPP. The following view was shared:

'Looking at how we can change systems a little bit to better improve outcomes for…children [experiencing homelessness], because this is just one little program in one little bit of Melbourne. This [children not at school] is happening in Frankston, in the north, everywhere. We're just one little bit…these kids just fall into our program, so to speak, because of the geography of it, but how do we help children who are experiencing homelessness better in other areas?' [EPP stakeholder B].

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50   AIHW, Specialist homelessness services 2016-17, Supplementary tables – Victoria.
51   CHP (2018) Victorian Homelessness Election Platform. http://chp.org.au/electionplatform2018/

As highlighted by Program staff, expanding EPP and increasing capacity would help the Program to reach a greater number of children. It was also argued that increased capacity would also enable greater, more intensive support and advocacy work. The following observations were made by stakeholders:

'More workers, so that we could really get in and do good work in trying to help change educational attitudes, work with teachers to really look at what gaps these children have in terms of their communication, so having a speech [pathologist] really get in and do that work around where their reading and writing, what their social and emotional communication looks like. A lot of our kids have really low expressive language, so we had one boy who was 14 and his expressive language was age-equivalent at younger than four years…So, these are the kinds of kids that we're working with. It's not uncommon. Really low IQ, so…around between 70 and 80,… so we really want to look at what's happening for these children, in a cognitive space, in an emotional space, but also in an educational space, and try and provide them access to the specialist services that they need, whilst doing that work with the parents to bring them along on that journey because that takes time' [EPP stakeholder B].

'We need to identify, and be committed to, all the children in need coming through the IAP [Initial Access Point, or Entry Point to the homelessness] system. At this stage IAP is the only mechanism of identifying children disengaged from the primary schooling system' [EPP stakeholder E].

'More [staff] would allow more psych services, more speech pathologist services, and would allow workers to provide more comprehensive support to children in their [new] schools' [EPP stakeholder F].

'Somehow provide ongoing support and tutoring for children with significant learning gaps' [EPP stakeholder C].

8.3.2. Increase support for parents at a time of crisis

According to stakeholder feedback, the EPP provides much needed support for the parents during the highly stressful period that families are in crisis or emergency accommodation by simply responding in a very pragmatic way. Attending to the children and physically getting them to school each day was a crucial response that reduced stress for parents.

Minimising stress for parents is one of the key practical ways to help disadvantaged families, identified in the literature.[52] The excessive levels of stress experienced by families because of homelessness and family violence is recognised by the EPP, and informs the way they work with parents.

The EPP acknowledges, for example, that the crisis phase is not the appropriate time to implement expectations or intensive supports for parents. Instead, parents need support that focuses on strengthening their sense of belonging and social connections. It was observed by stakeholders that this type of work is based on building rapport, which takes time, and is most effective when parents and families are in a relatively stable space:

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52   Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University (2017). *Three Principles to Improve Outcomes for Children and Families*. Access via: https://developingchild.harvard.edu/resources/three-early-childhood-development-principles-improve-child-family-outcomes/

'The EPP staff are often stretched in terms of their involvement with the children. It would be ideal to have capacity to provide further support to parents/guardians to develop their connectedness and sense of belonging; small groups, social outings, parental information sessions... [EPP stakeholder D].

'...having the time to really immerse [parents] in what we're doing and that takes time to build rapport. They've got other things going on, so they might need their other issues addressed first, so that might be a referral, they might need to have mental health support, drug and alcohol support to even look at this stuff [education] and engage meaningfully, so sometimes you need time for that to happen...I wouldn't do it in a crisis context. I don't necessarily think it's very respectful ...you need to be able to have executive thought and to think critically about your parenting or what's happening to your child...So, that work, I think, is really best placed to be done when they're in transitional [medium term housing] or something like that...in crisis, [parents]...just need help, so that their stress is reduced so that they know that their children are at least getting fed, that they're at least getting to school, that they're happy and they're getting some recreation...I feel quite strongly that it's not respectful to do that parenting work in that crisis space because I wouldn't want anyone coming in and telling me to do that stuff when I didn't even know where I was going to be next week' [EPP stakeholder B].

It was suggested that a greater alignment between the EPP and the broader system is needed. It was reported that this was critical to ensure that the gains made in the EPP are not overshadowed or undermined by the demands attached to the provision of crisis accommodation:

'The improvements need to be made within the housing system' [EPP stakeholder E].

'Improve relationships with housing teams, [both] internal and external' [EPP stakeholder G].

8.3.3. Training and education for schools

Engaging with schools, especially around increasing awareness and understanding of the issues of homelessness and its impact on children, and having the time to be able to do this, was a consistent theme identified by stakeholders. It also includes providing schools with the necessary information and context for each student to facilitate more effective support:

'Primarily, I think the [transition/new] schools it is the education, I suppose and trying to get in there and really make sure that everyone's got an understanding of backgrounds that the families come from and challenges they may face' [EPP stakeholder A].

'Roll out the EPP in many other schools; provide education to teaching staff around homelessness, trauma and the impact on the children. Continue to develop programs that keep children connected to their school' [EPP stakeholder D].

8.3.4. Practical support for schools

Stakeholders also talked about the importance of having time to be able to support schools in a practical way, and in real time:

'It's all about time; it requires providing a school with necessary information, that [the] EPP has as it learns about the family...through daily outreach and [contact during] Walking School Bus. It's about being available in a timely manner, i.e. that day, when a school rings needing support [about a child]...' [EPP stakeholder E].

'More EFT [effective full-time staff] would see EPP with more time to support schools, which would allow schools to be more supportive of students' [EPP stakeholder F].

8.4. The counterfactual: no Education Pathways Program

Ultimately, safe and stable housing is crucial to the development, health and wellbeing of children, including their attendance and engagement with education. Importantly, the early and timely provision of housing is necessary to minimise the harmful impact of homelessness on children. Where access to safe and stable housing remains elusive, efforts to support and maintain children's engagement with education should be paramount.[53] But, as the broader research evidence shows, ongoing homelessness will directly impact children's educational outcomes.

Indeed, the damaging effects of homelessness on children's education can continue even after housing has been stabilised.[54] Therefore, once families are housed, children may continue to need specific and specialised support to address their educational disadvantage.[55]

It is noteworthy that the case file of each child, and their family, supported by the EPP is never closed even though the family has moved to permanent housing, and the children, to a new school. Thus, if needed, the family is able to seek further follow up support from the EPP, at any time in the future; the importance of this is stressed in the literature.[56]

So, what would it have meant for these children, and their parents, if the EPP did not exist? This counterfactual question was asked of the EPP stakeholders. The consensus from their feedback was that the situation for children would, unquestionably, be serious.

Without the EPP, the stakeholders argued that these primary school-aged children would not be going to school, a place that provides routine, structure, stability, and a safe place where children can escape the daily crisis of their lives. Instead, it was felt that their emotional wellbeing would weaken each day as feelings of boredom, sadness, anger, and isolation grow and overwhelm. The everyday experience of homelessness would directly compound both educational disengagement and longer-term disadvantage. The following views were expressed:

'Well, what I did see before is that children would be in crisis accommodation for long periods of time and not attend school. I saw that their affect was very flat and quickly went downhill... It affects their behaviour, their demeanour, the way they communicated. They were angry, they were sad. And so, that's what we saw and that's why we designed this program...' [EPP stakeholder B].

'Children would sit in [crisis accommodation] for months on end, would be bored, would be saturated in adult problems and would be unable to be kids. Their lost learning time would be astronomical, and their development would be stifled. Parents would try to get them to school, but this would add stress to an already enormously stressful life, and this would be a struggle. Parents wouldn't see the community support [the] EPP provides, and they wouldn't get the flow on effects of relationship and community' [EPP stakeholder F].

53   https://www.nationalhomeless.org/publications/facts/education.html

54   Institute for Children, Poverty and Homelessness (2016). *Aftershocks: The Lasting Impact of Homelessness on Student Achievement*, Policy Brief, February, available at: www.ICPHusa.org

55   Institute for Children, Poverty and Homelessness (2016). *Aftershocks: The Lasting Impact of Homelessness on Student Achievement*, Policy Brief, February, available at: www.ICPHusa.org

56   Barker, J., Kolar, V., Mallett, S., & McArthur, M. (2013). *What works for children experiencing homelessness and/or family/domestic violence? Part 1: Literature Synthesis*. Hanover Welfare Services, Melbourne

'There would be many children not going to school; there would be more parents/guardians feeling they are not equipped with the tools to parent, to get their children to school, to feed them, etc. Many children in crisis would continue to feel excluded from their community and positive peer network. There would be missed opportunity for children to be involved in a positive, cohesive group (sport, school holiday programs) to assist in social skill development. There would be less opportunity to observe the children and support referrals to agencies as required, including child protection' [EPP stakeholder D].

'Children would sit in motels and miss key developmental milestones. They would continue moving around and not be picked up by child protection or other support services due to their transience...' [EPP stakeholder G].

It was further argued that children would miss out on learning social skills and opportunities to take part in sport and recreational activities and miss critical academic learning. Missing out on learning fundamental skills in the early primary school years, especially in reading and writing, leaves children academically vulnerable to falling further and further behind their peers. For example, phonics is a method of teaching students to read and pronounce words by connecting sounds with how words are spelt. Learning about phonics is essential to being able to learn to read and write; but it is a skill only taught in the early years of primary school. As noted in program documents:

'From Prep to Year 3, children are learning to read. From Year 3 on they are reading to learn'.

In effect, this would mean that children who have difficulty with reading, writing and comprehending language, will experience comprehension challenges in every subject they learn. As noted in the broader research, these educational challenges will be exacerbated as children get older and fall further behind. Such disadvantage has far-reaching implications for the development and wellbeing of children.[57,58]

For example, a 2015 study of 100 young people completing custodial sentences in New South Wales found that rates of language impairment were relatively high. Only 25% of these young people achieved Language Scores in the expected range; 75% did not.[59]

In response to the language and literacy challenges that emerged for many of the children participating in the EPP, a speech pathologist was employed on a contract basis in July 2018. Speech pathologists can assess for comprehension disorders, which is something that psychologists cannot do. Many of the children attending the EPP need intensive speech therapy, something that is not routinely available in schools, as one EPP stakeholder remarked:

57   Centre for Community Child Health, Murdoch Children's Research Institute (2018), *Research Snapshot: Addressing disadvantage to optimise children's development in Australia*, May.

58   United States Interagency Council on Homelessness (2018), Homelessness in America: Focus on Families with Children. Accessed via: https://www.usich.gov/resources/uploads/asset_library/Homeslessness_in_America_Families_with_Children.pdf

59   Pamela C. Snow, Mary Woodward, Monique Mathis and Martine B. Powell (2016), Language functioning, mental health and alexithymia in incarcerated young offenders, International Journal of Speech-Language Pathology, Vol. 18, 2016, Issue 1. Accessed via: https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.3109/17549507.2015.1081291

'…I'm really passionate about the…[speech therapy]…in a perfect world, having a speech…[pathologist] at the school to do specific interventions with these children would be amazing. Q: And schools don't do that? R: Apparently…[speech pathologists] are as rare as hen's teeth and they mainly do assessments…but…the interventions that our kids need, the Department [of Education and Training] can't provide. Q: And they can't provide it because? R: So, our intervention…is that our [speech pathologist]…sees the kids two to three times a week and we're doing term by term at the moment. I mean, our kids who are…years behind [and] need speech interventions for three or four years or more, but the Department, there's just not that capacity' [EPP stakeholder].

9. Conclusion and recommendations

The evidence presented in this report adds to the substantial body of literature that shows just how devastating homelessness, and the compounding effect of family violence, is for children. Homelessness, and family violence, contribute to a range of health and social difficulties, and severely restrict access of children to school, which has far-reaching consequences for children's future wellbeing and their capacity to participate economically and socially as adults.

Overall, the evidence indicates that the Education Pathways Program (EPP) provides a critical intervention and support for children up to 12 years of age experiencing homelessness. The EPP successfully supported children's engagement or re-engagement with mainstream education, and achieved other significant positive outcomes for children who were disengaged from primary school.

The EPP is an exemplar of an 'early intervention' strategy that aims to mitigate the immediate and longer term harm caused by homelessness by focusing on children in the crisis period of homelessness and in the early years of education. A critical time for children's cognitive, social, emotional and physical development.

An innovative and quality program with a firm and abiding commitment to ensure that children are linked to schools as quickly as possible, the EPP is flexible, adapting to the various and emerging needs of each new cohort of children experiencing homelessness. For example, it emerged that many of the children had difficulties with comprehending language, so in July 2018, a speech pathologist was appointed for children with comprehension disorders to help them learn basic phonic principles they had not acquired in the early primary years due to absences from school. Missing out on this essential learning is likely to have detrimental repercussions, affecting other areas of education.

And in January 2019, the EPP expanded its focus on the pre-school/kindergarten years in response to an increase in young children, aged three or four, needing support. Accordingly, the EPP has established a partnership with a local kindergarten that will ensure access to early childhood education.

Children need routine, stability, and especially to feel safe. In general, schools provide a safe and nurturing haven that can temper the impact of the trauma and toxic stress of homelessness and family

violence. The broader research evidence indicates that positive outcomes are possible when intervention occurs for children who are in crisis accommodation, even for those children with significant needs and difficulties.

Key outcomes achieved

The evaluation focused on the outcomes achieved by the three objectives of the EPP including: improve children's engagement with education; support parents to support children; and improve the capacity of schools to support children's educational engagement.

1. Children's engagement with education improved.

   Engagement was facilitated by increasing 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 had attended school regularly.

   The EPP responded to the challenge in a very practical way, using the Walking School Bus to physically get children to school each day. This provided a great opportunity for children to interact socially with each other, and with EPP workers.

   The extent of educational disadvantage reported was substantial. Overall, 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 with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties. Both teacher and formal educational assessments showed that many of the children enrolled by the EPP were many years behind their peers.

   For those students who demonstrated significant learning difficulties, formal learning and cognitive assessments were undertaken, which resulted in individual learning plans. This provided information for teachers and parents that enabled them to provide targeted support to better engage, and re-engage, the young students in education. It also led to a number of applications to access critical teachers' aides for students.

   However, these were limited to the 23% of students who met the criteria for the program for Students with Disabilities, under the category of Intellectual Disability (PSD-ID). Critically, despite significant learning gaps, most were just on the cusp of the eligibility criteria for an intellectual disability, and consequently, were reported as not qualifying for financial assistance that, if available, would have provided access to intensive support to address the huge gaps in learning.

   The limited financial capacity of the participating families was a significant barrier that will likely increase the risk of ongoing educational disadvantage and hardship for the children. Without the EPP providing the funding needed to secure intensive assistance, it was observed that these children would effectively be completely excluded from, what should be, universal education.

   While the State Government's commitment to quality and inclusive education is illustrated in the Education State reforms, one of the programs (LOOKOUT) which

focuses on providing educational and financial support to disadvantaged students, is targeted to children and young people in state care. There is no apparent mention of children who are experiencing homelessness. The EPP is one of the very few programs in the specialist homelessness sector dedicated to the provision of much needed educational support, including financial assistance, for these children.

While the longer-term impact of the EPP on the lives of the children, and their parents, was out of scope of this particular evaluation, the current evidence suggests that without the EPP, the trajectory for many of the children was highly likely to be a lifetime of hardship and social and economic exclusion.[60]

2. Parents' capacity to support children improved.

The philosophy of the EPP is that for parents living in crisis, the best response is practical help and support; this is especially important given that many parents did not have extended family who could assist.

While in short-term emergency accommodation, parents were not in a position to take on any more than what they already had to do in order to secure housing, such as looking for rental properties, and engaging with housing workers.

The very practical support that the EPP provided to the parents, by simply taking charge of their children's schooling, by enrolling and physically getting children to school each day, was reported by stakeholders as being invaluable. This practical response helps reduce the high levels of stress experienced by parents regarding their children's wellbeing.

Indeed, reducing parental stress is one of three key principles emphasised by international researchers as a critical means to improve family outcomes:

'The science of child development and the core capabilities of adults point to a set of "design principles" that policymakers and practitioners in many different sectors can use to improve outcomes for children and families. That is, to be maximally effective, policies and services should:

1. Support responsive relationships for children and adults;

2. Strengthen core life skills; and

3. Reduce sources of stress in the lives of children and families'. [61]

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60   Deborah A. Cobb-Clark and Anna Zhu (2015). 'Childhood Homelessness and Adult Employment: The Role of Education, Incarceration, and Welfare Receipt', *Melbourne Institute Working Paper No. 18/15*, September.

61   Centre on the Developing Child at Harvard University (2017). *Three Principles to Improve Outcomes for Children and Families*. Access at: http://www.developingchild.harvard.edu

3. **Improved capacity of schools to support the education of children who were homeless.**

   Collaborations with schools, building capacity of schools to better understand homelessness and its impact for students is a fundamental component of the EPP. A lack of understanding runs the risk of inappropriate responses to student who may present with challenging behaviours, which, in turn, could lead to adverse consequences for a child's education experience.

   The bulk of the work in this area focused on establishing and strengthening the partnership with the main local primary school. It was apparent that this very strong and mutually rewarding relationship, committed to improving outcomes for children, reaped significant benefits for all stakeholders.

   Access to education for the children was assured and they were immediately enrolled at the local school. Workers from the EPP had a daily presence at the school each morning after bringing children with the Walking School Bus. This provided an opportunity for the EPP to share information with teachers, or answer their queries or concerns on how the children were settling in. The local school was very receptive to receiving this support from the EPP workers, given they had a number of children attending their school, most of whom had traumatic and difficult backgrounds.

   Originally, the EPP had planned to do a number of presentations with as many schools as required to increase knowledge and understanding of homelessness and family violence. But the list of new schools that students had transitioned to was extensive; presentations at each of these new schools was simply not feasible given the limited resources. Nevertheless, communication remained a central goal. So new schools were informed about the context and particular circumstances of each new student, along with detailed assessments of their educational development and learning needs.

Key challenges:

- Limited funding and capacity:
  - The nature of funding is time-limited which means that it may not continue beyond any given financial year; it was reported this makes it difficult for the EPP to confidently offer supports in a consistent and ongoing way, and to be able to increase its capacity by employing more full-staff;
  - It also limits the scale of the program so it cannot reach more of the many children experiencing homelessness[62] and vulnerable to falling through the gaps of the education system; the numbers of children supported by the EPP most likely represents the 'tip of the iceberg'; and
  - It was reported that important work on capacity building with parents and with schools was not fully implemented, due to the lack staff, time and funding.
- System issues:

  Broader homelessness system is adult-focused, with many services and interventions

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62   AIHW Specialist Homelessness Services Annual Report, 2017-18, Data Tables, National https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/homelessness-services/specialist-homelessness-services-2017-18/data

designed to respond to the needs of adult clients. This runs the risk that the needs of children and their parents are sometimes overshadowed or may be inadvertently undermined. In some rare instances, this has resulted in the eviction of families from services.

The challenge for the EPP is to increase awareness and understanding in the broader homelessness system to ensure that services respond to the holistic needs of families, including the specific educational, health and welfare needs of children.

Key recommendations:

System level

- Education State strategies recognise children experiencing homelessness as a unique group that requires tailored and intensive support to overcome significant educational disadvantage.
- Advocacy for ongoing funding from the relevant Commonwealth department and the State Department of Education and Training, which have major responsibility for the provision of universal education, to ensure the EPP model can continue and be expanded across the homelessness service system.
- Funding to schools should be accessible throughout the year so that those schools that enrol children experiencing homelessness after February each year (the school census date), are not financially burdened.
- The education and other support needs of children experiencing homelessness be tracked to minimise the risk of them falling through gaps in the service system.
- It would be valuable to include questions on education needs and school enrolment in intake and assessment processes, with education needs included as specific goals in support plans for each child experiencing homelessness.
- Promotion of EPP across the homelessness service sector to raise awareness and understanding of the impact and extent of educational disadvantage for children, to improve the service response.
- Safe and appropriate housing is critical to the wellbeing of children and parents, but ongoing educational support for children is needed to address significant learning gaps.
- Alternate strategies to evictions continue to be developed with the view of balancing the need for rent payments and the need of children and their parents for secure and stable accommodation.

Program level

- Funding for the EPP be continued as it addresses the educational need among children experiencing homelessness.
- Assertive outreach be expanded to reach out to children experiencing homelessness and at risk of not attending school, who may be accommodated in a range of short-stay motels/hotels.

- Dedicated Education Worker role be appointed to strengthen partnerships between homelessness services and local primary schools, and
  – To engage and work with a range of new schools that students move to, and
  – To monitor the progress and circumstances of those students.
- Given the significance of phonics to language comprehension and literacy skills, a speech pathologist should be appointed in a permanent ongoing capacity.

Data/Research

- Data collection processes be improved and simplified in consultation with data and research teams to capture children as individual clients, including their education status, history and support needs.
- The voices of children and parents be included in subsequent evaluations of the EPP.
- Explore the potential to develop a longitudinal research project that investigates the longer-term impact of the EPP on children's educational, health and wellbeing outcomes, and the trajectory of their lives more broadly.

63   ABS, *4922.0 – Information Paper – A Statistical Definition of Homelessness, 2012*, 2012, Available from www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Latestproducts/4922.0Main%20Features22012?opendocumentandamp;tabn.

64   http://www.legislation.vic.gov.au/Domino/Web_Notes/LDMS/LTObject_Store/LTObjSt8.nsf/DDE300B846EED9C7CA257616000A3571/F86390FD1597F377CA257D0900192324/$FILE/08-52aa024%20authorised.pdf

Appendix 1:

Defining homelessness and family violence

Homelessness

The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS)[63] defines a person as homeless if they do not have suitable accommodation options and their current living arrangement:

- Is in a dwelling that is inadequate, or
- Has no tenure, or if their initial tenure is short and not extendable, or
- does not allow them to have control of, and access to space for social relations (ABS 2011, 2049.0)

Anyone can be considered homeless if they are:

- Sleeping in improvised dwellings, tents or sleeping out;
- Staying in supported accommodation for the homeless;
- Staying temporarily with other households;
- Staying in boarding houses;
- Staying in other temporary lodgings; or
- Living in severely overcrowded dwellings.

Family Violence

The Family Violence Protection Act 2008 (Vic)[64] defines family violence in section 5 as:

(a) behaviour by a person towards a family member of that person if that behaviour—

(i) is physically or sexually abusive; or

(ii) is emotionally or psychologically abusive; or

(iii) is economically abusive; or

(iv) is threatening; or

(v) is coercive; or

(vi) in any other way controls or dominates the family member and causes that family member to feel fear for the safety or wellbeing of that family member or another person; or

(b) behaviour by a person that causes a child to hear or witness, or otherwise be exposed to the effects of, behaviour referred to in paragraph (a).

Appendix 2:
Revised Evaluation Framework – Education Pathways Program (as at 4 September 2018)

Program objective	Evaluation question	Intended outcomes	Measure (Indicator)	Data source
1. Children's engagement with education improved	1. Did the program achieve its objective to improve children's engagement with education?	• Improve school enrolments • Improve school engagement • Improve social, health and emotional wellbeing • Develop and support education transition plans	• Increase in school enrolment • Positive attitudes towards school • Increase in school attendance (drop in absenteeism) • Number participating in walking school bus • Increase in sense of belonging at school • Number participating in extra-curricular activity • Number of transition plans (to new school) • Number of learning support plans / educational assessments completed	• Program data, including assessment forms, pre- and post-assessment instruments, school reports, learning and transition plans • Case file notes
2. Capacity of parents to support children	2. What impact has the program had for parents regarding their child's education?	• Enhanced confidence to support child's education • Increased confidence to engage with teachers	• Increase in confidence to engage with teachers (parent/teacher nights) • Increase in getting child to school on time • Increase in helping child with homework • Positive attitudes towards school • Increase involvement in school activities • Number of parents engaged with the EPP	• Worker reflections • Case file notes

| 3. Capacity of schools to support children's educational engagement improved | 3. What impact did the program have on schools capacity to support children? | • Increased awareness of homelessness/ family violence and impact on children's learning
• Strong partnerships between the EPP and schools | • Number of school staff participating in information sessions on homelessness/ family violence
• Increase in understanding / knowledge of homelessness/ family violence and impact on children's learning
• Increase in confidence to support children who experience homelessness/ family violence
• More positive/ creative ways schools relate/ engage with children and parents
• Increase in schools knowledge of the EPP
• Frequency of contact between the EPP and schools | • Worker reflections |
| | 4. How could the program be improved? | Continuous program improvements | • Potential improvements reported by key worker/s | • Worker reflections |

Appendix 3:
Education Pathways Program – Program Logic
(as at 21 April 2017)

Vision

The Education Pathways Program aims to improve educational outcomes for children experiencing homelessness and/or family violence by supporting school attendance and engagement (defined as 'consistent and willing participation and a positive attitude toward education'), and by working in partnership with schools and other agencies to better support children and their parents.

Specific objectives (these are the outcomes we want the program to achieve):

1. Children's engagement with education improved
2. Parents capacity to support children improved
3. Schools capacity to support children improved
4. Wellbeing improved for children and their parents
5. Agencies capacity to support children improved

Target group

Primary school-aged children experiencing homelessness and/or family violence and residing in crisis accommodation who are not enrolled in school, and their parents. In particular, the program has a focus on children with other complex or additional needs as a result of negative outcomes associated with homelessness.

Assumptions

Children who experience homelessness and/or family violence are likely to suffer a range of negative outcomes which may result in complex or additional needs:

- Disruption and disengagement from education & learning
- Poor physical health and emotional wellbeing
- Disengagement from friends & community
- More likely than other children to have experienced single or multiple traumas

Children who enter the homelessness service system require a dedicated response especially in relation to education:

- Participation in learning and educational development reduces the risk of vulnerability to an ongoing cycle of homelessness and disadvantage
- School engagement and continuity of learning is essential to ensuring the healthy development and wellbeing of children
- Participation in school provides stability, normality and safety, which are especially important during periods of instability, uncertainty and change

- Participation in education and learning increases self-esteem & confidence and is a platform for greater community engagement
- Disruption to learning and educational development needs to be addressed as quickly and as early as possible in order to break the cycle of educational disadvantage

Homelessness and/or family violence is also distressing and disruptive for parents/caregivers who may need:

- Assistance to support their children during times of crisis
- Assistance to help their children connect/re-connect with school

Appendix 3:
Education Pathways Program – Program Logic (as at 21 April 2017)

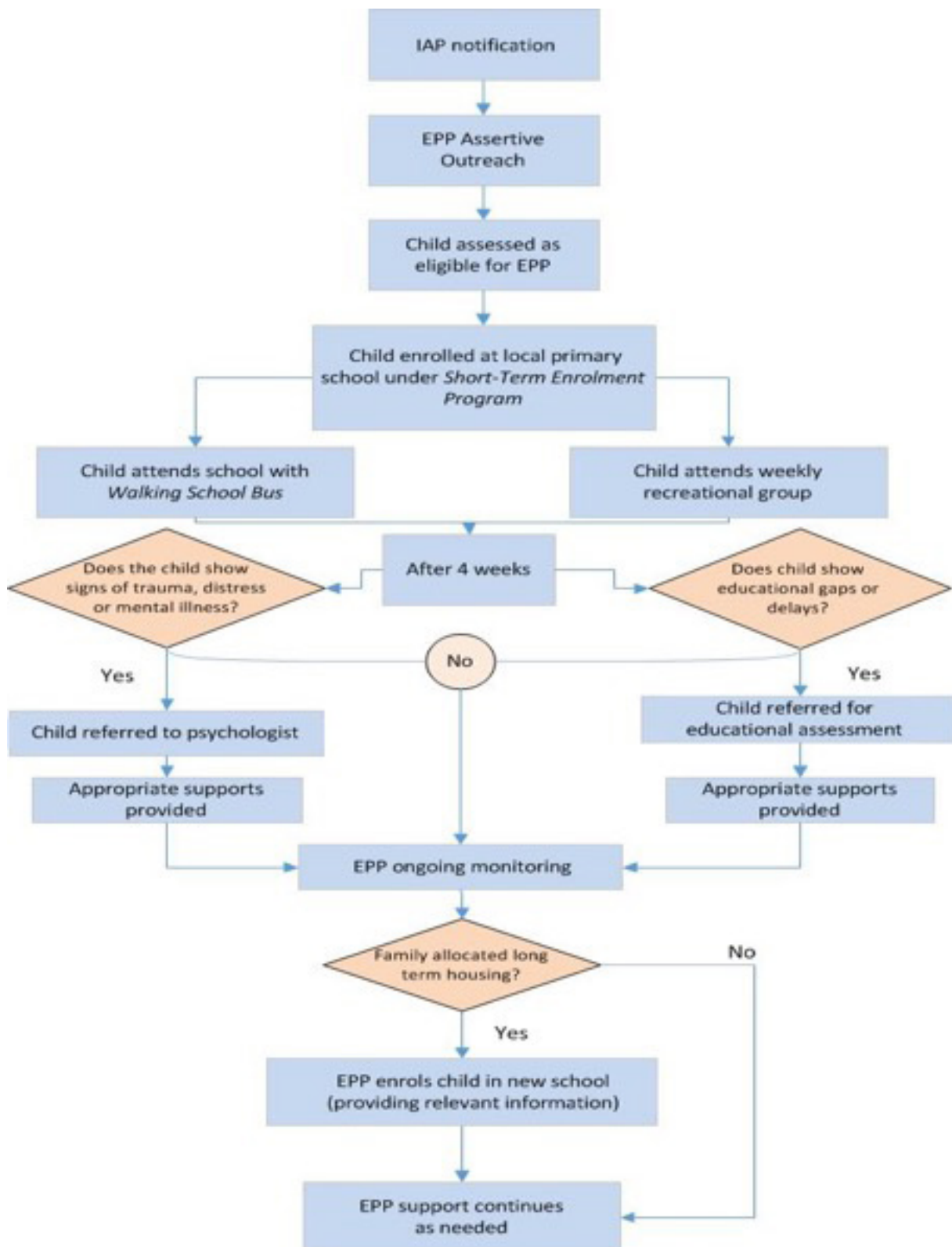| Inputs	Activities	Outputs	Outcomes	Impact
Participants • Targeted support to families with primary school-aged children in emergency accommodation with a particular focus on children with additional or complex needs **Resources – Direct from EPP** • Coordinator (0.8 FTE) • Education Pathways Facilitator (0.6 FTE) • Volunteer • CSSS Program Psychologist • Brokerage resources • Material aid • Office space • Use of pool car	**Intake and assessment** • Eligibility review for any primary aged student not currently attending school • Identifying and referring children attending other schools to Child Protection or other support services **Service provision** • Assertive outreach model • Timely enrolment of children in school • Provide uniforms and school supplies • Take children to school with Walking School Bus • Assess needs and form support relationship with parent through daily contact of Walking School Bus • Provision of breakfast, lunch boxes and material aid i.e. uniforms • Care coordination – housing (Accommodation Options for Families / family programs), child protection, school and Adventure Playground • Raising profile of primary education within Child Protection and housing agencies • Education and other support to family • After school activities: Longtable and After School Club • Referrals to therapeutic support services after 'crisis phase' • Link with local services (e.g. dentist, local library, Adventure Playground) • Support for medical review • Exit (Transition) planning **Collaboration/links with schools** • Identify child's education history • Lead role with local primary school for all Short-Term Enrolment Program (STEP) students including daily school liaison and monitoring of all STEP students • STEP committee chair (monthly meetings) • 2 education sessions / presentations to schools on poverty and homelessness • 2-3 hrs daily to make and deliver lunches and support admin, teachers, welfare, nurse, accounts, management etc. • Educational, psycho-social and cognitive assessment • 1:1 counselling and or support for parent and/or child • Develop Individual Learning Plan and/or teacher support plans • Classroom and playground observations	• Number of children engaged in program • Number of children enrolled in school, including regular attendance • Individualised learning and/or support plans developed • School engaged in program	**Children's engagement with education improved** • Children enrolled at school • Children engaged at school • Relationship with peers • Participation in extra-curricular activity • Transition Plan (for new school) **Parents capacity to support children improved** • Enhanced confidence in their abilities and skills to support their child's education • Increased confidence to engage with teachers • Reduced stress **Schools capacity to support children improved** • Increased understanding/ knowledge of homelessness and impact on children's learning • Strong partnership established • Increased confidence to support children who are homeless **Wellbeing improved for children and parents** • Nutritional needs met • Connected to local community networks/ sense of belonging • Healthy physical development • Healthy mental development • The mental space to resolve crisis (parents) • Child/parent relationships • Greater family cohesion	Educational outcomes improved for children experiencing homelessness and/or family violence

Appendix 3
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A flowchart depicting the Education Pathways Program support process:

- IAP notification
- EPP Assertive Outreach
- Child assessed as eligible for EPP
- Child enrolled at local primary school under *Short-Term Enrolment Program*
  - Child attends school with *Walking School Bus*
  - Child attends weekly recreational group
- After 4 weeks
  - Does the child show signs of trauma, distress or mental illness?
    - Yes: Child referred to psychologist → Appropriate supports provided
    - No
  - Does child show educational gaps or delays?
    - Yes: Child referred for educational assessment → Appropriate supports provided
- EPP ongoing monitoring
- Family allocated long term housing?
  - Yes: EPP enrols child in new school (providing relevant information)
  - No
- EPP support continues as needed

Appendix 5:

Example of handover notes for student transferring to new school – observation and assessment data completed by classroom teacher

General overview

We hope today is a smooth transition for Sam*. Here are some observation notes and data analysis for Sam's new teacher.

Sam has attended school regularly. He is punctual, greets you with a friendly smile, is inquisitive, loves talking and asking questions all the time and generally being around people.

Sam loves playtime and running around, so setting small goals for him to complete before going out on a break can be motivation enough to produce some work.

Perhaps getting Sam to do some of those initial getting to know you type activities, like all about me, compare and contrast with potential friends, might help you and the other children get to know Sam a little more.

Although Sam had a good awareness of what our school and classroom rules were he had difficulty following them.

Sam calls a spade, a spade, both with the teacher and the other students. This often caused conflict with the other children as he would often point out the other children's weaknesses, which would embarrass them or cause arguments. Sitting Sam near resilient children who can focus on their work or near where you are working in the classroom was a strategy we employed.

Making sure Sam has all the resources he needs for an activity will reduce him moving around the room, so it is worth spending the first minute of each lesson checking that he has everything he needs and understands the learning intention and his own personal goal for the session.

Assessment data

We have had Sam in our classroom for 5 weeks and during this time he has shown little growth in Reading, Writing and Mathematics. He is unable to complete work in a set timeframe unless you are working with him one on one. Even then, it is hard for him to sit still and fully engage in the task at hand. During our whole class focus and share time he is often distracting others, calling out or trying to move around the room.

Reading - Running record score Level 30 1:7 Hard

Sam needs to employ all reading strategies as he often asks the teacher what the word is before having a go. (Eagle Eye- Looking at the picture, Stretchy snake- Slowly stretching each letter sound together, Chunky Monkey- breaking down words into chunks and Try'in Lion- rereading the sentence to see what would make sense.)

During guided reading groups we have been focusing on highlighting the main idea of a paragraph and identifying key words to help us understand and summarise what the text is saying. Sam can answer literal questions from information reports and can highlight the key word. Sam had trouble using these key words to create a sentence.

Writing - Sam has not completed one writing sample independently in 5 weeks. He avoids writing and will become easily distracted. Sharpening pencils, finding a rubber, looking for his literacy book, etc.

Spelling - SWST Level 2

Can spell high frequency words but spells phonetically.

Maths - Number Vic Curriculum 2

Sam likes Mathematics better than literacy and will work confidently in a small teacher group on the floor. During his time in our classroom we have been learning multiplication and he is confident at using different strategies such as making arrays, drawing illustrations and skip counting to help him find his answer. He is currently learning his times-tables and can automatically recall his 2s, 5s, 10s number facts. Sam understands that division is the inverse operation and that he can use his multiplication facts to help him divide. In small groups or one on one with the teacher Sam is able to demonstrate all of this, but as soon as he is asked to complete a task individually he is unable to apply his knowledge.

Inquiry/Coding - During Sam's short time in our classroom, we have been working on a coding program on the iPad called Scratch Jn. He was really engaged during these sessions and can confidently use the program and make algorithms to move objects.

If you have any other questions or concerns, please don't hesitate to email us.

Kind Regards
Grade 3 Teachers
Local Primary School

Name and some details changed to maintain anonymity

**Launch
HOUSING**

IT'S TIME TO END
HOMELESSNESS