

Capacity to submit

Community Information & Support Victoria (CISVic) is the peak body representing local community information and support services representing 60 community-based, not-for-profit agencies, staffed by over 1,279 paid staff and in excess of 5,353 volunteers.

Our local services assist people experiencing personal and financial difficulties by providing information, referral and support services including Emergency Relief, financial counselling and financial literacy. Our agencies provide free services to an average of 300,000 people every year.

We direct people who need help to local centres for services.

Helping those most in need Our main work is with the vulnerable and disadvantaged, including those on welfare payments, single parents, newly arrived, refugees, those with mental health issues, drug and alcohol issues and those experiencing family violence and family breakdown.

Emergency relief Many of our agencies can provide emergency relief, both financial and practical, by providing food, food vouchers, travel cards, petrol vouchers, assistance with household bills, rent, pharmaceutical supplies and telephone bills.

One voice for many We liaise with all tiers of government and other peak bodies, conduct training and undertake sound, evidence-based research. We are grateful to the State and Federal Governments for their funding support for core and special projects. We also have increasingly strengthening contact and cooperation with a range of peer organisations.

This is a vital interface for not just CISVic and its members but also for the community support sector as a whole, exploring more effective use of resources, skills and funding conduits. This has included partnerships to deliver important training to volunteers and community workers.

We also sit on a number of state & federal government groups including a State Ministerial Advisory Council and Federal Consultative Committee and other relevant peak body advisory groups, including VCOSS (Victorian Council of Social Services), the ultimate state community peak body.

CISVic agencies are embedded in their communities

The CISVic membership service model is place-based and holistic in working with its communities and clients. The provision of supported services by CISVic member agencies is primarily directed at vulnerable and disadvantaged families and individuals who fall through service gaps. As generalist services providing a range of free, confidential and supported services, we connect vulnerable people and families to vital services and their communities.

Collectively, the CISVic ER Consortium of thirty (30) agencies, is the second largest Federal Government funded provider of ER services in Victoria. In total, forty-two (42) CISVic agencies deliver ER across forty-eight (48) sites from a combination of government, philanthropic and donated funds. Our engagement with community, local service providers and stakeholders is built on a strong local presence, place-based focus to problem identification and solution, and by drawing upon and enhancing local social capital.

Submission

CISVic member agencies provide support to families experiencing financial and personal crisis through the provision of material and/or financial aid through emergency relief (ER) programs. Twenty-five (25) member agencies across metropolitan Melbourne provide some education support to families, predominantly this consists of support towards the cost of education. All clients accessing our ER services experience financial difficulties, and families receiving ER do so because they cannot make ends meet. The rising cost of education is a contributing factor to the financial stress that families experience at the beginning of each school year.

Our submission highlights the inadequacies in the current funding structure, particularly where they are not sufficiently flexible to take into account the rising cost of education, and the support needs of low-income, low-resourced families.

Effectiveness of current funding model

We note that the Student Resource Package (SRP) allocated a very small proportion of funds to social disadvantage. Whilst we support needs-based funding, we believe there should be more allocated to schools to address the impact of social disadvantage on students' wellbeing. Funding needs to acknowledge family circumstances and how this impacts on a student's ability to perform and achieve in the classroom. The Federal Government's Budget measures and withdrawal from funding commitments to education will leave gaps in funding for targeted programs aimed at addressing inequality and disadvantage in school communities.

The uncertainty around Federal Government funding commitment, the rising costs of essential household expenses, and the increasing gap in educational outcomes between the most and least disadvantaged students are crucial drivers for change in the current funding model. We therefore recommend that equity funding be based on a broader range of indicators than currently is the case for SRP. This should include factors such as:

- The concentration of disadvantage within a school *and* the community around the school (such as based on ABS SEIFA index);¹
- A consideration for 'pockets of disadvantage' and the relative needs of low socio-economic students compared to higher-resourced families in the same school community;
- Family income in recognition of the impact of rising education costs on students' engagement with education and social inclusion.

Supporting disadvantaged students

The *2015 Dropping off the Edge Report* maps the compounding impact location has on disadvantaged communities and families. Socio-economically disadvantaged students often lead chaotic lives where constant financial stress and social isolation challenge resource-poor parents' ability to engage in their children's education. Our work with families and individuals with complex

¹ The *2015 Dropping off the Edge Report* reaffirms that locational disadvantage is deeply entrenched and difficult to shift. These communities experience a complex web of persistent disadvantage that include high rates of unemployment, criminal convictions, disability and low education among other indicators of disadvantage. See <http://www.dote.org.au/findings/executive-summary/>.

needs highlight the importance of wrap-around service delivery, holistic support infrastructure and acknowledging the inter-connectedness of problems and their solutions in addressing disadvantage.

Needs based funding should also provide for school-based and local responses to disadvantage that directly addresses the issues and problems faced by vulnerable and disadvantaged families. Importantly, where concentrations of disadvantage exist, such funding should enhance the capacity for schools to work with community, relevant support services and families to remove barriers to better student outcomes.

We therefore recommend that to more effectively support disadvantaged students:

- The overall quantum of funding, as well as the percentage for equity funding, needs to increase;
- Appropriately fund schools and/or support low-income families to meet the rising cost of education;
- Consideration be made to a funding model that addresses the gap in educational attainment between disadvantaged and mainstream students. One possible model is *Pupil Premium* in the United Kingdom whereby schools are allocated funding to address inequality by giving schools the means to adequately resource and support disadvantaged students, with flexibility to respond at both the school and the individual level²;
- Funding and policy settings that supports collaborative partnerships at a regional or cluster level (for example, psychologist, social/welfare worker) to address gaps in services, particularly in areas experiencing ‘pockets of disadvantage’;
- Better resourcing and support for schools to engage with external community and welfare services at a regional/cluster level to address inequality and its impact on student outcomes.

Transparency and Accountability

Currently, there is very little transparency with regard to how schools are funded, outcomes reported and where the vulnerable students are in the education system. There is also a lack of consistency between schools as to how funding is used to address disadvantage, and how parents and families experiencing disadvantage or financial crisis can be supported by the school community. From our experience, parent payments towards the cost of education are increasing, and whilst this varies widely between schools and regions, they are on the rise and parents are feeling more pressure to contribute and pay. The Auditor General’s Report *Additional School Costs for Families* found that parent payment practices are not consistent, with some schools charging parents for items that should be free.³

We recommend increased transparency, reporting and monitoring of outcomes for students and school communities. With regard to vulnerable and disadvantaged students, where there is additional funding to address inequality and outcome gaps, we recommend reporting on the progress and impact of the initiatives adopted.

² See <https://www.gov.uk/pupil-premium-information-for-schools-and-alternative-provision-settings>.

³ Accessed 22/07/2015 at http://www.audit.vic.gov.au/reports_and_publications/latest_reports/2014-15/20150211-school-costs.aspx

Case study: Back to School Support Program, Cranbourne Community Information and Support Service

The Cranbourne Information & Support Service Inc (CISS) delivered its tenth Back to School (BTS) Support program between the months of November 2014 and March 2015, in conjunction with The Salvation Army Cranbourne Community Support Services.

The Salvation Army Cranbourne Community Support Services contributed \$17,000 towards this program, \$10,000 was received from Zagames in Berwick and \$27,000 was received from The R.E. Ross Trust. Some funds are being provisioned for use towards educational needs that will present throughout the year.

The money was used to assist families in the Casey South community and the suburb of Doveton with the cost of sending children to school, and covered items such as non-voluntary fees, textbooks, stationery, shoes, uniforms, and sundry items like lunch-boxes and bags, etc. In total, in the 2014-2015 financial year, Cranbourne CISS distributed \$42,755.00 to 220 families, consisting of 439 children (110 of whom were VCE students), attending 70 schools. Of the 220 families assisted, 43% were new to the program, and 94% of families were in receipt of Centrelink payments.

When Cranbourne CISS started this program ten years ago, the majority of funds went to providing uniforms to be spent at Kmart, Big W and Best & Less. Now those funds -and more- go to PSW. Each year PSW continues to grow as the main supplier of uniforms, due to more and more public Primary and Secondary Schools introducing the "Logo" high end uniforms. Families in the area continue to struggle and are totally overwhelmed with the increasing costs of education. Often, over and above expenditures on books, stationery and fees are now Laptops, Tablets or I-Pads, depending on the school and year level.

Many parents are unable to purchase these items outright and are forced to access other programs Cranbourne CISS deliver such as the No Interest Loans Scheme (NILS). Another new trend presenting at the agency is the increased number of people requiring assistance with tertiary education costs including TAFE and university.

"With the Governments, the Education Departments and the Schools all working together and all listening to the Community Centre that assist these families on a daily basis, and I mean listen, really listen and look at their statistics, hopefully some solutions can be found. I am not a Manager of a Community Centre, or have any trained qualification. I am a volunteer and I Coordinate a "Back to School" Program, and I listen and hear their problems, issues and struggles. Apart from financial assistance, I try to advise them, teach them and sometimes I cry with them. I have only 20 minutes with these families and that is not enough time.

*I have only really glimpsed over the problems and I feel so lost as to what to do. I am only one. But you have the power and ability to fix the so-called 'Age of Entitlement' problem and change it to an **Age of Achievers**"*

Julie Jones, Back to School Coordinator, Cranbourne CISS