

## **Response to Parliamentary Inquiry into Retaining Young People in Rural Towns and Communities**

**from the Brimbank/Melton Local Learning and Employment Network Inc (BMLLEN)**

### **Terms of reference (1 & 2)**

identifying and examining the factors that influence young people in deciding to remain in or leave the rural communities in which they reside;

and

identifying and examining the factors that influence young people in deciding whether or not to return to the rural communities in which they have previously resided following the completion of study, travel or other fixed or short term activities in other places,

### **Youth at risk**

Young people leave their communities for jobs and to continue their education. They stay because of family and friends. Melton is a metropolitan LGA that demonstrates the outcomes of a regional one. The young people of Melton have among the highest levels of youth disengagement in metropolitan Melbourne. The percentage of young people going on to University in this region is very low (On Track data for 2004 shows 31.5% cf Victorian average of 42.6%).

The number entering VET Certificate Levels 3 and 4 courses is not good where English is the language background. 18% of Year 12 completers don't see going on to further study as relevant (cf Victorian average of 15.7%) and 23.2% cite too much travel as a barrier (cf Victorian average of 18.6%). Significantly, 41.5% tried to get into a course of study but were unsuccessful (cf 27.3% for all of Victoria).

'On Track' data also shows that full time work is very hard to get (6% of Brimbank/Melton Year 12 completers, 4.5% for Year 9/10 early leavers). It is even harder for girls to find work than boys. The types of jobs are very limited – even for Year 12 completers – with the greatest employment category for boys being labouring and for girls being retail and sales.

The high levels of youth disengagement indicate a pressing need for alternative, locally based educational provision that is better suited to the needs of these young learners than mainstream programs. Very early leavers (at Years 9 and 10) do not appear to know of the difficulties they will encounter so they are under-prepared for employment and they see further study as irrelevant. Families of these young people are often unaware of the difficulties and may be operating with the mindset of a previous generation.

Where educational options have been developed and delivered in Melton, the outcomes for young people improve. For example, the three government secondary colleges in Melton deliver the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL). Djerriwarrh Employment and Education Services also offers a Community VCAL for 15 young people who had left school.

Areas that could be targeted for strengthening retention in locally based education include:

- Encouraging more males to go to VET programs.
- Encouraging more girls to take up Apprenticeships (where they are currently poorly represented).
- Improved engagement in education and training for young people who are homeless or who have alcohol and/or drug related problems or poor mental health.

### **Critical issues**

Feedback from young people indicates that there seems to be an ongoing negative image of Melton (VU/BMLLEN community project findings, 2005). This image restricts it from progressing with the rest of Melbourne and Victoria. The media seem to play a role in the shaping of the views held by Melton residents in regard to themselves and their surroundings. The over dramatising of events or highlighting negative aspects of Melton keep the local residents feeling helpless and the outsiders with pre-conceived ideas.

Young people who have disengaged talk about difficulties with fitting in, lack of relevance of school curriculum, experiencing 'critical periods', the particular vulnerability at Year 9 and a perceived lack of support. Students don't know where they belong. They don't feel like they fit in which makes it hard to stay engaged with the community.

It is also impossible for young people not to be influenced by older generations. Parents, grandparents and close personal acquaintances play a big part in how a young person develops and understands the world and their surrounding environments.

Parents are ideally the first and foremost models of appropriate ways of living, interacting and conducting one's self. In the early stages of a child's life they mimic and absorb everything that they see and are shown and use this as the basis and benchmark of their own existence.

Young people will portray very similar if not exactly the same traits, beliefs, behaviours and actions as their closest adult, guardian or parent. These come in forms of religion, personal appearance, fitness and health, motivation, attitudes towards drugs, alcohol and racism. If the model in which a young person learns from models actions and behaviours which are not accepted by society, illegal or wrong, then that young person is more likely to take on those behaviours.

Young people at risk of disengagement also comment on feelings of exclusion. Exclusion by their peers can lead to young people leaving school early. Policy makers and the media often focus on the increase in criminality among young adults that can result from exclusion from the school community.

A less visible result of social exclusion is the young people who do nothing at all as they don't believe they have anything to contribute to society. Groups at risk of becoming casualties of exclusion both within the school and wider community include: students with special educational requirements; children in care; minority ethnic students; young carers; students belonging to families who are under stress; pregnant schoolgirls and teenage mothers.

### **Terms of reference (3)**

developing strategies and recommendations on steps that might be taken to increase the number of young people who decide to remain in or return to rural towns and communities.

### **Overcoming barriers**

Initiatives such as the Local Learning and Employment Networks (LLENs) have helped achieve the '*Growing Victoria Together*' targets, challenges and strategic issues of building cohesive communities through focusing on improving the transition from school to employment (preferably with training) for young people.

The partnership approach that the LLENs have demonstrated so effectively prove the value of networking in strengthening local communities as scarce resources are maximised through cooperation and collaboration.

The involvement of local government has emerged as a critical requirement in ensuring the ongoing sustainability of new ways of engagement in communities. Where local government can provide leadership, they create an accessible framework for developing networking skills and new partnerships. They provides a safe space for people to discuss and develop new organisational behaviours that focus on the common good and can bring together partners who may have been regarded as minor players or who may operate as competitors in the external environment. The establishment of the Melton Community Learning Board, a committee of the Shire of Melton Council, is an exemplar.

### **Whole community approach**

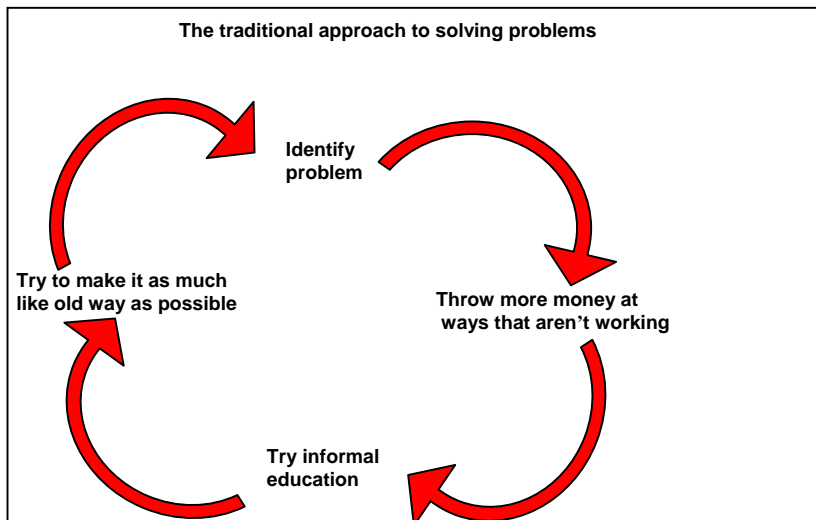
The cross sectoral partnerships and networks that have been developed through the LLENs are characteristic strategies of engaged communities that support collaboration and create a joined up community.

The joined up community is the most effective way to address the issues that create youth disengagement and the consequent drift from their community. At risk factors that contribute to poor engagement in young people have been consistently and widely identified through local and national studies such as the Vinson Report (Vinson, T : 1999. *Unequal in Life: the distribution of social disadvantage in Victoria and NSW*, Jesuit Social Services) and the Dusseldorp Skills Forum reports as well as international studies in the UK (such as McNulty's work in Blackburn with Darwen), in Norway and in Sweden. Absenteeism is the single most accurate predictor of youth at risk and this is exacerbated by low levels of literacy and numeracy and poor social skills creating disconnectedness. Community engagement strategies (such as 'Western Youth Futures', the regional youth guarantee being developed by the three LLENs of the Western Region) recognize that youth disengagement is not addressed by focusing on the young person alone. The family, the school and the entire community need to be committed to ensuring that a young person is engaged with their education and the youth guarantee models include businesses, police and sporting clubs in this effort.

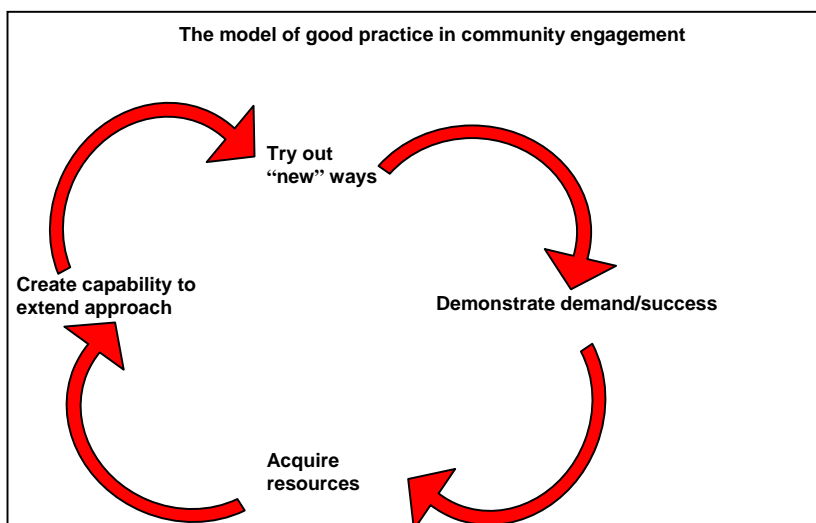
### **Models of good practice**

Public sector provision of education has been attacked as failing to cope with the impact of social and economic change. Mainstream educational delivery is failing those young people who are disengaged from their community. The lack of alternative educational settings to facilitate re engagement of young people in schooling, with particular emphasis on raising literacy and numeracy levels and a focus on vocational education represents a failure to respond to the reality that mainstream educational settings do not (and cannot) cater for the entire cohort of young people. In the context of how we practice education and develop a culture that values engagement through lifelong learning, initiatives such as LLENs (which are regarded as leading the way in addressing the issues of youth disengagement in Australia), Learning Towns and Neighbourhood Renewal are creating the overtures and links with formal as well as informal systems. They design and demonstrate ways to improve aspiration and participation beyond the traditional focus on school, vocational, adult and continuing education by challenging mainstream approaches and removing the compartmentalisation.

*We suggest moving from this...*



*...to this*



(McNulty, 2004)

Good practice models have been established in Melton as a result of the leadership of local government and its engagement nationally and internationally through the Victorian and Australian Learning Communities Networks. The Melton Community Learning Board and the innovative Melton Learning Precinct – a joint venture between the Shire and Victoria University - are exemplary community engagement strategies that join up community so that it is better able to support its young people.

## **Impact of the new approaches**

Disengaged young people in Melton that seek or are referred to the Council for help can access a range of activities and services to assist them. Through this participation, students that are exposed to 'real people' and 'real problems' have a better insight to what life is about when given some responsibility. Responsibility creates a feeling of being needed through activities such as paying bills, finding transport, looking for and going to work.

Students attending secondary schools in Melton spend their Year 10 and in several cases, even earlier school years, learning about the workforce and career paths. For instance, through the Beacon (No Dole) approach adopted by some of the Melton secondary colleges, engagement with the world of work demonstrates to students that their decision-making skills must always be intact when dealing with issues. Most importantly, they are exposed to consequence of their actions and decisions thus better equipping them to life outside of school.

The collaborative effort of the Melton secondary colleges and the BMLLEN in jointly resourcing the Western Edge Cluster has resulted in a wide range of vocational education and training delivery that is engaging and retaining young people in educational programs that are relevant and appropriate. Consequently, while tertiary education participation is lower than the metropolitan average, young people are increasingly participating in TAFE programs.

## **Conclusion**

These initiatives are examples of action that aims to change the normal course of things through locally designed solutions to local problems, seamless systems that enable engagement regardless of age, an emphasis on how to think rather than what to think, creative new solutions rather than repeating past success and a focus on the future rather than meeting the needs of the present.

We would be pleased to answer any queries that arise from this response. We would also be interested in addressing the Parliamentary Inquiry in person to expand on these issues.

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