

Pathways to re-engagement through flexible learning options

A policy direction for
consultation

*Every
child,
every
opportunity*



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**Published by the Student Wellbeing Division
Department of Education and Early Childhood Development
Melbourne
April 2010**

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1 Introduction

Ensuring that all children and young people of compulsory school age are engaged in education is a priority for the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (the Department). Both the *Blueprint for Education and Early Childhood Development 2008* (the Blueprint) and the *Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians 2008* recognise that successful completion of school significantly improves the life chances of children and young people. School completion leads to greater employment opportunities, economic and social prosperity, community inclusion and participation, and health and wellbeing. Conversely, the costs of not engaging in education are high, both for the individual and the community.

The Department is committed to ensuring that all Victorian children and young people, regardless of their circumstances, are provided with the opportunity to participate and engage in a world-class education system. Schools have a vital role in ensuring good educational, social and wellbeing outcomes for all children and young people, which includes providing a responsive and inclusive school experience and finding innovative ways to engage all children and young people.

For the majority of children and young people, attending school, participating in classes and interacting with teachers and peers is stimulating and engaging. However, individually tailored or flexible learning opportunities may need to be provided for some children and young people, particularly those who require additional support to meet their learning needs, to ensure that they do not become disengaged from education. Schools, with support from school networks and regional offices, have front-line responsibility for providing flexible learning opportunities for children and young people.

Considerable work has been undertaken in recent years to identify and respond to student disengagement at both departmental and whole-of-government levels. A range of existing and emerging policy directions, approaches to curriculum and pedagogy, support services and flexible learning programs have an increasing focus on improving outcomes for disadvantaged and vulnerable children and young people. The *Effective Schools Are Engaging Schools: Student Engagement Policy Guidelines*, in particular, emphasise that effective schools are engaging and inclusive, recognising and responding to the diverse needs of their students, accommodating different learning profiles and rates of learning, and intervening early to identify and respond to individual student needs.¹

A small number of children and young people require a more flexible learning option either inside or outside a school environment for the purpose of re-engaging in education. Programs traditionally known as alternative education settings are one of the flexible learning options available to students at high risk of disengagement, or already disengaged from school. Alternative education describes the range of responses provided to children and young people who, for various reasons, are unable to remain within the classroom.

A proposed policy framework for flexible learning options

During 2009, the Department commissioned a review of alternative education programs to inform the development of a consistent and evidence-based policy framework for flexible learning options. The development of a policy framework is intended to commence a longer-term change process to move from the current system of flexible learning option provision to a strengthened, consistent and more coordinated approach to addressing student disengagement. This will require a collective approach across government involving both the education and community sector. This first step is to focus our effort on the government school sector to improve a system facing many challenges to provide flexible learning options for those students who need this type of response.

It is therefore proposed to develop a robust policy framework that will guide the provision of education to children and young people who are at risk of disengaging or already disengaged from education and including:

- a a shared vision about the value and purpose of providing flexible learning options
- b clear links between the provision of flexible learning options and the key elements of school and network strategic planning – student learning; engagement and wellbeing; and pathways and transitions

¹ *Effective Schools Are Engaging Schools: Student Engagement Policy Guidelines*, Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2009.

- c good practice principles that inform the provision of flexible learning options
- d an outline of five key focus areas that enable effective provision of flexible learning options: a skilled workforce; accountability; local solutions; partnerships; and appropriate targeting of resources
- e a clearly described continuum of flexible learning options both within schools and in other settings
- f clear governance arrangements for flexible learning options
- g accountability mechanisms that will promote transparency and ensure accountability for achieving student engagement, wellbeing, learning and student pathways and transitions outcomes
- h a consistent funding approach
- i timelines and processes for review and evaluation.

A policy framework for flexible learning options will help to achieve the Department's vision that:

Victoria will provide a socially inclusive education system in which all children and young people receive the support they need to enable their engagement in school, their wellbeing, learning opportunities and pathways to further education, training or employment. Students at risk of disengaging or already disengaged will remain a priority for the Victorian government.

Pathways to re-engagement through flexible learning options: a policy direction for consultation (the Directions Paper) aims to describe the role of flexible learning options in responding to student disengagement and to signal proposed directions and components of the flexible learning options policy framework to be established.

The purpose of the Directions Paper is to prompt discussion and seek feedback about the characteristics of the flexible learning options policy framework. The views of stakeholders and staff involved in the provision of education and flexible learning options for students at risk of disengagement are sought. Discussion questions are included throughout the document in relevant sections and are collectively attached in Appendix B.

Feedback on the development of the flexible learning options policy framework will be essential for creating a shared understanding of how the framework can support the enhanced educational outcomes for children and young people who are most vulnerable to disengagement from schooling. This is an important opportunity for stakeholders to have their say and this contribution will be invaluable in shaping and implementing the flexible learning options policy framework.

The flexible learning options policy framework is anticipated to be finalised in 2010, with a view to implementation in 2011. No change to the current arrangements for providing flexible learning options, including alternative education programs, is proposed for 2010.

2 Understanding disengagement

The vast majority of children and young people in Victoria are enrolled and engaged in school until they complete Year 12 or equivalent, with many continuing their education thereafter. The *Effective Schools Are Engaging Schools: Student Engagement Policy Guidelines*² identify three interrelated components of school engagement:

- behavioural engagement, which refers to students' participation in education, including the academic, social and extracurricular activities of the school
- emotional engagement, which encompasses students' emotional reactions in the classroom and in the school. It can be defined as students' sense of belonging or connectedness to the school
- cognitive engagement, which relates to students' investment in learning and their intrinsic motivation and self-regulation.³

School engagement is closely linked to inclusion. Inclusion is supported when classroom environments respond constructively to factors such as disparities in socioeconomic status, gender, disability, ethnicity and educational experience.⁴ Children and young people become disengaged for a variety of reasons. In an educational context, disengagement is used to describe the detachment from school of those children and young people aged 6 to 17 years (or year 10 completion) for whom school attendance is compulsory.

Who is at risk of disengaging from school?

Children and young people are at risk of disengaging from school when their life circumstances, learning experiences and/or behaviours impede learning, reduce school success and discourage participation. Many children and young people at risk of disengagement from school could be vulnerable if they have serious difficulties associated with their life circumstances which, if not addressed, would compound their cycle of disadvantage. In Victoria, schools are required to work collaboratively to identify children and young people at risk of disengagement, understand the factors that lead to disengagement and implement a range of strategies to enhance school engagement.

Students become disengaged from education for many reasons, including the learning environment not meeting their needs, homelessness, family breakdown, poverty, mental health problems, low self-esteem, previous poor educational experiences, low educational achievement and challenging behaviours.

Understanding the risk factors for disengagement can help a school identify and work with children and young people at risk of disengaging before this becomes entrenched. As outlined in Table 2.1, there is evidence that some characteristics can place children and young people at relatively higher risk of disengagement from school. Risk factors for disengagement include characteristics of individual children and young people, family characteristics and community factors.⁵

While a school may not be able to influence all the risks that students may face, such as refugee status or living in out-of-home care, schools can work with students and their families and carers to help build students' resilience and support meaningful engagement in school. Furthermore, the earlier these risks are identified and acted on, the more likely it is that disengagement from school can be effectively addressed and the less likely that it will escalate and become entrenched. Schools are often required to work in partnership with the significant adults in the students' lives, including families and carers, as well as with community agencies and other government services to improve educational outcomes for those students at risk of disengagement.

Monitoring and additional support may be required during all school transition points, including the transition to the post-compulsory years of schooling, as this is a period in which a number of young people disengage from education. It is also notable that school absence is highest among Victorian young people in Years 8–10. However, as there are isolated examples of students showing signs of disengagement from school as young as eight years old, identification of risk factors for disengagement, commencing in the primary school years, is essential.

² *Effective Schools Are Engaging Schools: Student Engagement Policy Guidelines*, Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2009.

³ *Effective Schools Are Engaging Schools: Student Engagement Policy Guidelines*, Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2009.

⁴ *Inclusive Education in Victoria: Discussion Paper & Proposed Policy Framework*, Inclusive Education Network, 2006.

⁵ Smart, D., Sanson, A., Baxter, J., Edwards, B. and Hayes, A., *Home-to-school Transitions for Financially Disadvantaged Children*, The Smith Family, 2008.

Table 2.1: Risk factors for disengaging from school

Groups at higher risk of disengagement	Characteristics
Children and young people in out-of-home care	Approximately 5550 Victorian children and young people live in out-of-home care, such as foster care, kinship care or permanent care. ⁶ These children and young people have generally experienced abuse, neglect and/or trauma, which can result in decreased concentration, behavioural problems and, ultimately, poorer educational outcomes. Changes in care arrangements can often mean a change of school, further contributing to the possibility of disengagement.
Koorie children and young people	Indigenous children and young people remain the most educationally disadvantaged group in Australia. The Victorian Government is working hard to improve the educational outcomes of Koorie students in accordance with the strategy <i>Wannik Learning Together – Journey to Our Future</i> . However, Koorie students in Victoria are not attending school at the same rate as other students; they tend to be less prepared for school and are less likely to feel happy at school. ⁷ Best practice research indicates that Koorie students benefit from education that is individualised, sensitive to cultural needs and aligned with their community and cultural context. ⁸
Young offenders	Research indicates 84 per cent of young male offenders and 93 per cent of young female offenders had left school by Year 10 and had a history of chronic truanting and suspension prior to leaving school. ⁹ Educational attainment and inclusion reduce the likelihood of antisocial and criminal behaviour.
Children and young people affected by homelessness	Homeless children and young people are more likely than other children and young people to have been exposed to family conflict, drug abuse, mental health issues, violence, abuse, trauma and social isolation. Children and young people affected by homelessness can find participation in education difficult and risk falling behind their peers, underachieving and leaving school early. ¹⁰
Newly arrived and refugee children and young people	Newly arrived children and young people from language backgrounds other than English, and those from refugee backgrounds may have had disrupted or no previous education, they may have endured the trauma of war and persecution, they may have language difficulties and they may be shouldering responsibilities beyond their years. Fitting into a classroom environment can be difficult for these children.
Young parents and carers	Caring responsibilities, such as parenting or caring for a parent with a mental health disability, can put considerable pressure on young people. Juggling caring responsibilities with school can be difficult, and young parents and carers often do not persist with schooling. ¹¹
Children and young people with disabilities	International evidence indicates that students with disabilities are twice more likely to leave school early than their peers without disabilities. ¹² Around 63 per cent of Australian students with disabilities experienced difficulty at school. Intellectual/learning difficulties, fitting in socially and communication difficulties are the most common difficulties experienced. ¹³ Approximately 12 per cent of children and young people across Australia report being absent from school at least one day per week as a result of their disability. ¹⁴
Children and young people with mental health concerns	Children and young people who have poor mental health, or who have a parent/carer with poor mental health, often experience difficulties at school. One in seven children and young people aged between 4 and 17 years experience mental health issues. ¹⁵

6 *Directions for out-of-home Care*, Department of Human Services, 2009.

7 *Wannik: Learning Together – Journey to Our Future: Education Strategy for Koorie Students, Victoria 2008*, Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2008.

8 Schwab, R.G., *Why Only One in Three? The Complex Reasons for Low Indigenous School Retention*, CAEPR Research Monograph No. 16, Canberra, 1999.

9 Sacher, M., *Survey Aims to Help at-risk Children*, University of Sydney, 2006.

10 *Supporting Children, Young People and Their Families Affected by Homelessness: Guidelines for Victorian Schools*, Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2009.

11 Moore, T., Morrow, R., McArthur, M., Noble-Carr, D., & Gray, J., *Reading, Writing and Responsibility: Young Carers and Education*, Institute of Child Protection Studies, ACU National, Canberra, 2006.

12 Thurlow, M.L., Sinclair, M.F. and Johnson, D.R., *Students with Disabilities Who Drop Out of School: Implications for Policy and Practice*, Issues Brief, National Center on Secondary Education and Transition, Institute of Community Integration, 2002, at www.ncset.org/publications/viewdesc.asp?id=425

13 *Disability, Ageing and Carers, Australia: Summary of Findings*, Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2003

14 *The State of Victoria's Children 2008 – A Report on How Children and Young People in Victoria Are Faring*, Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2008.

15 *Because Mental Health Matters: Victorian Mental Health Strategy 2009–2019*, Department of Human Services, 2009.

Groups at higher risk of disengagement	Characteristics
Other characteristics	Evidence suggests that: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • boys are more likely than girls to leave school early • regional and rural students are more likely than metropolitan students to leave school early • students who change schools frequently and who are currently underperforming at school are more likely to leave school early.¹⁶

Disadvantage and disengagement

The Blueprint outlines the Department's vision that 'every young Victorian thrives, learns and grows to enjoy a productive, rewarding and fulfilling life, while contributing to their local and global communities'.¹⁷ A key priority is to improve outcomes for disadvantaged young Victorians. The term disadvantage refers to underlining family circumstances that shape the experience of both disengagement and vulnerability of children and young people. In an educational context disengagement is used to describe the detachment of children and young people from core opportunity mechanisms in society, that is, school and further education.

Disadvantaged young Victorians are over-represented among those who are at risk of disengaging or already disengaged from school. Children and young people who disengage early from school are subject to yet further disadvantage. Evidence suggests that those who disengage early from school tend to be significantly more disadvantaged in later life with: an increased likelihood of experiencing unemployment; poorer outcomes in health, accommodation and social status; greater risk of offending behaviour; greater susceptibility to the influences of drug and alcohol misuse, homelessness and anti-social behaviour; and lower lifelong income.¹⁸ Such disadvantage has associated social and economic costs to government, in terms of increased demand for welfare support and government subsidised services. This evidence, combined with Victoria's target of at least 90 per cent Year 12 completion by 2015, highlights just how critical it is to engage all children and young people in school who are disadvantaged or at risk of disengagement. Engaging children and young people who are disadvantaged will mean they are able to achieve the best possible educational outcomes for themselves in the short term but also improve their life opportunities and community wellbeing in the long term.

Research is unequivocal about the positive impact that effective schools with rich and engaging and purposeful pedagogy, high expectations, targeted teaching and curriculum and the strategic use of technology and resources have on retention, participation and achievement for students. However, for a small number of disengaged and disadvantaged students, school effectiveness is a requirement, but not sufficient in itself, to guarantee successful participation in education.

Figure 2.1 is a conceptual model that places various risk factors within a 'vulnerability layer'.¹⁹ The diagram's colours and layers represent the increasing degree of vulnerability as the cumulative effect of risk factors becomes more intense, rather than associating any particular risk factor with a level of vulnerability. The higher the risk category for the individual the higher the risk of disengagement from school and the greater the likelihood that students will require more flexible learning options. The National Partnership Agreement on Low Socioeconomic Status School Communities provides funding over seven years (2008–09 to 2014–15) to support education reform activities in up to 1500 low socioeconomic status schools across Australia. The Agreement is facilitating reforms to bring about improved educational and wellbeing outcomes for children, young people and schools in disadvantaged communities in Victoria.

16 McMillan, J. and Marks, G., *School Leavers in Australia: Profiles and Pathways*, Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth, ACER Research Report No. 31, 2003.

17 *Blueprint for Education and Early Childhood Development*, Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2008

18 *The State of Victoria's Children 2008 – A Report on How Children and Young People in Victoria Are Faring*, Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2008

19 *Vulnerable Youth Framework Discussion Paper: Development of a Policy Framework for Victoria's Vulnerable Young People*, Department of Human Services, 2008
http://www.cyf.vic.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0003/251733/vyfdiscussionpaperweb_smaller.pdf

Figure 2.1: Cumulative risks of school disengagement



3 Supporting students at risk of disengagement

The last decade has seen wide scale reform to Victoria’s education system. A broad range of **policies, curriculum options and pedagogy, services and programs** have been introduced or enhanced to provide a platform for improved engagement and increased school completion. Many which promote improved educational outcomes for children and young people and respond to student disengagement are outlined below in Table 3.1. More information about these initiatives is provided in Appendix A.

Table 3.1: Policy and programmatic context for addressing student disengagement

Addressing student disengagement	
<p style="text-align: center;"><u>Policy</u></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>Existing</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Blueprint for Education and Early Childhood Development • Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians (Commonwealth) • The Effective Schools Model • Effective Schools Are Engaging Schools: Student Engagement Policy Guidelines • Guidelines for the Delivery of Community VCAL • National Partnerships on Youth Attainment and Transitions and Low Socioeconomic Status School Communities • Partnering Agreement: School Attendance and Engagement of Children and Young People in Out of Home Care • Supporting Children, Young People and Their Families Affected by Homelessness: Guidelines for Victorian Schools • Managed Individual Pathways • Mental Health Reform Strategy • Wannik Strategy <p style="text-align: center;"><i>Emerging</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A Fairer Victoria 2010 • Vulnerable Youth Framework • Better Youth Services pilots • Extended Schools pilots • Student Support Services Guidelines • Specialisation in Victorian Government Schools • 0–18 Disability Strategy • 0–18 Health and Wellbeing Service Framework • Rural Education Framework • Victorian Training Guarantee 	<p style="text-align: center;"><u>Curriculum and pedagogy</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ultranet • e⁵ Instructional Model • Principles of Learning and Teaching • Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL) <p style="text-align: center;"><u>Services</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student Support Services • Primary Welfare Officers • Student Welfare Coordinators • Secondary School Nurses • School Focused Youth Services • Local Learning and Employment Networks • Youth Transition Support Initiative Coordinators • Youth Connections <p style="text-align: center;"><u>Programs</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Alternative Education Settings • Community VCAL • Adult and Community Education programs • TAFE • Distance education provision • Schools and programs delivered within other sectors i.e. Catholic, Independent and Community Services Organisations

Key initiatives to address disengagement

Of note are a number of key initiatives which provide particular opportunity to address student disengagement:

- The implementation of the enhanced network model for government schools occurred in 2008, and included the appointment of Regional Network Leaders to lead schools in improving learning outcomes. Planning processes within each network of schools identify priority areas for action, including improving student learning outcomes, increasing school completion and addressing rates of disengagement within the network. The network’s focus on teaching and learning, student wellbeing and engagement, and pathways and transitions provides the context to plan for more flexible learning options for some children and young people.

- The Ultranet is an online learning environment that will support high-quality learning and teaching, and connect students, families, teachers and school administrators. The implementation of the Ultranet during 2010 will provide significant benefits for engaging students in learning and will offer new learning opportunities and methods for students at risk of disengagement from school. For example, the Ultranet will enable family members and carers to become partners in their child's education and create virtual learning communities and social networks outside the existing peer pressures and relationships that may be constraining a student's ability to succeed in their schooling community. Further, the Ultranet will also support schools in delivering flexible learning options by providing a platform for teachers and students to develop and share specialist curriculum and programs that address the needs of those students who find engagement with traditional pedagogical approaches challenging and who respond well to digital learning technologies and self-directed study.
- The *Effective Schools Are Engaging Schools: Student Engagement Policy Guidelines*²⁰ (the Guidelines) were released during 2009 and provide guidance for schools, networks and regions in understanding student engagement and responding when necessary. The Guidelines recognise that, while prevention and early intervention strategies and use of punitive actions, such as suspension or expulsion, are necessary, students who are at risk of disengagement from their learning require a staged response that identifies their individual needs. While the usual measures address the needs of the vast majority of children and young people, enabling them to remain engaged at school, there are a small number of children and young people who will require more specialised, usually intensive, support. The Guidelines advocate that all options for re-engagement are explored and exhausted with appropriate support and responses matched to these needs. Flexible approaches to engagement, such as through the use of school or non-school educational programs, should be explored as part of the re-engagement process.
- The effectiveness of the current service system is being tested and reviewed by a series of Better Youth Service pilots led by the Office for Youth. The pilots aim to identify current service system strengths and areas for improvement in responding effectively to highly vulnerable 13–16-year-old Victorians. Pilot sites include Frankston, Wyndham, Greater Bendigo, Swan Hill, Geelong and Yarra Ranges. The pilots model best practice service provision in relation to:
 - identifying and supporting vulnerable young people
 - establishing a local data set about vulnerable young people
 - improving local planning and coordination
 - improving local service delivery for disadvantaged young people.

Options available to support disengaging students

In terms of provision of flexible learning options for children and young people who are at risk of disengaging or have already disengaged from school, the options are diverse and can include TAFE, Adult Community Education (ACE), Community VCAL, distance education or re-engagement programs based on partnerships with non-government organisations that are registered and non-registered training organisations. There are also a number of schools and settings in the Catholic and Independent schooling systems, including schools and programs operated by community service organisations, which cater for children and young people who are at risk of disengagement or already disengaged from education.

Thousands of courses are available at TAFE institutes, ACE organisations, university TAFE Divisions and private training providers. Generally, all offer high-quality, nationally recognised training. Training opportunities range from short courses to vocational graduate diplomas. Many courses offer on-the-job training, and apprentices and trainees receive wages while they learn. Courses in vocational education and training are developed from standards set by industry and employers. These courses provide students with the skills to secure employment and extend the range and depth of skills on which employees can draw as their careers develop. More information about TAFE and ACE is provided at Appendix A.

²⁰ *Effective Schools Are Engaging Schools: Student Engagement Policy Guidelines*, Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2009, at <http://www.education.vic.gov.au/healthwellbeing/wellbeing/engagement/default.htm>

Alternative education has traditionally formed part of the range of flexible learning options offered to re-engage vulnerable young people in education. Alternative education offers intensive support to students who are experiencing significant difficulties attending mainstream schools. These young people are at high risk of disengagement or have already disengaged from learning, and have high levels of school refusal and absenteeism. In 2009–10, the Department provided \$6.5 million to alternative education settings across Victoria. Currently, all departmentally funded programs are auspiced by a host school for administration and management purposes. Programs may:

- operate in a separate facility, located away from a regular school setting
- operate in a facility located on the grounds of a regular school but operate independently from the school
- operate in a facility located within a regular school, and partially integrated with the school
- be completely integrated within a regular school
- be of short duration (e.g. 8–10 weeks) or for a longer term (e.g. 1–2 years).

In addition to funded alternative education settings, many schools have developed innovative programs to cater for the needs of disengaged young people, funded from their Student Resource Package or from other sources. Many schools including those in the National Partnership Extended School Hub field trials are working in partnerships with local community service agencies, business and other government departments to offer a range of extended day services and programs. These activities can be delivered before during and after school and focus on barriers that impact on student learning. This may include a focus on student engagement, retention, support with transition or parent engagement and literacy support. These programs include Community VCAL programs, partnerships with registered training organisations and other localised initiatives.

4 Engagement through flexible learning options

Ensuring that all children and young people have the opportunity to engage and participate in learning opportunities that are relevant and meaningful to them requires the provision of a continuum of educational options. Options range from planning for differentiated learning for all students within schools through to intensive programs for the small number of disengaged students, estimated to be up to 2 per cent of children and young people, who require specialised and individually tailored support in order to re-engage with learning. The continuum of educational options can be characterised as comprising four tiers, as shown in Figure 4.1.



Figure 4.1: A continuum of flexible learning options

A continuum of flexible learning options

The Department has adopted the term ‘flexible learning options’ for the range of programs in school and community settings that support those children and young people at risk of disengaging or already disengaged from education to re-engage in school. Of particular interest are programs that are provided within schools but away from a usual classroom (that is, in Tier 3 of Figure 4.1) and programs traditionally understood as alternative education programs, where students attend a re-engagement program separate from the school, usually for a short time and usually off site (that is, in Tier 4 of Figure 4.1). Flexible learning options may also include programs provided by other organisations, such as Community VCAL. The information in the following section is based on the model shown in Figure 4.1.

Tier 4: Flexible learning options in separate or off-site settings

Tier 4 flexible learning options are available for the very small number of children and young people (up to 2 per cent) who require more complex and intensive services and supports in order to re-engage with education. Tier 4 options are considered when all other options for learning have been exhausted, the child or young person has a long history of disengagement or exclusion from school and reintegration into an educational environment is a long-term option. In some circumstances, Tier 4 flexible learning options are of extended and ongoing duration.

Tier 4 case study – NETschool Bendigo

Issue

NETschool Bendigo is for young people (15–20 years) who are experiencing difficulties with schooling but who have a desire to re-engage with learning. Each year, approximately 100 students participate in NETschool, with 65–70 students typically participating at any one time.

Intervention

NETschool Bendigo uses information technology to engage young people creatively with learning opportunities. Young people may either physically attend the centre or engage in home-based learning via the NETschool Bendigo Online Community. The NETschool is an annexe of Bendigo Senior Secondary College, which means that Student Resource Package funding is available for the program.

Those attending NETschool must meet criteria relating to age (young people must be aged 15–20 years at the time of enrolment), disengagement (students must be out of school or in the process of leaving school) and capacity to attend schooling (students, for a range of reasons, must be unable to attend the traditional school setting). Students must also have access to stable accommodation and a supportive adult in their lives (unless a young mother), and must not be using/abusing illegal substances.

In working with young people, an individualised and flexible approach is adopted. NETschool works with one student at a time. Each learner decides what they wish to study and, with the support of their NETschool mentor, Personalised Learning Plans for each student are developed and provide the basis for students to work at their own pace to achieve their individual goals. NETschool learners are able to learn through their interests and plan their work around real-world projects through research-based learning. Some NETschool learners complete VCAL and VCE studies through Bendigo Senior Secondary College.

The definition of success for young people varies, taking into account students' different aspirations and expectations of the program. A narrow or traditional view of success cannot be applied to NETschool learners, as many students have experienced trauma, mental illness or a variety of other complex issues personally or in their family units, which must be given due consideration. The NETschool approach is based on principles for learning, including student-centred practice, quality relationships with mentors (teachers), a flexible and small learning environment, and motivation for learning and participation.

A critical strength of NETschool is that it works with families of the students and other community and support organisations, and especially the Bendigo Senior Secondary College (BSSC). The partnership with BSSC ensures that information about each student flows between all parties working with the student and enables the student to move seamlessly between BSSC and NETschool.

Outcomes

In 2008, most young people achieved successful outcomes, with 10 per cent completing their studies, 15 per cent moving into other educational institutions (including schools), 45 per cent re-enrolling for another NETschool year and 7 per cent gaining employment. Less than 9 per cent were disengaged from school or seeking employment.

Tier 3: Flexible learning options within school settings

Tier 3 flexible learning options involve intervening early to address the issues that are preventing a child or young person's full engagement with school and learning. Tier 3 initiatives tend to be short-term, intensive programs, delivered on the school site but away from a usual classroom. Alternatively, students may participate in Tier 3 programs for part of the week and attend their usual classroom for the remainder of the week. Children and young people who access Tier 3 options may face a range of barriers to learning, such as poor concentration, low self-esteem, learning difficulties, behavioural issues or other risk factors that may make it difficult for them to remain in the classroom with their peers and reduce their potential to succeed in school. Tier 3 programs may be provided by individual schools or within a network across multiple schools.

Tier 3 case study – Hands On Learning

Target

Hands On Learning targets students who are disengaging from school, particularly in the middle years. As of March 2009, fourteen schools and 341 students were participating in the program.

Intervention and assessment

Hands On Learning engages students who have disconnected with school in a setting that facilitates alternative education and pastoral care. This occurs through small groups working with local artisans and teachers on practical or creative projects (normally on the school site), such as a new building structure, kitchen garden or paintings.

The program runs for one full school day each week (including breaks and mealtimes) and students participate for one term per year for up to four years, with the average participation approximately two years. Students remain on site and participate in their normal academic curriculum for the remaining four days each week. Schools nominate up to 40 students to participate in the program. Students work in groups of ten, with each group supported by at least one teacher/paraprofessional and an artisan/craftsperson. Ideally, groups include a range of students (year levels, personalities and skills). There are four key elements to the Hands On Learning model:

- *Long-term mentoring* – students participate in the program for up to four years and develop strong relationships with positive and engaging staff members.
- *Reality, not practice* – the project is needed by the school or local community.
- *Choice* – participation is voluntary and within the program students are encouraged to explore their own interests.
- *Sustainability* – the project has a negative impact on the environment through choice of activities and materials used.

Outcomes

Hands On Learning reports that participants have better outcomes in relation to attendance, retention and unemployment post-program than the state average (e.g. Hands On Learning students had attendance rates at school of between 93 and 95 per cent and the Hands On Learning program of around 99 per cent). Further, the proportion of Hands On Learning students who leave school at Year 10 and are unemployed is lower than the state average. Improvements in areas such as students' self-esteem, awareness of their own skills and interests, engagement with the school and community, and group skills have also been reported.

Tier 2: Targeted initiatives

These initiatives focus on preventing disengagement from school among students who may face a range of risk factors that make disengagement more likely. They address an individual child or young person's needs within a school setting. Examples of targeted initiatives include school-based mentoring programs, outreach services from the community into the school, referrals to student support services or other specialised services, school-based tutoring programs, breakfast clubs and homework clubs. Children and young people remain in their school classroom, while receiving additional support to learn, engage in education and to reduce risk factors.

Tier 2 case study – Managed Individual Pathways

Issue

The Managed Individual Pathways (MIPs) program was designed to ensure that all students aged 15 years and over in government schools have an individual pathway plan that will guide their progression to further education, training or full-time employment.

Intervention

MIPs enables schools to assist students at risk of early leaving by offering better targeted and more intensive support in determining their future directions. The target group is young people at risk of not completing Year 12 or its equivalent, and those who require further support. To support MIPs, the Students Mapping Tool was developed and implemented in 2007. This tool helps schools to identify students who have characteristics known to increase the risk of early school leaving, such as poor attendance and low literacy and numeracy levels. Schools appoint MIPs coordinators or 'transition' teams. Students are followed up six months after exiting school by the school.

Outcomes

A review of MIPs in 2005 found that many schools reported benefits from MIPS such as improved engagement of at-risk young people, increased school completion rates and increased staff responsiveness to young people's needs. However, the review also found wide variation in the implementation of MIPs and its overall success. Strong gains were made when pathways plans were introduced from the start of secondary school. Those schools that took this approach increased the likelihood of identifying young people at risk of disengagement, and successfully engaged teaching staff in pathways planning. Schools and key partners are very supportive of MIPs, as planning pathways makes more effective use of the

multiple options available to students leaving school. MIPs is also viewed positively due to its flexibility to respond to local conditions, the potential for shared knowledge among school staff of individual students' issues, concerns and aspirations and its capacity to better integrate a range of services and processes in schools in the interest of disadvantaged students

Tier 1: Differentiated provision of education

Differentiated provision of education refers to schools responding to the different needs of children or young people in their area by providing a diverse range of educational programs. All schools are responsible for engaging and motivating all children and young people in learning and using a variety of different strategies to achieve this. Differentiated provision of education may also occur across a network of schools. For example, some secondary schools in a network may choose to offer and emphasise specialised curriculum and programs that are likely to appeal to some students more than others. The focus is nonetheless on providing a range of learning options to engage all children and young people within schools and across a network of schools. Tier 1 initiatives are relevant to the majority of students because they promote engagement in school.

Tier 1 Case Study – Eaglehawk Secondary College

Issue

Eaglehawk Secondary College is one of four 7-10 colleges currently being rebuilt as part of The Bendigo Education Plan (BEP) with strong commitment to improving outcomes for all students in the areas of student learning, engagement and wellbeing, and pathways and transitions.

Target group

As part of the development of the BEP, Eaglehawk Secondary College adopted improved student retention, engagement and attendance as a priority for all students. The whole school was therefore the target group.

Intervention

The goal of improving student learning data at Eaglehawk Secondary College was a catalyst for the introduction of curriculum innovation and flexible learning options for all students. Changes within the school included:

- Creation of Learning Communities – Eaglehawk Secondary College has restructured itself into four Learning Communities and eight Learning Neighbourhoods. These were created in line with the BEP to increase students' sense of belonging and provide a structure for teacher teams to meet on a regular basis with Learning Neighbourhood Leaders and to plan and deliver stage related curriculum. The new structure also provides opportunities for young people to take on leadership positions.
- Implementation of Teacher Advisory System - all teachers are Teacher Advisors and have daily meetings of 20 minutes with their students. The Teacher Advisors are the first point of contact for families and they have a key role in supporting student learning progress and well being. Online theme-based curriculum has been developed for Teacher Advisor sessions. All students develop an individual learning plan with their Teacher Advisor.
- Outreach Education Program - The employment of a School Engagement Worker led to the development of the Outreach Education Program which provides individualised programs for at risk students that involves off-site tutoring at community locations. This has resulted in the reconnection of many students and families with school and a significant improvement in those students' attendance and learning data.
- Expansion of Pathways Options – The employment of a Structured Work Place Learning Coordinator to support the expanded VET curriculum options for students and work experience resulted in greater engagement of students and broadened pathway options. Shared VET delivery across schools and the Bendigo Trade Training Centre has also supported this goal.

Outcomes

The Learning Community model and Teacher Advisory system have been embraced very positively by staff, students and parents. An improved student culture is evident with reduced incidents of problem behaviour and greater learning focus from previous years. The Outreach Education Program is providing flexible learning options for selected students with very successful engagement and improved motivation to learn.

Discussion questions:

1. Does the continuum of flexible learning options reflect the range of programs supporting children and young people in Victoria? Are there any major options not covered?
2. How can Tier 3 and Tier 4 flexible learning options be supported and strengthened to better engage and retain children and young people at high risk of disengagement?

A shared responsibility

No one school network or education provider can single-handedly achieve the goal of engaging all children and young people in schooling. Success in engaging all children and young people in school relies on effective working partnerships between various parties, including the Department, schools, related government agencies, community service organisations, children or young people and their families and carers, training institutions, business and industry, and others involved with children and young people at risk of disengaging or disengaged from school. A shared commitment to preventing and addressing student disengagement is an appropriate starting point for building stronger partnerships, as is increasing clarity about the roles and responsibilities that each party can adopt. Key responsibilities for preventing and addressing student disengagement at the departmental, regional, network and school levels are outlined below in Table 4.1.

Table 4.1: Suggested roles and responsibilities for addressing student disengagement

Stakeholder	Suggested roles and responsibilities
Central office	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop and implement policy and initiatives that prevent and address student disengagement • Ensure access to high-quality, effective programs on a statewide basis • Implement and maintain an appropriate funding approach for flexible learning options that reflects differences in community needs, and allows for service system development • Ensure accountability for outcomes of children and young people at risk of disengagement.
Regional offices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure that there is a sufficient number of quality flexible learning options available for children and young people at risk of disengagement in the region • Support network collaboration to develop a range of programs and models that best respond to local needs • Allocate funds to networks or programs in response to needs identified through regional and network planning processes • Oversee and monitor the effectiveness of Tier 3 and Tier 4 programs within the region • Liaise with related agencies and government departments to ensure strong partnerships and coordination of services with joint responsibility for the wellbeing of children, young people and their families • Facilitate forums and opportunities to share information and good practice across the region.
School networks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collaborate to map flexible learning options in the local area, identify (and quantify) demand for flexible learning options and plan to meet demand • Build school capacity within the network to support disengaging and disengaged students • Promote and facilitate the sharing and pooling of resources in the interests of disengaging and disengaged students • Monitor student outcomes.

Stakeholder	Suggested roles and responsibilities
Schools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meet the learning needs of all enrolled students • Implement a range of whole-of-school engagement strategies • Identify students at risk within the school, and work in conjunction with the network to address these needs • Refer students to support services, where appropriate • Provide Tier 1–3 programs where applicable and refer students to Tier 4 programs where appropriate • Develop and maintain effective partnerships with families to support children and young people's learning and development.
Families and carers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop and maintain partnerships with community organisations and other support services able to support children, young people and their families in addressing risks to disengagement • Provide a nurturing home environment which values and supports learning and is responsive to the child's individual needs • Support children to attend regularly and engage fully with school • Advise schools at the earliest opportunity about any concerns held for children or young people in regard to their engagement with school • Participate in planning for children and young people's engagement and/or re-engagement in school (e.g. attend student support groups) • Work with schools to identify the most appropriate flexible learning option as required.
Community service organisations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Liaise with schools to assist in identifying students at risk of disengagement • Support children and young people to re-engage with schools • Develop and maintain partnerships with schools to provide Tier 3 and 4 programs.

Discussion questions:

3. Are the suggested roles and responsibilities for addressing student disengagement reasonable and practical?
4. How can school networks and regions play a stronger role in supporting schools and stakeholders to provide innovative flexible learning options that meet local needs?

A review of alternative education provision

In 2009, the Department completed a review of alternative education provision in Victoria and commissioned a report by KPMG, focusing on Tier 3 and 4 programs. Consultations occurred in April and May 2009. A wide range of views were expressed, underscoring the importance of flexible learning options available to children and young people at risk of disengaging or already disengaged from education. The review provided the Department with significant information and proposed areas for improvement that form the basis for a new policy direction for flexible learning options. The review identified the key challenges to the delivery of flexible learning options as outlined in Table 4.2.

Table 4.2: Challenges to the provision of flexible learning options

Challenges	Issues to be addressed
Responsibility	A systemic approach is required to plan for and provide education for children and young people at risk of disengagement. This approach must be based on shared understanding and clear agreement about the respective roles and responsibilities of various parties. Currently, approaches to alternative education vary among regions and schools. Many schools and communities have a strong sense that supporting disengaged children and young people is the domain of alternative education providers, and that schools lack the flexibility and capacity to respond to children and young people at high risk of disengagement. This view underlines the difficulties faced by many schools in fostering the relationships with students that are critical for supporting student engagement, and the need for further development of the school workforce to equip them with the skills required to work effectively with children and young people at risk of disengagement.

Challenges	Issues to be addressed
Program quality and effectiveness	The effectiveness of existing programs is difficult to determine and local evidence of what works and what does not work requires strengthening. There is a need for verifiable evidence of the educational outcomes achieved by students and the overall effectiveness of programs, including the features of programs that are most closely linked to positive outcomes.
Demand and utilisation rates	More extensive data is required to quantify the number of children and young people accessing or seeking to access flexible learning options. Schools and community members report that there is increasing demand for programs catering for children and young people at risk of disengagement; however, the availability and suitability of programs is currently difficult to assess.
Eligibility for programs	Determining eligibility for flexible learning options is a complex process and there is a need for consistent guidance about eligibility criteria. In practice, the difficulty contributes to inequities in access both at the state level and within regions.
Workforce skills and support	Work with disengaged students can be demanding and requires specialist skills. For example, staff working with disengaged students require knowledge of and the capacity to apply adult learning principles, trauma theory and a range of creative techniques to manage behavioural issues and learning disabilities. In addition, staff working away from school settings may feel isolated and disconnected from their peers, and find it difficult to access opportunities for professional development and supervision. These issues may act as a disincentive for staff to continue working with disengaged students and a deterrent to potential new staff members.
Governance arrangements	A consistent statewide, regional and/or network governance framework is required to oversee the provision of education to children and young people at risk of disengaging or disengaged from education. This would support collaboration with community service organisations involved in educating disengaged children and young people, as well as promoting partnerships between schools and across regions. A strong governance structure would clarify who should be responsible for providing educational opportunities for these young people.
Accountability	Consistent allocation of and accountability for funding is required. Funding arrangements tend to be historically determined and the opportunity for program growth is constrained.

To support the provision of appropriate and effective flexible learning options across Victoria, a new policy framework is required to establish clear roles, responsibilities, accountabilities and partnership arrangements at the central, regional, network and school levels, providing the basis for joint responsibility for outcomes of children and young people who are at risk of disengagement or disengaged from education. The development of a clear policy framework can inform future arrangements for, and provide a consistent and sustainable approach to, alternative education funded by the Department. The development of this policy framework is intended to provide a more coherent approach to the purpose, eligibility, access, funding, accountability and evaluation of these programs.

Discussion questions:

5. Are the challenges to the provision of flexible learning options accurate?
6. How can a policy framework better guide and support the provision of flexible learning options across Victoria?

5 A policy direction for flexible learning options

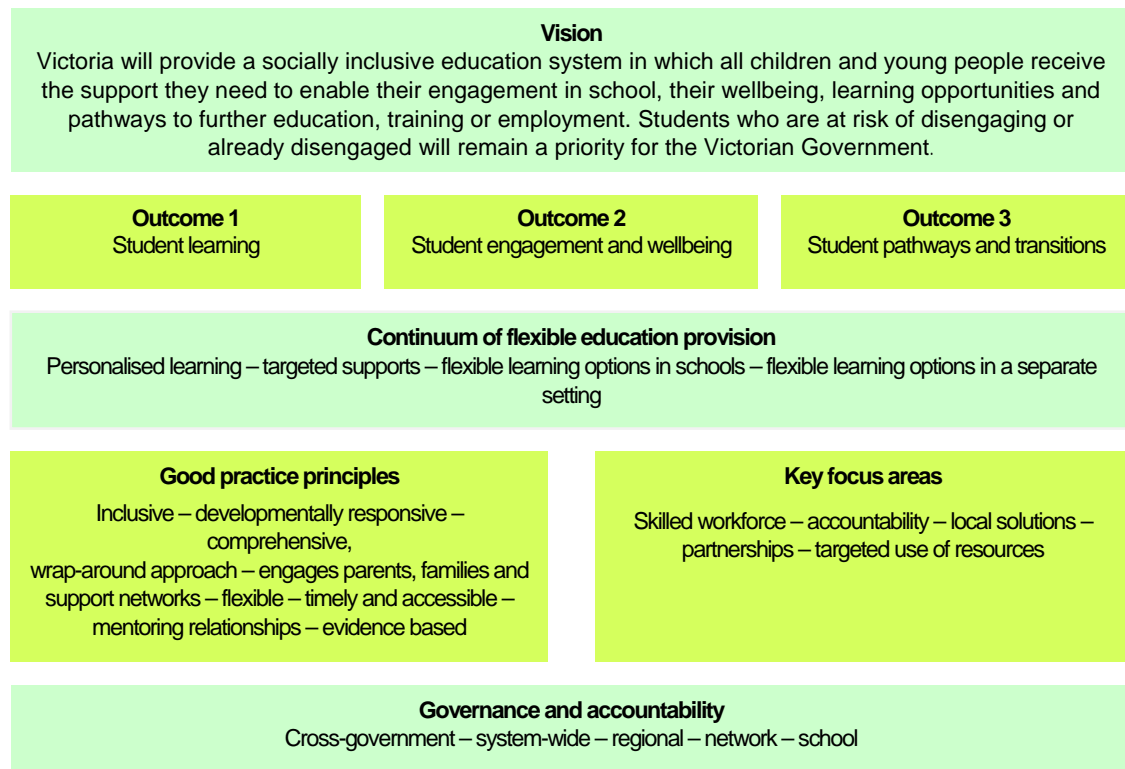
This Directions Paper signals the proposed directions and intentions of the Department in response to the review of alternative education provision, with a particular focus on Tier 3 and 4 programs.

The policy framework will guide the provision of education to children and young people who are at risk of disengaging or already disengaged from education and is proposed to include:

- a a shared vision about the value and purpose of providing flexible learning options
- b clear links between the provision of flexible learning options and the key elements of school and network strategic planning – student learning; engagement and wellbeing; and pathways and transitions
- c good practice principles that inform the provision of flexible learning options
- d an outline of five key focus areas that enable effective provision of flexible learning options: a skilled workforce; accountability; local solutions; partnerships; and appropriate targeting of resources
- e a clearly described continuum of flexible learning options both within schools and in other settings
- f clear governance arrangements for flexible learning options
- g accountability mechanisms that will promote transparency and ensure accountability for achieving student engagement, wellbeing, learning and student pathways and transitions outcomes
- h a consistent funding approach
- i timelines and process for review and evaluation.

The proposed components of the flexible learning options policy framework are outlined in Figure 5.1.

Figure 5.1: Overview of policy framework – flexible learning options



The vision

The provision of flexible learning options must be informed and guided by a shared vision about the value and purpose of providing more flexible learning options to children and young people at risk of disengaging, or already disengaged from education. The proposed vision for flexible learning options is that Victoria will provide a socially inclusive education system in which all children and young people receive the support they need to enable their engagement in school, their wellbeing, learning opportunities and pathways to further education, training or employment. Students who are at risk of disengaging or already disengaged will remain a priority for the Victorian Government.

The proposed vision covers the three domains of school and network accountability; that is, learning, wellbeing and the pathways and transitions of all students, as described in the School Accountability and Improvement Framework²¹.

Good practice principles

Good practice principles related to the planning and provision of flexible learning options will provide clarity about how the vision can be achieved. The following good practice principles are proposed:

- 1 **Inclusiveness** – all children and young people, whatever their background or circumstances, must be afforded opportunities to participate in a range of positive learning experiences.
- 2 **Developmentally appropriate responses** – flexible learning environments and experiences must recognise and be sensitive to the developmental age and stage of each student.
- 3 **Comprehensive, wrap-around (or student-centred) support** – students at risk of or already disengaged from school must be at the centre of all efforts to support and engage them, and these efforts must take account of all of the students' needs. Any and all services and supports required by each student must be coordinated in a student-centred manner.
- 4 **Engagement of parents, families and support networks** – families, carers and others who are important to the student must be encouraged and supported to collaborate in providing appropriate learning experiences for the student.
- 5 **Flexibility** – support for learning must be tailored to the needs of each student.
- 6 **Timeliness and accessibility** – support for learning must be easy to navigate and offered quickly and at the earliest possible opportunity.
- 7 **Mentoring relationships** – teachers and other support services must build positive connections with students in order to influence their ability to engage and learn. Evidence strongly suggests that a relationship with a significant adult, often within the school or broader educational environment, is a strong protective factor and can make a significant difference to a child or young person's learning and wellbeing outcomes.
- 8 **Evidence-based** – there is considerable good practice already occurring in Victoria in relation to provision of flexible learning options for children and young people at risk of disengaging or already disengaged from education. Building on current good practice and programs can increase the capacity of schools, potentially in partnership with community-based organisations, to meet the educational and related needs of disengaging or disengaged students.

Governance and accountability

Clear roles, accountabilities and partnership arrangements at the central, regional, network and school levels will provide the basis for joint responsibility for outcomes of children and young people who are at risk of disengagement or disengaged from education.

With responsibility comes accountability. A comprehensive data collection effort is required to complement the proposed new framework for flexible learning options for Victorian students. Data is important for assessing current performance and enabling continuous improvement. Sharing of data between schools and

²¹ School Accountability and Improvement Framework, Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. Access at <http://www.education.vic.gov.au/management/schoolimprovement/accountability/default.htm>

non-school providers of flexible learning options will be encouraged, to facilitate good planning and decision-making and to build a common understanding and evidence base of the programs and strategies that result in good outcomes for students.

As part of a new policy framework, a consistent funding approach should be developed for resourcing Tier 4 flexible learning options across Victoria. It will be important to provide regions and networks with the flexibility to determine the specific mix and type of supports to be offered to students according to their individual needs. More work is required, however, to address issues of potential inequity in regional allocation of funds and the possible growth of flexible learning options across regions.

Many schools fund programs delivered in Tiers 1–3 from their Student Resource Package, including the use of equity funding. These programs are often provided across a network rather than on an individual school basis, with schools contributing funding. Many schools already have arrangements in place to facilitate this and these arrangements will continue to be supported.

Key focus areas

Five focus areas identified by the review for the planning and provision of flexible learning options for children and young people at risk of disengaging or already disengaged from schools are proposed to be included in the policy framework. These are the key areas for enabling effective provision of flexible learning options, and each links to the broader policy context for providing every child with every opportunity to succeed, no matter where they live or what their socioeconomic circumstances.

- 1 **A skilled workforce** – the skills and qualities of staff are a major determinant of schools' capacity to engage children and young people at risk of disengaging and the outcomes of flexible learning programs. Service improvement in school education must be driven by a culture of sustained professional learning and leadership development. Workforce development is one of three key strategies outlined in the Blueprint.
- 2 **Accountability** – shared and clear responsibility for the engagement of children and young people at risk of disengaging or already disengaged from education is critical. The School Accountability and Improvement Framework and the Network Accountability and Improvement Framework provide useful advice in relation to accountability issues and this is reinforced in the Effective Schools Model.
- 3 **Local solutions** – schools, school networks and regions are responsible for developing local solutions tailored to local needs. The recently introduced enhanced network model for government schools strongly supports the notion of locally responsive planning and education provision.
- 4 **Partnerships** – strong links and partnerships between schools; between schools and support services, including community organisations; and across networks are essential. Building partnerships with parents, family members and carers and communities is also one of three key strategies outlined in the Blueprint.
- 5 **Appropriate targeting of resources** – in the interests of equity, resources must target those children, young people, schools, networks and regions with the greatest needs. Targeted resource distribution can greatly assist in improving outcomes for disadvantaged young Victorians.

Discussion questions:

7. Are the proposed components of the policy framework for flexible learning options relevant and appropriate? Are there any components that have not been covered?
8. How can the key focus areas be strengthened in practice to enable more effective provision of flexible learning options?

Next steps

The next stage of strengthening the provision of flexible learning options will be to develop the proposed policy framework in 2010 to enable time to prepare and plan for anticipated implementation in 2011.

Table 5.1 lists the proposed range of actions to be undertaken in developing a clear policy framework, based on evidence and building on the Effective Schools Model²², to inform future arrangements for, and provide a consistent and sustainable approach to, flexible learning options funded by the Department. Actions are linked to the proposed key focus areas within the policy framework (see Figure 5.1).

Table 5.1: Action plan for developing a policy framework

Framework	Action
Focus area 1: A skilled workforce	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Explore professional development opportunities that could be offered to school-based staff.
Focus area 2: Accountability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Align accountability requirements included in the new framework with the School Accountability and Improvement Framework and Network Accountability and Improvement Framework Explore the development of data collection mechanisms in relation to flexible learning options to support performance monitoring and continuous improvement.
Focus area 3: Local solutions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use Ultranet as a student centred electronic learning environment to support high quality learning and teaching, for flexible learning options and to connect students, teachers and families/carers.
Focus area 4: Partnerships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Explore how existing data collection mechanisms can best be applied to ensure comprehensive data about flexible learning needs, options and outcomes is collected in regions Ensure that partnerships with students, families and carers are at the centre of planning for and provision of flexible learning options Explore formal opportunities for school networks to complement and collaborate with LLENs, Youth Connections Service Providers and School Focused Youth Services and other relevant stakeholders, in the planning and delivery of flexible learning options for Victorian students.
Focus area 5: Appropriate targeting of resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Explore strategies, options and models for funding flexible learning options and, in particular, preliminary network planning and facilitation roles and responsibilities Explore potential opportunities that can support the growth of flexible learning options, especially in networks identified as high need.

The policy framework will help to ensure that Victoria provides a socially inclusive education system where all children and young people receive the support they need to enable their engagement in school, their wellbeing, learning opportunities and pathways to further education, training or employment. Students who are at risk of disengaging or already disengaged will remain a priority for the Victorian Government.

Discussion question:

- Are the suggested actions to develop a policy framework for flexible learning options reasonable? Are there other actions that are required?

²² *Effective Schools Model*, Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2008, at <http://www.education.vic.gov.au/about/directions/blueprint1/es/>

Appendix A: Additional policy and program context

Curriculum and pedagogy

Ultrahet

The Ultrahet is an online learning environment that will support high-quality learning and teaching, and connect students, parents/carers, teachers and schools administrators. The implementation of the Ultrahet during 2010 will provide significant benefits for engaging students in learning and will offer new learning opportunities and methods for students at risk of disengagement from school. The Ultrahet will enable parents/carers and family members to become partners in students' education, giving them online access to their children's homework and information about attendance, assessment and curriculum, as well as teacher feedback, at any time. The Ultrahet will provide a platform for students to learn the cutting-edge information and communication technology skills that they will need in the 21st-century workforce. Every child and young person will have a complete record of their achievement for all their years of schooling and direct feedback from teachers.

The Ultrahet will allow students to access online learning activities that are tailored to suit their needs. They will have their own online workspaces with personally tailored education programs and easier access to the curriculum. All students in every Victorian government school will be able to access the Ultrahet regardless of their location, development level, or cultural or socioeconomic background. They will be able to access learning tasks, work and collaborate with students and teachers within and across schools, enrol in specialist classes or areas of interest in other schools and access learning anywhere, any time. For example, the Ultrahet will allow students in remote schools, to access specialised curriculum and podcast classes from schools that excel in various subject areas.

The Ultrahet is expected to increase student participation, engagement and achievement both inside and outside the walls of the classroom.

E5 Instructional Model

The *e⁵ Instructional Model*²³ provides a framework for defining and promoting high-quality instruction in the Victorian government education system. Five phases of instruction are described as Engage, Explore, Explain, Elaborate, and Evaluate. Each phase is supported by a developmental continuum of learning to assist teachers to identify areas for improvement. The model focuses on what the teacher is doing in the classroom, rather than on student behaviour.

Principles of Learning and Teaching P–12

*Principles of Learning and Teaching P–12*²⁴ (PoLT) articulate six principles that can be used by teachers and schools to reflect practice and support professional dialogue to strengthen pedagogical practices. A key principle is to ensure that students' needs, backgrounds, perspectives and interests are reflected in the learning program. A range of strategies is used to monitor and respond to students' different learning needs, social needs and cultural perspectives. PoLT argues that students' lives and interests should be reflected in learning sequences and recommends that a variety of teaching strategies be used to accommodate the range of students' abilities and interests, and to encourage diversity and autonomy.

Support services

School Focused Youth Service

The School Focused Youth Service is a joint initiative between the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development and the Department of Human Services, and focuses on the coordination of preventative and early intervention strategies for 'at risk' young people, delivered through school and community clusters. Across Victoria, 41 coordinators work with school and community advisory groups and

²³ *e⁵ Instructional Model*, DEECD 2009 <http://www.education.vic.gov.au/management/schoolimprovement/panddc/default.htm>

²⁴ *Principles of Learning and Teaching*, DEECD, 2006 <http://www.education.vic.gov.au/studentlearning/teachingprinciples/default.htm>

networks to ensure that services are coordinated and responsive to the needs of children and young people aged 10 to 18 years.

A core component of the School Focused Youth Service is the establishment of linkages/coordination between youth services (in schools and in the community). These linkages include community mapping, development of services, enhancement of the effectiveness of existing services, provision of information about service availability, and the establishment of protocols between services and schools. The School Focused Youth Service has some capacity to apply brokerage funds to purchase services in response to identified gaps in service availability. Gaps are identified by schools and community clusters and vary from cluster to cluster according to both the available service mix and the needs for various service types.

Local Learning and Employment Networks

LLENs bring together education providers, industry, community organisations, individuals and government agencies in order to improve education, training and employment outcomes for young people. A state-wide network of 31 LLENs focuses on young people aged 15–19, with a particular emphasis on those at risk of not completing Year 12 or its equivalent. LLENs exist to help improve education, training and employment options for 15–19-year-olds, particularly those at risk of making poor transitions from compulsory schooling to the next stage of their lives and careers.

Youth Transition Support Initiative

The Youth Transition Support Initiative assists disengaged young people to obtain a sustainable education, training or employment option. It provides funding for 24 Transition Support Workers across 12 LLEN areas. These areas were selected based on high numbers of disengaged young people. Transition Support Workers provide personalised assistance to young people aged 15–19 years who are not in education and training, not working full-time and do not have Year 12 or an equivalent qualification. The objective of the assistance is that disengaged young people will achieve a sustainable education, training or employment outcome. The program is run through nine community agency coordinators: The Salvation Army, Berry Street, Taskforce Community Agency, Uniting Care Cutting Edge, Centacare, St Luke's Anglicare, Western Workplace Learning Inc. and Djerriwarrh Education and Employment Services.

Student support services

The student support service program enhances the capacity of Victorian government schools to meet the additional learning and wellbeing needs of children and young people. This program was established to support children and young people with additional needs or at risk of disengagement, and to strengthen the capacity of schools to engage all students in education. Student support services staff comprises psychologists, guidance officers, speech pathologists, social workers, visiting teachers and other related professionals.

Major reforms are currently being undertaken to strengthen student support services. Five key components of the reforms are:

- 1 overarching state-wide student support services policy
- 2 targeted service delivery
- 3 improved management structures
- 4 enhanced workforce support and supervision
- 5 better accountability and performance reporting arrangements.

New guidelines for student support services (*Strengthening Networks and School Communities: Guidelines for Student Support Services*) have recently been released in response to changing policy directions and the changing needs of regions and school communities. The guidelines are available online.

0–18 Health and Wellbeing Service Framework

Health and wellbeing services focus on optimising health, wellbeing, learning and educational outcomes for children, young people and families in Victorian government schools. The 0–18 Health and Wellbeing Service Framework recognises that health and wellbeing are of critical importance for the educational outcomes of children and young people, and that the domains of health, wellbeing and development are intrinsically linked. The 0–18 Health and Wellbeing Service Framework will:

- build a coherent and coordinated system for delivering health and wellbeing services to children, young people and their families
- improve the effectiveness and responsiveness of health and wellbeing services for all children, young people and their families
- strengthen partnerships across departmental, regional, network and local levels and between health and wellbeing services and:
 - education services
 - the children, young people and families they support
 - the broader health and wellbeing sector.

Programs and resources

Community VCAL

Community VCAL programs are a form of VCAL delivery tailored to the needs of students who have become disengaged from mainstream schooling, or who are considered to be at significant risk of disengaging from mainstream school. Community VCAL students are generally enrolled at a government school but the program is delivered by an education provider external to the school site.

A review of Community VCAL initiatives was undertaken in 2008. The report, *Future Directions for Community VCAL Programs*, outlines five key quality improvements for Community VCAL:

- a clear policy framework that positions Community VCAL in the context of the Blueprint and subsequent reforms
- improved data on Community VCAL programs, students and outcomes
- stronger accountability for delivery and outcomes
- more consistent funding arrangements
- promotion of good practice in Community VCAL delivery.

TAFE

TAFE courses provide a range of options for post-compulsory school-aged children to develop skills sets for future employment opportunities. TAFE options range from certificates to vocational graduate qualifications that comply with requirements of industry and from tailored individual training to packages that improve the skills of working groups within various industries. TAFE can help students, job seekers, or those already employed to access training in Victoria.

Adult Community Education

Adult Community Education (ACE) provides education and training for a broad range of Victorians over compulsory school-leaving age, with a special focus on people who have had limited access to education. Introductory and informal learning opportunities are offered in a friendly local environment. ACE providers help adults to move on to other learning opportunities in TAFE and higher education, or to employment. Consistent with a Memorandum of Understanding arrangement between Adult, Community and Further Education and the Department, ACE providers also deliver educational programs to some students who are below the minimum school leaving age when all other options within the school environment have been explored and exhausted. Students remain 'attached' to their school of origin and there is ongoing collaboration between the school and the ACE provider.

There are more than 350 ACE organisations and two large Adult Education Institutions – the Centre for Adult Education and Adult Multicultural Education Services in Victoria – that provide vocational education and training to adults throughout Victoria. ACE providers deliver a diverse range of courses to meet the needs of individuals and businesses in the community. These courses include:

- adult literacy and numeracy – training for adults in literacy and numeracy skills, including teaching English to people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, for example English as a Second Language.

- employment skills – training in basic skills to support work or further learning, such as communications, teamwork, problem solving and job search skills
- VCE/VCAL – Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE) and Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL) for education and training for post-compulsory learners.
- vocational education – assisting people to gain the skills required for specific occupations, start work, go back to work or change jobs.

Distance education

Distance Education Centre Victoria (DECV) is a P–12 school providing flexible educational services. Courses through distance education combine print-based, digital, audio and visual learning materials and electronic interaction facilities through the Internet. The online environment of distance education provides facilities for discussion forums, chats, communication and the provision of feedback on work submitted. The learning environment is managed and monitored by the teachers responsible for the students, and student access is controlled by enrolment levels.

Distance education courses are designed to meet the educational needs of students whose circumstances prevent them from attending regular schools. In some instances, students are travelling, ill or find regular schooling difficult. Some students use the DECV's services to enrol in one or two subjects that they cannot access at their regular school. In many instances, students enrol with the DECV for a short time and then return to regular schooling.

Appendix B: Feedback form

If you wish to provide feedback directly to Student Wellbeing Division, this feedback sheet may be useful. This feedback can be provided by:

Email: flexible.learning.options@edumail.vic.gov.au
Mail: Flexible Learning Options Project Manager
Student Wellbeing and Support Division
Office for Government School Education
GPO Box 4367
MELBOURNE 3001

Feedback on the Directions Paper concludes at **5.00pm** on **Monday 31 May 2010**.

All feedback to the questions outlined below must be in writing, and received by close of business on this date.

Discussion question 1: Does the continuum of flexible learning options reflect the range of programs supporting children and young people in Victoria? Are there any major options not covered?

Discussion question 2: How can Tier 3 and Tier 4 flexible learning options be supported and strengthened to better engage and retain children and young people at high risk of disengagement?

Discussion question 3: Are the suggested roles and responsibilities for addressing student disengagement reasonable and practical?

Discussion question 4: How can school networks and regions play a stronger role in supporting schools and stakeholders to provide innovative flexible learning options that meet local needs?

Discussion question 5: Are the challenges to the provision of flexible learning options accurate?

Discussion question 6: How can a policy framework better guide and support the provision of flexible learning options across Victoria?

Discussion question 7: Are the proposed components of the policy framework for flexible learning options relevant and appropriate? Are there any components that have not been covered?

Discussion question 8: How can the key focus areas be strengthened in practice to enable more effective provision of flexible learning options?

Discussion question 9: Are the suggested actions to develop a policy framework for flexible learning options reasonable? Are there other actions that are required?
