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Never Stand Still

Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences

Linking Schools and Early Years Project Evaluation

BJ Newton and kylie valentine

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Executive Summary

This is the final report for the five-year evaluation of the Linking Schools and Early Years project. The Linking Schools and Early Years Project (LSEY) was led by the Centre for Community Child Health (CCCH), Murdoch Children's Research Institute at the Royal Children's Hospital Melbourne and ran for six years from 2007 to 2012.

The aim of LSEY was to ensure that all children enter the formal education system ready to engage and be successful in school. The project also aimed to ensure that schools are prepared for children of all abilities and backgrounds when they first attend, and that families, services and communities are ready to support the development of children.

The project was implemented in three sites in Victoria: Corio/Norlane in the Greater Geelong City Council, Footscray in the City of Maribyrnong and in Hastings in Mornington Peninsula Shire. In each site the project worked with selected schools; feeder early education and care services (ECEC)¹ for these schools; local government; and child and family services to develop new models of working collaboratively in order to address barriers to learning and development.

This final evaluation report focuses on the final six months of the project in each of the LSEY sites, paying particular attention to issues and initiatives towards the sustainability of the project in each respective area post funding. As the focus is on the wrap-up of the project, no new quantitative or qualitative data has been collected. The findings from this report, while informed by previous years' evaluations, draw primarily from LSEY project documents provided by the LSEY site facilitators and a focus group with the site facilitators and management from the Centre for Community Child Health.

Summary of project

The LSEY outcomes framework translates the research evidence on transition into three goals:

- Goal 1: Children and families make a smooth transition between early years services and school

¹ The term 'early years services' and 'early education and care (ECEC) services' are both used in this report, to describe the following services (from raising children.net.au and careforkids.com.au).

- **Long day care** is centre based day care that offers child care for at least eight hours a day for at least 48 weeks per year. Some long day care centres include preschool programs.
- **Kindergarten or preschool** run group programs for children of three and four years of age that are sessional and part-time.
- **Occasional care**: short periods of care for children under school age. Families can use occasional care on either a regular or irregular basis. Parents use occasional child care for a variety of reasons, including casual, shift-work or part-time work; respite care; crisis and emergency care, shopping or attending appointments
- **Family day care**: experienced family day carers provide care and developmental activities in their own homes for other people's children.

- Goal 2: Early years services and schools actively connect with families
- Goal 3: Schools are responsive to the individual learning needs of all children

The delivery of programs and activities to meet these goals differed between the three LSEY sites to suit the different local service sector and community context of the area. While differences existed between the actual implementation of project initiatives, all three sites were based on a shared approach. This approach was to deliver locally relevant, family and community centred programs and services through the collaborative efforts of professional partnerships.

The evaluation of LSEY found a number of key strengths of the LSEY approach that contributed to the success of project activities:

- The facilitator role
- Dedicated time release for educators, and specific funding for that purpose
- A flexible model that is responsive to local needs
- Ongoing professional development of school and ECEC educators
- Project funding provided by LSEY
- Research and evidence base
- Local partnerships and capacity building
- The engagement of local government in the partnerships

Summary of sites

All three LSEY sites are economically disadvantaged, and have a relatively high proportion of children with developmental vulnerabilities in one or more domains of the Australian Early Development Index (AEDI)². Despite these demographic similarities, the project sites are quite diverse in their local service systems, cultural backgrounds of families, and geographic context. As a result the project has been implemented and received differently by the community in each location.

Corio and Norlane are suburbs within the City of Greater Geelong. Three schools were initially invited to join the LSEY project, however this expanded to include all schools (seven schools) in 2011, that was supported by merging public schools and to include the two local Catholic schools. The LSEY Network in Corio Norlane consists of three groups:

- LSEY/Best Start³ Partnership group – this partnership group merged in 2009 due to similar initiatives, to make better use of local resources and to demonstrate the value placed on professional's time by not doubling up on meetings.

² 'The AEDI measures five areas of child development based on scores from a checklist completed by teachers. The areas are physical health and wellbeing; social competence; emotional maturity; language, cognitive and communication skills; and general knowledge' (Laidlaw 2009).

³ Best Start is a Victorian government early years initiative.

- The Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) Working Group – this group is a formal off-shoot of the Best Start/LSEY Partnership group and comprises of local early years services and prep teachers.
- The Transition Leaders Group – this group comprises of one prep teacher from each of the seven LSEY schools and one ECEC representative. They are responsible for facilitation and administration of the ECEC Working Group.

Some of the stand-out achievements for the Corio Norlane site included:

- Merging with Best Start effectively, that is, in a way that maintained LSEY project autonomy while at the same time utilising Best Start resources and networks and creating a mutually beneficial partnership.
- Filling a significant gap in the local community service sector through the establishment of the ECEC Working Group. This group is highly valued in the community.
- Securing funding of the Transition Leaders Group (contributions from all schools) and almost certain sustainability of this group at least for 2013.

Footscray and Footscray West are busy urban suburbs in the City of Maribyrnong in Melbourne's Western suburbs. The project began with two schools but expanded to include a further three schools and additional early years services to accommodate the local context and to attract more interest. Footscray has struggled to maintain network groups over the life of the project, experiencing peaks and troughs in community engagement. Two Network Groups were established, and have had variable attendance over time:

- The Partnership Group – consisting of senior level professionals, including school principals and local council, and also representatives from the Practitioner Group
- The Practitioner Group – made up of local prep teachers and early years educators

Some of the highlights for the Footscray site included:

- Improved strategies to engage families in schools
- The implementation of play-based curriculum in some capacity in more than one school
- Recognising and valuing the importance of continuity between early education and care services and prep classroom environments

Hastings is a small town on Victoria's Mornington Peninsula. Hastings has three primary schools, two public and one Catholic, all of which are actively involved in the LSEY project and have been since the project commenced. Three network groups were established through the LSEY project:

- The Partnership Group – made up of management level ECEC service and school representatives,
- The Practitioner Network – made up of prep teachers and early years educators
- The Practitioner Leadership Group – consisting of three early years education representatives from local early years services and schools who were responsible for facilitation and administration of the Practitioner Network

Some of the highlights for the Hastings project over the life of LSEY included:

- Developing a genuine partnership approach to meeting the needs of families in the town
- Adopting an attitude of equality between professionals in the education sector and between schools; *collaboration* rather than *competition*
- Integrating LSEY principles into normal business, as illustrated by a number of the LSEY activities, including joint transition programs, professional development initiatives, and strategies to engage families

Sustainability

At a site level the final six months of the project has centred on strategising, planning and putting into place actions to enable the sustainability of the project in the future. It has also been a time to reflect on the achievements over the life of the project.

While there have been a number of successes towards the sustainability of the project, partners have also had to come to terms with the fact that some aspects of the project cannot continue as they have been in the past. This realisation has caused the groups to strategise ways that the project can continue at least in some form, and develop contingency plans with existing resources.

Overall the **Corio Norlane** site has made considerable efforts to ensure the sustainability of the project. The seven schools involved in the project have taken on the responsibility of funding the Transition Leaders Group, and growing recognition of the importance of the Early Childhood Education and Care Group has increased the community support for this group also. While the fate of the Partnership Group is not as clear, already formed relationships, and the connection with Best Start, still provides exposure for the project at a management level. Recent activities for the groups have focused on the continuation of the network groups, in order to continue to work towards the LSEY goals.

The **Footscray** Linking Schools and Early Years project has endured some significant and ongoing challenges impeding sustainability, including turnover of key staff and supporters. Changes to the structure of the state education department also had local effects in Footscray, as a small number of senior stakeholders expressed uncertainty as to the possible impact of these changes, and consequently were unwilling to make plans for LSEY. While the partnerships in a formal capacity have now drawn to a close due to a lack of leadership post funding and inconsistent attendance, the relationships developed between educators in schools and ECEC services will continue informally and through transition activities. The sustainability of the project now relies on the aspects of the project that are thriving, that is, the improvements that are occurring within some of the schools, and the relationships that have developed between schools and their feeder ECEC services.

The **Hastings** LSEY partnership groups have been focusing all their efforts on planning for the sustainability of LSEY once funding ceases. Professionals at all levels are committed to the project and recognise its value to the community. Hastings continue to seek

opportunities for funding to sustain the LSEY project,⁴ however the community is so committed to LSEY continuing, they have developed contingency plans to save LSEY at least for the short term by portioning the workload on already existing resources. Engaging families continues to be an ongoing challenge in the Hastings area, particularly in the school sector, and improving this is now a priority for the project. The project staff and partners have identified the need for a community development worker in the area, and are seeking opportunities for funding for this.⁵

Conclusion

The strengths and risks of this model have been apparent throughout, and are also clear in the current context of the end of funding. The risks are that local engagement and ownership are vital, and where this engagement falters, so too do the activities and initiatives. The strengths are that local engagement and ownership translates into significant efforts to find funding where it is needed to sustain activities and groups; and also that local ownership has embedded some activities into everyday practice, such that specific resources are no longer necessary. Schools and services in each of the sites have invested considerable effort and resources in improving the transition to school experience for children and their families, building relationships and respect between sectors, and ensuring schools meet the needs of their communities. Although the project funding has ceased, these efforts will continue.

⁴ At the time of finalising the report the Catholic Diocese of Westernport has committed to fund the LSEY partnership activities in Hastings for the next three years.

⁵ At the time of finalising the report the LSEY partnership through the PlayOn Program has been successful in receiving a philanthropic grant to support community development. A second grant was secured by a community organisation to support the community development plan.

1 Introduction

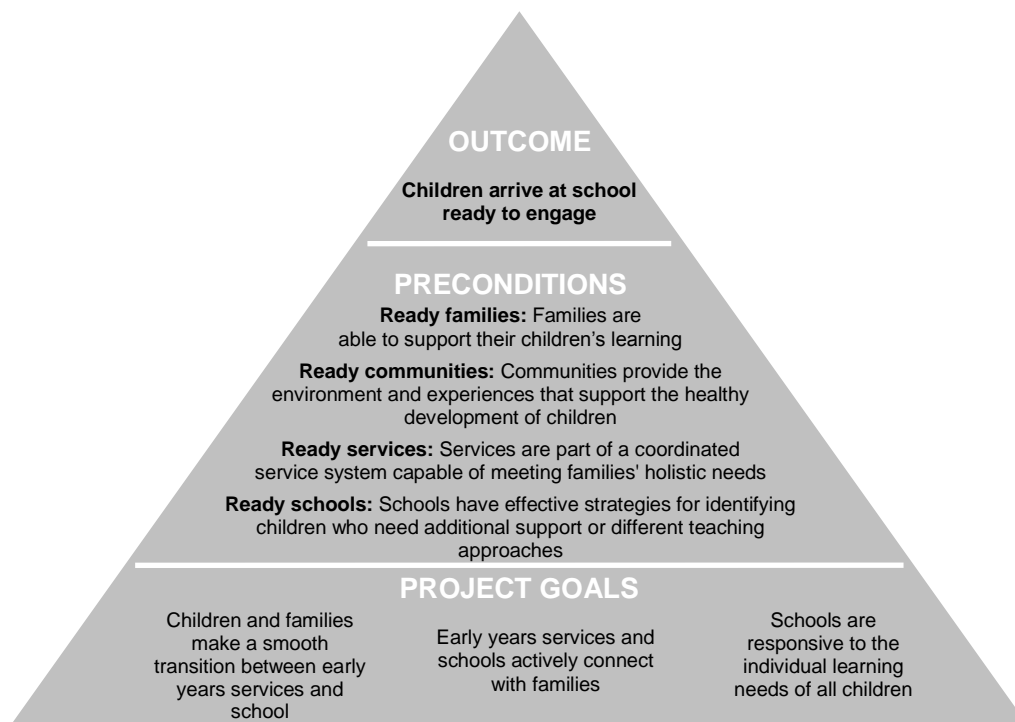
The Linking Schools and Early Years Project (LSEY) was led by the Centre for Community Child Health (CCCH), Murdoch Children's Research Institute at the Royal Children's Hospital Melbourne, and funded by the R. E. Ross Trust and the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD). The aim of LSEY was to ensure that all children enter the formal education system ready to engage and be successful in school. The project also aimed to ensure that schools are prepared for children of all abilities and backgrounds when they first attend, and that families, services and communities are ready to support the development of children.

LSEY was implemented in three sites in Victoria: Corio/Norlane in the Greater Geelong City Council, Footscray in the City of Maribyrnong, and Hastings in Mornington Peninsula Shire. In each site the project worked with selected schools; feeder early education and care services (ECEC)⁶ for these schools; local government; and child and family services to develop new models of working collaboratively in order to address barriers to learning and development. The project ran over a six year period from 2007 to 2012.

This is the final evaluation report for the LSEY project. The most recent evaluation report (Eastman et al., 2012) detailed the different activities within each site over the life of the project and provided both a qualitative and quantitative analysis of the evaluation data for 2012, and changes over time in the key outcome areas of transition to school activities, partnerships, and parents' experiences of school. The evaluation was informed by the LSEY Outcomes Framework (Figure 1.1).

⁶ The term 'early years services' and 'early education and care (ECEC) services' are both used in this report, to describe prior-to-school services including long day care and kindergarten.

Figure 1.1: LSEY outcomes framework



Previous reports have extensively discussed the project's progress and effectiveness in meeting the LSEY goals. In light of project coming to a close, this report focuses on the sustainability of the LSEY project within each site once funding has ceased.

Using a wide variety of project documents provided by the LSEY site facilitators, this report will focus primarily on the final six months of the project and the strategies and initiatives the sites have implemented for the sustainability of the project beyond the funding period. We did not collect any new qualitative or quantitative data from parents, schools or services.

2 Project summaries

2.1 Summary of the LSEY goals

The LSEY project has worked to meet three goals in order to achieve the ultimate outcome that 'children arrive at school ready to engage'. Each of the LSEY project sites implemented local strategies to meet the three LSEY goals in their community. As has been discussed extensively in previous evaluation reports, and will be further addressed in this report, the three LSEY sites are diverse and as a result, have all implemented similar activities with varying degrees of success. Some of the activities have become ingrained as a part of normal school/service business, while other activities were trialled as pilots and others are designed to be one-off events. A comprehensive list of the activities for each goal can be found on the LSEY website (Centre for Community Child Health, 2013b, 2013c, 2013d). Below the LSEY goals are outlined, as are some of the activities that have been implemented to achieve each goal:

Goal 1: Children and families make a smooth transition between early years services and school

To work towards meeting this goal schools and services made changes to their transition to school programs, and began working collaboratively to plan and deliver activities, both professionally and with families that would improve the transition to school experience for children coming into prep year. Some of the activities implemented across all three sites to achieve this include:

- Peer Swaps: Prep teachers and early years educators spent a day in each other's services in order to develop a better understanding of the other's role in early childhood education development
- Family transition information tools: These included a transition to school calendar that is inclusive of all school's transition activities, school open days and information sessions, and transition to school information packages.
- Seamless early learning environments: This entailed schools and early years services working together and providing reciprocal guidance about how to implement learning environments that support a smooth transition to school. This has included changes to the classroom set-up for prep teachers, and introducing prep activities into ECEC centres for preschool students.

Goal 2: Early years services and schools actively connect with families

This goal involves schools and services working together to connect with families. To achieve this, a number of schools in particular have implemented programs and made changes to their school environment so they are more parent friendly. Such changes have included:

- Family spaces: Some schools have created a designated space within school grounds that parents can come and meet informally. Others have opened their classrooms to parents at designated times throughout the week or school term
- Consultations with families: Some schools have sought the advice of parents formally through research projects in order to improve their family engagement strategies,

develop better relationships, and create a more inclusive school environment for families

- Schools as community hubs: In partnership with local child and family services, some schools provided access to allied health care services and programs on school grounds

Goal 3: Schools are responsive to the individual learning needs of all children

This goal is based on the importance of schools' building capacity, through changing their operations and building relationships with families and with services to identify and meet the individual learning needs of all children. This is an important component of a shift from a focus on the 'school readiness' of children to the 'child readiness' of schools. Some of the LSEY activities to meet this goal included:

- Transition statement partnerships: Early years educators and prep teachers, and in some instances, families, worked together to develop useful and accurate transition statements that can assist children to settle into school. This was most productive when the transition statement is handed directly from the early years educator to the prep teacher and they can discuss any issues or concerns they have.
- Joint professional learning: Early years educators and prep teachers in all settings were engaged in ongoing, innovative and evidence-based professional learning in order to improve their knowledge and understanding of issues such as supporting children with a disability, addressing literacy and oral language delays, and implementing learning environments to maximise student engagement.

Success factors

The most recent evaluation report (Eastman et al., 2012: 59-63) discusses a number of strengths of the LSEY project approach that have contributed to the successful implementation of LSEY initiatives and activities. These are:

- The facilitator role has been a significant contributor to developing relationships between stakeholders and maintaining momentum.
- Dedicated time release to enable early years services and schools to engage in LSEY activities and meetings has significantly assisted the development of relationships.
- A flexible model that is responsive to local needs
- The professional development of school and ECEC educators has been ongoing at all sites since the inception of the LSEY project.
- Project funding provided by LSEY has also been an important contributor to project goals.
- Access to information sessions about research and evidence for collaborative partnerships has also contributed to supporting connections
- The establishment of formal management and practitioner groups at all three sites has been a key contributor to the development of actions to ensure a smooth transition to school for children and families.

- The engagement of local government in the partnerships has been a critical factor in the success of activities and the project.

2.2 Summary of each site

Corio Norlane

Corio and Norlane are suburbs within the City of Greater Geelong with a combined population of 25,844 people, with 13.8% comprising of children 0-9 years (ABS, 2011a). The Australian Early Development Index (AEDI)⁷ data reports that 33.1 per cent and 30.2 per cent of children are vulnerable on one or more AEDI domains in Corio and Norlane respectively (AEDI 2012a). Corio and Norlane are socially disadvantaged suburbs, with an unemployment rate of 10.9% compared to the overall Victorian population of 5.4% unemployed. Additionally, the City of Greater Geelong is currently experiencing a population influx, with many refugee and migrant families settling in the region. In response to these issues several new and ongoing community and government initiatives have been implemented in an attempt to improve conditions and meet the needs of families.

The LSEY project in Corio Norlane entered into an environment of an already established network of community services and a number of early years projects were already underway. This helped to pave the way for the project as it was able to tap into existing groups and develop further relationships through this. One of these was the local Best Start Partnership Group. LSEY and Best Start merged their Partnership Groups in 2009 as they identified a number of similarities between the two projects and an opportunity to minimise the chances of workers becoming fatigued at having to attend multiple groups. This merger helped to boost the profile and exposure of LSEY as Best Start had been established in the community for a number of years and was attached to local government.

Three State government schools were initially involved in the LSEY project, however this expanded to a total of seven schools (State and Catholic) in 2011 due to the merge of the Best Start and LSEY partnerships and wider school engagement was supported by the merge of the local public schools. This expansion was of benefit to LSEY as the additional schools were motivated to be a part of the project and partnerships.

The LSEY Network consists of three groups: the LSEY/Best Start Partnership group, the Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) Working Group, and the Transition Leaders Group. The Transition Leaders group is made up of one prep teacher from each of the seven LSEY schools. Their role is to plan, organise and implement many of the project activities and initiatives. They also act as facilitators to the ECEC Working Group, which is made up of local ECEC educators and prep teachers. The ECEC Working Group is a formal off-shoot of the Best Start/LSEY Partnership group and has become a valuable resource in the community as a leader of early education knowledge and community actions.

As a project that has experienced significant changes throughout the past several years, LSEY in Corio Norlane has evolved and adapted to these changes in a way that has enabled

⁷ 'The AEDI measures five areas of child development based on scores from a checklist completed by teachers. The areas are physical health and wellbeing; social competence; emotional maturity; language, cognitive and communication skills; and general knowledge' (Laidlaw 2009).

the project to thrive. Previous evaluation reports discuss the range of activities and initiatives delivered by this project (Eastman et al., 2010; Eastman et al., 2012; Rajkovic & valentine, 2010; valentine & Dinning, 2009) and some of the highlights include:

- Merging with Best Start effectively, that is, in a way that maintained LSEY project autonomy while at the same time sharing resources and networks with Best Start
- Filling a significant gap in the local community service sector through the establishment of the ECEC Working Group. This group is highly valued in the community
- Securing funding of the Transition Leaders Group and near-certain sustainability, at least for 2013

Footscray

Footscray and West Footscray (hereafter Footscray) are busy urban suburbs in the City of Maribyrnong in Melbourne's Western suburbs with a combined population of 23,425 people (ABS, 2011b; ABS, 2011d). Children aged 0-9 years make up 9.7% and 12.6% of the Footscray and West Footscray population respectively. Footscray is a culturally diverse area, with 43 per cent of residents being born overseas; and 35.9 per cent of those new to Australia, having arrived in the last five years. Footscray, like the other LSEY sites, suffers social disadvantage, with 29.8 per cent of households in the lowest income group compared to 25% in Victoria (ABS 2011b). Current AEDI data shows that 22.2 per cent of children in Footscray and 16.8 per cent in West Footscray are developmentally vulnerable on one or more AEDI domains (AEDI 2012b).

An issue that arose early for LSEY in Footscray was that it was difficult to identify the geographic boundaries to the community. Families used many services outside Footscray, the area has a large number of services, and the service network crossed many LGAs. As a result the project expanded to accommodate the local context and to attract more interest. Three additional schools were engaged (from two initially), as were additional ECEC services.

Networks were established in Footscray, made up of a Partnership Group and Practitioner Group. The Partnership Group had senior representation, including school principals and local council, and also representatives from the Practitioner Group. The Practitioner Group was made up of prep teachers and local early years educators who would develop and implement activities on the ground, such as the Peer Swaps and the Transition Statement Handover. Even with this expansion the LSEY facilitator had difficulties getting the Partnership and Practitioner groups off the ground, with inconsistent and low attendance for the duration of the project, and when there was momentum happening, professionals were unable to take ownership of or champion activities at a community level. By the end of the project the stand out achievements were activities and connections at an organisation level, separate from the community level partnerships, but enabled through engagement with these partnerships. Improving transition to school programs and making changes within the school environment has been the focus of schools and ECEC services in local partnerships, whether or not they attended the network groups. While reported on in detail in previous evaluation reports (Eastman et al., 2010; Eastman et al., 2012; Rajkovic & valentine, 2010; valentine & Dinning, 2009), some of the highlights for the Footscray LSEY project include:

- Improved strategies to engage families
- The development and implementation of a play-based curriculum across some schools
- A recognition of and valuing the importance of continuity between ECEC services and prep classroom environments

Hastings

Hastings is small town on Victoria's Mornington Peninsula. Home to 8,685 people, children under nine years of age represent 14.3 per cent (ABS, 2011c) of the Hastings population. The AEDI reports that 42.5 per cent of children are developmentally vulnerable on one or more of the AEDI domains (AEDI 2012c). Hastings has a tight knit local community, but faces a number of vulnerabilities, including a low employment rate and a high ratio of single parents and low income families.

Hastings has three primary schools, two public and one Catholic, all of which are actively involved in the LSEY project and have been since inception. The LSEY project hit the ground running in Hastings. All three schools, local government, and the local kindergarten were keen supporters. Over time, and through repeated attempts to engage services, the organisations joining the project grew and now a genuine whole of community approach to meeting the needs of families is executed within the local area.

Three key groups encompass the LSEY project: the Partnership Group, made up of management level service representatives, the Practitioner Network, made up of prep teachers and early years educators, and the Practitioner Leadership Group, consisting of one kindergarten teacher, childcare educator and prep teacher from different local schools/services. The Practitioner Leadership Group is responsible for managing project activities, facilitating the Practitioner Network, and acting as a conduit between the Practitioner Network and the Partnership Group. The Practitioner Leadership Group is the driving force behind the implementation of project initiatives.

Throughout the life of the project the Hastings site has experienced many achievements and rolled-out various innovative activities to meet the LSEY goals and improve the overall early learning experiences for children and families. While these activities have been discussed throughout the five-year evaluation and are detailed in previous reports (Eastman et al., 2010; Eastman et al., 2012; Rajkovic & valentine, 2010; valentine & Dinning, 2009), some of the highlights for the project include:

- Development of a genuine partnership approach to meeting the needs of families in the town
- Adopting an attitude of equality between professionals in the education sector and between schools; *collaboration* rather than *competition*
- Integration of LSEY principles into normal business, as illustrated by a number of the LSEY activities, including joint transition programs, professional development initiatives, and strategies to engage families

3 Method

3.1 Data used for this evaluation

This is the final evaluation report for the Linking Schools and Early Years Project. In previous years the evaluation reports have been informed by various quantitative data, including parent questionnaires, school surveys, child and family services surveys, and early years surveys, as well as qualitative data in the form of interviews and focus groups.

The data used for this report has been primarily collected from the LSEY site facilitators in the form of reflections, work plans, action plans, and case studies. The material used to inform the report is listed below.

Corio Norlane

- Best Start- Linking Schools and Early Years Action Plan 2011-2012
- Corio Norlane- Site facilitator's reflective work plan
- Corio Norlane Site Story- Community and Facilitator Reflections July-Dec 2012
- ECEC Group Work Plan- Phase IV
- ECEC Group Community Action Plan Phase IV July-Dec 2012
- Corio Norlane Community Case Study
- Partnership Model Corio Norlane July- Dec 2012
- Evaluation of Transition Leaders Group for 2012- Reflections from the Transition Leaders
- ECEC Transition Leaders Work Plan 2012

Footscray

- Footscray 2012 Phase V Action Plan- First Cut
- Footscray 2012 Phase V Action Plan- Second Cut (December 2012)
- Footscray Site Story- Community and Facilitator Reflections July-Dec 2012
- Footscray Site facilitator's reflective work plan
- Footscray Work Plan Phase V (2012)- First Cut
- Footscray Work Plan Phase V (2012)- Second Cut
- Footscray Community Case Study
- Our City- Our Children, Hearing Their Voices: Maribyrnong Early Years Plan 2010-2014
- Project Partnerships/ Network Structure 2012
- Footscray Transition Timetable

Hastings

- Hastings Partnership Structure 2012
- Hastings Partnership Structure 2013

- Building Supportive Communities
- Hastings Community Case Study
- Hastings Phase V (2012) Linking Schools and Early Years Action Plan
- Hastings Phase VI (2013) Linking Schools and Early Years Interim Action Plan
- Hastings Site Stories- Community and Facilitator Reflections July-Dec 2012
- Hastings Partnership Terms of Reference
- Hastings Partnership Model 2012
- Hastings Partnership Work Plan 2011 (Dec 2012)
- Hastings Partnership Work Plan 2011 (June 2012)
- Practitioner Leadership group/ Practitioner Network Work Plan 2012 (Dec)
- Practitioner Leadership group/ Practitioner Network Work Plan 2012 (June)
- Practitioner Leadership Group Stages 2008-2012
- Site Facilitators Reflective Work Plan: Hastings July-Dec 2012

All sites

- LSEY Core Components
- Linking Schools and Early Years e-newsletter August 2012
- Linking Schools and Early Years e-newsletter November 2012
- Linking Schools and Early Years Project 2007-2012: Final Progress Report

To clarify this material and add any additional information a focus group was also conducted over the phone with the LSEY facilitators and management from the Centre for Community Child Health. The interview schedule for this focus group is included at Appendix B. The focus group was voice recorded and then transcribed verbatim.

All data were analysed using NVivo 9 qualitative software, using open and axial coding, based on the research questions and emergent themes. The coding frame used to theme and analyse the data is presented at Appendix C.

3.2 Caveats and limitations

As described in previous reports, the evaluation design has limitations, in common with other studies of this type (Eastman, Newton, Rajkovic, & valentine, 2010; valentine & Katz, 2010). The most important of these are: the views and perspectives of children are not included; the relationship between the project goals and the overall outcome cannot be tested; and the changing policy context in Victoria means that the extent to which changes in practice and outcomes can be attributed to LSEY, as opposed to other federal, state and local initiatives, cannot be quantified.

For this report, the only sources of data are the site stories prepared by the site facilitators, administrative data from the project, and a focus group interview with the site facilitators and LSEY project leader. These documents report on the perspectives of others, including data from internal evaluations. However, the views of teachers, principals, early childhood educators and other stakeholders did not directly inform this report, as they did previous reports. The focus of this report is therefore on the lessons learnt from the perspective of project implementation. The findings should be read with this in mind, and the absence of direct reporting of the opinions and priorities of the LSEY communities themselves.

4 Key findings

4.1 Site sustainability and challenges

The focus of LSEY at each site within the last six months has been on the sustainability of the project and partnership groups. As noted in previous evaluation reports, sustainability of the LSEY approach has been considered and embedded from the beginning of LSEY in 2007. In the second half of 2012 LSEY partnerships in each of the site invested significant time in activities and planning focused on sustainability, as the six-year funding for the project concluded at the end of 2012. Throughout the project the sites have consistently had different implementation experiences, and as a result the three sites each had a varying degree of community involvement, support, resources, and motivation to sustain the project. This was also the case in 2012, where a shared focus on sustainability and planning resulted in quite different activities and outcomes.

This section discusses the actions towards sustainability in each of the sites, including the achievements towards sustainability in relation to the project goals. The progress and direction of partnership groups are also discussed as are the challenges of sustainability at a site level.

A key lesson from the 2012 report (Eastman et al., 2012) was that resources for the role of facilitator, and for the additional work associated with LSEY in schools and services, was regarded as critical. Many of the sustainability strategies in the sites have therefore focused embedding activity into core business and on securing resources where necessary. At the overarching project level, efforts for site level sustainability have focused on communication of key messages to ECEC and school governance and funding bodies.

Corio Norlane

The Corio Norlane LSEY site has made considerable strides in the last six to twelve months to ensure the sustainability of the project. The seven schools involved in the project have taken on the responsibility of funding the Transition Leaders Group, and growing recognition for the importance of the Early Childhood Education and Care Group has increased the community support for this group. Furthermore, these two groups were adopted by the local Best Start⁸ partnership as formal working group structures that focused on the specific LSEY goals. This ensured that although formal funding had ceased, the LSEY goals will continue to be a priority for the Transition Leaders, ECEC Working group and on the agenda for the Best Start partnership group.

The Transition Leaders Group in Corio Norlane, made up of prep teachers from the seven schools involved in the LSEY project, is regarded as integral to the planning, development and implementation of project activities. The Transition Leaders group was established to provide leadership in community wide transition programs for families. This group was initially a trial, but a review of the group's performance and impact led the school principals to commit to joint funding for the group's time-release for the following year.

⁸ Best Start is a Victorian government early years initiative. In Corio Norlane the Partnership Group merged with the local Best Start partnership in 2009

After the second year of the Transition Leaders group, the school principals recognised the importance of sustaining this group and the schools are now jointly providing the full amount of funding to time-release prep teachers on the Transition Leaders Group, and equip them with the required resources, in order to work on LSEY activities. The Transition Leaders Group has also recently expanded to include ECEC educators. Like the school principals, the Geelong Kinder Association has also recognised the importance of this group in improving transition to school, and is providing funding for one early years representative to attend these meetings. The Transition Leaders meet 10 times per year, all of which prep teachers will attend, and half of which an early years educator will attend.

A key function of the Transition Leaders Group is to facilitate the Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) working group. The ECEC working group has seen regular attendance and commitment from a large number of early years educators and prep year teachers in the Corio Norlane area. The group is also growing a positive reputation in the community as the go-to group for information or guidance on issues related to early childhood education. The school principals have also recognised the value of this group and have directed the prep year teachers to prioritise the attendance of these group meetings above any other. The goals and initiatives specific to LSEY remain the responsibility of the Transition Leaders and ECEC working groups.

In Corio/Norlane the community is both motivated and resourced to continue the LSEY project. Partnership members have prepared for the transition from having a facilitator to the project being community led by the Transition Leaders Group. The funding provided by schools to continue the Transition Leaders group has essentially ensured the sustainability of this group and the ECEC working group. Additionally, the work within schools to engage families and meet the LSEY goals of smooth transition and meeting individual learning needs, is likely to be sustained in the future, although factors such as school priorities and funding will also be important in determining this.

The merging of LSEY and Best Start partnerships strengthened both projects. However, the end of LSEY funding potentially compromises the influence that the project can have on the Best Start Partnership Group to engage in LSEY specific activities. The formal adoption of the Transition Leaders and ECEC working group by the Best Start Partnership will help maintain LSEY priorities at these meetings and ongoing relationships with management and practitioners across all areas of community services. This is important to the sustainability of the LSEY approach and enabling whole of community planning and delivery of programs.

Challenges

The LSEY project is anticipated to maintain a presence in the community at a partnership level, thanks to the support of the schools and Best Start. Best Start enables LSEY to continue to have a voice during partner meetings, as it has committed to keeping LSEY on the local agenda. However, as there is no funding attached to LSEY at this level, the sustainability of this is uncertain. Unlike LSEY, Best Start is bound by strict indicators project funding must be spent on Best Start initiatives which will take priority over LSEY activities. Additionally, Best Start has welcomed a new site facilitator for the local area, and unfortunately there was no handover from the former worker to the new worker, or to LSEY representatives. This has seen a significant loss of local knowledge and relationships.

At a wider community level there are a number of changes emerging in the local area. For instance, the Extended Schools Hub project is also coming to a close and new projects are being rolled out in the community. It is uncertain at this time whether or not the agendas of these new projects will align with or impact on the sustainability of LSEY.

Footscray

The Footscray Linking Schools and Early Years project has endured some significant and ongoing challenges impeding sustainability, including turnover of key staff and supporters, the complex meanings of community in Footscray (geographic versus connection based) and subsequently limited capacity to operate at a community level. As such the future of the LSEY project heavily relies on the micro-level partnerships developed between schools and their feeder ECEC services, and the activities undertaken in partnership between these two groups and child and family community services.

In 2012, there was continued patchy attendance in Footscray at the Partnership Group meetings, and this made it difficult to plan, delegate and implement activities for the future of the project. This was discouraging to group enthusiasm and momentum. The difficulty experienced by the project in developing community-level partnerships was that it needed people to be involved and committed to community thinking and planning for it to continue. Inconsistent and low meeting attendance throughout the project indicated how improbable the sustainability of community level partnerships was going to be. As a result the LSEY team focused on fostering relationships between schools and their key feeder services. The range of challenges associated with a community level partnership approach has been documented throughout implementation over the past five years and these have been important learnings for the Footscray community.

A Partnership Group meeting in August 2012 was the final for this group, and it was decided that the sustainability for LSEY is best placed upon the Practitioner Group and that micro-level partnerships between schools and their feeder services were more a more effective use of resources than a community-wide partnership approach. However, the Practitioner Group level also exhibited poor attendance at times which hindered future plans for the direction of the group beyond 2012. The Practitioner Group also dissolved as those who were motivated to continue the group have left their respective services. One prep teacher demonstrated their commitment to the project by volunteering to facilitate future meetings. However, unfortunately this person has since left their position, compromising the sustainability of the Practitioner group. This demonstrates that a collaborative community-level partnership approach requires collective commitment by management and practitioner levels. It also highlights the dependence of the project model on volunteerism and goodwill, noted in an earlier evaluation report (Eastman et al., 2010). The LSEY facilitator reflected that as the project was nearing a close people were more hesitant to invest their time and resources into the project. Despite this, the LSEY project did make an impact at the organisation level, with relationships between schools and their feeder ECEC services. The project will continue in Footscray in the form of micro-level partnerships, and in the implementation of LSEY principals in learning environments and transition to school programs.

Challenges

At a management level, three of five LSEY school principals were not represented on the LSEY Partnership Group, but others sent representatives such as the Assistant Principal, Welfare staff or Practitioner level representatives. This is a difference from the other two sites, where all school principals were actively involved the project. The support at a senior level may be a key factor in the success and sustainability of the project. One of the reasons for principals' reluctance in attending or delegating staff to represent their school at partnership meetings during the final months of LSEY, was the uncertainty of DEECD structures. While the policies of the DEECD impact all schools at a state level, the changes within the Department affected some areas differently than others depending on their current and usually limited resources. Further, the level of engagement from the Department varied in each LSEY site and a perception of a less supportive Department may contribute to the reluctance of some principals to participate in the project.

Support from the local council towards the end of LSEY also waned due to staff changes, namely the resignation of the Early Years Coordinator at Maribyrnong Council, who was very supportive of the project. Additionally, the Footscray site evaluation journal reports that in 2012 the Maribyrnong Council early years department was subject to a review and this, combined with caretaker mode in preparation for council elections, shut down some activities within the early years department. Subsequently the council has dropped back in its commitment of staff to the project as they are unable to allocate a council representative to the partnership forum.

Hastings

The Hastings LSEY partnership groups have been focusing all their efforts on planning for the sustainability of LSEY once funding ceases. Professionals at all levels are committed to the project and recognise its value to the community.

The last six to twelve months has seen the development of strategies for the sustainability of the Partnership Group and Practitioner Network, multiple attempts to secure the funding required to continue LSEY in its current form. However, the Partnership has also undertaken planning for a contingency to ensure LSEY continues in some form if funding has not been acquired.

The Hastings Partnership Group developed a Terms of Reference outlining the vision and mission of the group. The three LSEY goals are featured in this document, as are group processes, and role and responsibilities of group members. This provides the group with direction and guidance around how to run the group and what is expected of its members. The endorsement of this document by all partners at a management and organisation level helps to ensure the sustainability of the group.

The Partnership Group has an in principle agreement with a local charitable trust. . While there is no set funding available to LSEY from the trust, the trust have taken on two of the Partnership Groups projects as part of their activities and will share the management of these projects with the Partnership Group. This new arrangement also enables the project to continue to work autonomously towards the LSEY goals.

Attempts to secure funding for a local facilitator have been unsuccessful to date, but the Partnership Group has developed the contingency plan that outlines responsibilities for activities and LSEY initiatives, normally overseen by the facilitator, that will be delegated across organisations in the community. The willingness of community organisations to increase their workload and to undertake LSEY responsibilities demonstrates the community-wide commitment to the sustainability of the project. As such the needs for a facilitator, while still recognised as important, has been reprioritised and the direction of funding attempts is now for a Community Development Worker to focus on engaging families and to support further capacity building at a community level. The Partnership group recognise that engaging families continues to be an ongoing challenge in the Hastings area and therefore recognise the need to prioritise funding for a community development worker over a Partnership Group facilitator. Additionally, the Partnership Group has acknowledged the importance of their continued ownership of the project, and the three schools have agreed, in the short term, to provide joint funding for LSEY activities to continue momentum and progress of the Practitioner Network.

The Practitioner Leadership Group is at a point where members work autonomously as a group and do not require the assistance of the LSEY facilitator. Strategies built into this group, such as the 'knowledge bank' and the rotating roster to ensure that all prep teachers and early years educators become involved, assists in the sustainability of this group, and in turn the sustainability of the Practitioner Network to which the Practitioner Leadership Group facilitates. The Practitioner Leadership Group also acts as a conduit between the Practitioner Network and the Partnership Group. If funding for the time-release of this group cannot be secured the sustainability of these aspects of the LSEY project will be compromised.

The Practitioner Network has also advanced to a point where members see the value in attending for developing professional relationships. This group is able to work autonomously without the facilitation or support of the LSEY facilitator, and in an informal capacity can be sustained. However for specific activities and actions leadership and facilitation from the Practitioner Leadership Group is required.

Challenges

Lack of funding is the biggest barrier to sustainability in Hastings. As described above, the initiatives developed by the community cannot be sustained without resources. On a partnership level everyone is actively committed to the project and has the motivation to continue supporting LSEY. The Partnership Group is energetically exploring options for funding, from a range of sources. However, a lack of funding places extra pressures on the Partnership Group in particular, to manage and facilitate the project. Furthermore, without the core group of Practitioner Leaders to plan, drive, and implement LSEY activities, many activities will fall by the wayside.

4.2 Sustainability of activities

All three LSEY communities have developed activities over the life project aimed at improving the transition to school for children and families, engaging families in the community, and meeting individual learning needs. As the project has evolved so too have

many activities, particularly those that have achieved high levels of community ownership. The sustainability of activities has been driven different mechanisms across each site.

- In **Corio/Norlane**, the Transition Leaders and ECEC Working Group have been working to improve and embed a number of the LSEY activities that were successful and have potential for sustainability. The LSEY/Best Start Partnership provided strategic planning and guidance throughout the project, and this role should continue under the current arrangements.
- In **Footscray**, the micro-level partnership approach to meeting the LSEY goals has been positive over the past few years of LSEY implementation. While the partnerships in a formal capacity have drawn to a close, members acknowledge the value in working together and a number of initiatives will continue through micro-level partnerships.
- In **Hastings**, the Partnership group were primarily responsible for the strategic direction and the Practitioner Leadership group for activity planning, with support from the Practitioner Network for activity implementation.

The activities that are considered by project leaders in each site to be potentially sustainable are summarised below under each LSEY goal. They include activities that have become part of core business and those where there is local motivation to continue, build on and expand.

Goal one: Children and families make a smooth transition between early years services and school

Peer swaps have been an ongoing activity to develop relationships between early years services and schools and proved to be a fundamental strategy in developing a shared understanding of the importance of early education and the value of the different practitioner roles in the learning of young children. Prep teachers and early years educators have spent the day at the other's workplace and benefited by gaining an insight into the importance of early education from another perspective.

While seasoned educators in Hastings and Corio Norlane have evolved from engaging in Peer Swaps, this activity is now a part of the **induction process** for all new prep teachers and ECEC educators the area. This format for Peer Swaps is a way of practically introducing the LSEY project to new educators and promoting the partnership approach to new staff members, hence ensuring the continuation of the LSEY model to a new generation of educators. In Hastings all three school principals support this, as do the Partnership Group, and funds permitting for both schools and early years services, this activity has the potential to be sustained as a starting point for promoting a collaborative approach to early childhood education. In Corio Norlane the funding committed by school principals for the Transition Leaders group to continue meeting incorporates time for prep educators to regularly visit early years services.

Peer swaps were also used as an induction for new educators in Footscray, but it will now be up to individual early years services and schools to initiate this activity. In one case the school transition coordinator has developed a transition plan where the first half of the year is spent visiting ECEC services to observe and develop relationships with the providers, which involves a series of Peer Swaps.

Transition Calendars have been an ongoing activity in Hastings and Corio Norlane for several years. Over time, in both communities, this has evolved into a transition **information package** for children and families that include information about the importance of the transition to school and activities parents can undertake with their children in the lead up to starting school. The information pack is not only to communicate information efficiently to families, but it also promotes a unified community approach to transition to school.

In both communities this has been a collaboration between all schools and their feeder early years services and has been the responsibility of the Practitioner Leadership Group (Hastings) and Transition Leaders group (Corio Norlane), with support from the respective Practitioner/Education networks. Much planning and liaising on the part of the Leadership groups and negotiation from all LSEY organisations was carried out to develop the transition calendar. The successful outcome is a reflection of the positive relationships that have been developed from a partnership approach to transition to school.

The Transition Calendars and information packs have been so effective that it is now embedded into the core activities of the group and all LSEY schools. However as this activity takes considerable planning and liaising with all organisations involved, it would be very difficult to sustain if the Leadership groups were no longer running.

Formal and informal transition programs have been developed for children, their families and educators in Corio Norlane and Footscray. These have been developed collaboratively by schools and early years services with a focus on family engagement in transition and their children's learning environments as well as focusing on educators developing relationships and working together.

In Corio Norlane their collaborative approach to planning a transition program for children and families as well as educators has been well received in the community and management and will continue as a part of the overall partnership approach to transition. The formal part of the transition program is implemented towards the end of the year before children start school and includes sessions at schools for children and families together and separately and was developed by bringing together the experiences of all local early years services, schools and families. The informal part of the transition program begins in term one and involves meetings between prep teachers and their feeder early years services as well as visits by prep teachers to early years services and children, their families and early years educators informally attending events in schools throughout the whole year.

In Footscray a **Transition Timetable** was developed with the intent to implement it from the middle of 2012. This was a whole of community approach to supporting families in the transition to school. It outlined tasks and responsibilities of a variety of local education, government and community organisations in the implementation of transition to school programs. The planning and developing the Transition Timetable at a community level involving schools, early years services, early interventions services and local government did encourage the development and strengthening of relationships and enabled practitioners to recognise the importance of a partnership approach to transition to school. Given the status of the partnerships and networks in Footscray (dissolved), community-wide implementation of the Transition Timetable now rests with the leadership and motivation of each individual early years service, schools and community service. The time and effort gone into

developing the Transition Timetable did encourage a commitment from schools and ECEC services to implement it independently through their micro-level partnerships.

Also in Footscray, individual schools have developed formal and informal transition programs either in collaboration with their feeder early years services or with the intention of strengthening relationships with early years services.

- One school transition coordinator is embedding **regular connection and communication** with their feeder early years services through a transition plan where the first half of the year is spent visiting ECEC services to observe and develop relationships with the providers, and the second half of the year engaging parents and children.
- One school developed a **'Bridge into prep'** program that included engaging families in their children's prep class and an early-learning focussed classroom environment for prep children in the first four weeks of school (see Eastman et al., 2012: 35). The school is now seeking funding opportunities to further improve their knowledge in this area.
- One school has implemented a fully integrated **inquiry-based prep program** that has engaged in significant professional development (LSEY funded) to ensure staff were well supported in this transition process. For instance, the prep teachers receive ongoing mentoring from ECEC services to provide support and guidance with implementing the curriculum. School teachers have also embarked on a study tour to investigate how based learning is applied in other school settings. This program is now their standard practice.

In Hastings a **Meet n Greet** is an activity that was first implemented in 2012. It entails prep teachers visiting ECEC services and staying to read a story to the children and meet their parents. This activity is one that evolved from prep teachers simply dropping into the ECEC services to leave their transition information packages. It provides the opportunity for families to get to know the teachers and receive first hand information about school and transition programs. The Meet n Greet activity is one that requires little resources but does depend on the schools being able to fund the time-release for the teacher to visit the early years service. If school funds permit then this activity is most likely sustainable.

Also in Hastings, the **Hastings Family Fun Day**, hosted by the local area Pre-School Association has been a key event for schools to engage families regarding transition to school. Supported by school funding, teachers and principals from each primary school meet and interact with families and preschool aged children. From 2013 schools are enlisting the help of prep year parents to talk to families about their experience of transition and its importance for children. As this activity has already been funded by the schools in an ongoing capacity, it is likely this will be sustained in the future. However, the specific activities that are provided for families during the event may differ depending on the status of the Practitioner Leadership Group and Practitioner Network. For instance, in the past, teachers from each school have collaborated to deliver activities for children. These activities are designed to teach parents the importance of early childhood education and transition to school. These collaborative approaches could not continue without formalised supports and resources to plan and deliver the activity.

Goal two: Early years services and schools actively connect with families

In all sites a range of **family engagement** activities were undertaken at a community level and by individual early years services and schools. Some of these include reviewing current family engagement approaches, research into where ‘community’ exists and others directly engage families in activities.

- In Footscray **family engagement in prep classrooms** was part of some school transition programs or through developmental inquiry-based prep programs.
- In Corio Norlane the local schools and early years services were conscious of the importance of engaging families in their services. To gauge the extent that this was happening, and what improvements could be made, the ECEC working group carried out the **Family Friendly Review**. This aimed at building on current activities to better engage families in their children’s learning, as well as assessing the extent to which the current organisation’s environment was welcoming to families. In response to this review the schools and early years services made the appropriate improvements.
- In Hastings the **Let’s Get Together** community event was a joint initiative by a wide range of services in Hastings to deliver the message to families that ‘literacy and learning is fun’. The event was held during children’s week at one of the local primary schools and targeted prep and preschool aged children and their families. Food, games and activities were provided and the day was fancy dress themed as Storybook characters. The day enabled a fun and comfortable atmosphere for families to get to know school staff and service providers in their local area. All parents and organisers attending were happy with the turn-out and would like to see the event repeated next year. The likelihood of this is dependent on the joint resources, capacity and collaborative efforts of the services involved, which was LSEY funded. The sustainability of this event will rely on early years and school funding/support for joint planning time or external funding.
- In Footscray, a **Community Connections** research project was conducted collaboratively by the LSEY partnership and the Royal Children’s Hospital (RCH) Education Institute. The project engaged community members in a range of focus groups to explore where ‘community’ exists in the suburb of Footscray and develop a better understanding of the barriers contributing to engaging families. The project also investigated how people used their community connections to learn about early childhood development and education services in their local area. Findings from the project were presented to a variety of local services both already engaged, and new to LSEY, which has generated interest amongst the local service system to utilise the research for community action planning. The Footscray Footsteps Forum (described below) extensively discussed the Community Connections research findings and discussed how it can be translated into the development of strategies to improve access to services and information in the community. The Forum also brainstormed and recorded variety of practical initiatives and activities to continue and further develop partnerships within the local service system.
- In Corio Norlane the **Let’s Read Together** is a Family/School Partnership activity being implemented jointly by families and one Corio Norlane school. This program is designed to engage families to develop their children’s language and literacy skills. The school principal meets families monthly at the supported play group at the school and reads a

book to the group. Families also receive a copy of the book to practice teaching reading to children at home. Children are then also engaged with the same book in the classroom to connect the home and school environments. Provided that the school continues to resource this activity and promote its importance, this activity has the ability to be sustained beyond the LSEY project.

Goal three: Schools are responsive to the individual learning needs of all children

Transition Statement Exchanges were undertaken across all LSEY sites and is considered a significant activity amongst schools and early years services. It involves a personal handover of the DEECD Transition Learning and Development Statements that are completed for all children entering their first year of primary school. The importance of engaging in a formal handover of the transition statements is recognised across all the communities as an effective strategy for communicating information about individual children (with parental consent). This is especially important for children who have additional or complex needs.

In Hastings and Corio Norlane, planning for the handover is the responsibility of the Leadership Groups, and is implemented during the Practitioner/Educator network meeting. Like most other LSEY activities, this required the group to have dedicated time to prepare outside of their normal teaching time. Thus this is another activity that will rely on funded time-release or the good will of professionals for sustainability.

However, the sustainability of this activity is likely in Hastings and Corio Norlane given its value is recognised from an executive level and down to those working directly with families. As such it has now been embedded into the calendar and program for each year as a part of normal business, to be coordinated by the Leadership groups with full support of the Practitioner/Educator networks. In Footscray the Transition Statement Exchange is also valued at both management and educator level but the lack of active partnerships and networks means there is less capacity for collaborative organisation of the activity. As a result it is unlikely to continue.

In Corio Norlane the **SCOPE project** has been a pilot project whereby the Transition Leaders Group is working with SCOPE, a Victorian early intervention organisation to assist children with specific needs, to develop and implement training for educators to better equip them to address the specific additional needs of children. The project entailed consultation with educators regarding the type of training that is required based on common issues identified within learning environments. Educators then underwent the necessary training which was followed by a mentoring strategy to assist educators to practically deliver their new skills into their classroom practice. The feedback from the project was overwhelmingly positive and those involved are motivated to continue the pilot and work on expanding it, provided the necessary funding is available.

In Footscray the **Footscray Footsteps Forum** was held in October 2012 to celebrate the achievements of the project, reflect on their LSEY journey, and look towards the next steps for the Footscray community. The forum was befittingly entitled 'Footscray Footsteps'. At the forum the members acknowledged the value in working at a community level, and from this have developed stronger relationships with professionals and families, improved transition to school for children and built capacity within their own professional environments to better respond to the needs of children and families. The discussion then

turned to the Footscray community and how a partnership approach could be developed and fostered to deliver initiatives and activities in the future. The group brainstormed a number of strategies, however, no ownership or responsibility has been taken for their follow-up.

In Hastings the educators felt they had a sound understanding of the value of different roles in early education, the group has moved beyond the Peer Swaps to a new activity called **Plan Together Teach Together**, first run in 2011 with an external facilitator, and afterwards by the Practitioner Leadership Group in 2012. This activity involved early years educators and prep teachers coming together to develop and deliver joint lessons for prep and early years children run by one prep teacher and one early years educator. This activity has considerable benefit for teachers, as they learn more about the general and individual needs and learning styles of the children to assist in how they plan their lessons and classrooms in the lead up to (for early years educators), and following transition to school (for prep teachers). This activity requires considerable preparation and facilitation from the Practitioner Leadership Group, planning by the Practitioner Network, and attendance by all. Thus it is quite a time consuming and costly activity to run. Despite this, the Partnership Group recognise the value in it and the group is seeking funding for it as one of their priorities. Should the Practitioner Leadership Group not continue, however, it would have difficulty getting off the ground as this group use their fortnightly meetings in preparation for the activity. The initial Plan Together Teach Together experience has provided a solid foundation for promoting joint early years services and school planning, and this momentum and awareness will be a positive motivator into the future.

In all sites **joint professional learning** with early years services, schools and community service was a key focus. This has taken different forms across each site and focused on different topics and approaches.

In Hastings **Teacher Talk** was a professional development programs for early years and prep educators. It was an extensive professional learning program called Hanen Teacher Talk®. It focused on promoting rich and sustainable language and literacy environments in all learning environments. Educators gained important knowledge about the links between language, literacy and learning environments and how to identify instances where children were not developing in these areas. A variety of strategies and activities to incorporate into everyday practice were also provided. The activity also entailed ongoing individual and shared reflection between the participating educators as has reportedly resulted in ongoing changes to the daily teaching practices of those involved. The evaluation of this professional development program identified statistically significant findings in relation to practice change. The program developer and leader plan to sustain elements of the program in their practice.

In Footscray joint professional development has been a focus, both formally and informally. The Practitioner Group opted for a significant focus on **sharing professional practice** which resulted in joint learning about differences and consistencies between early years and prep programs. This sharing generally occurred formally during Practitioner meetings, but it also occurred informally through the relationships between schools and their feeder early years services. Because the Practitioner group is no longer operating, practice sharing will only continue through informal mechanisms.

Activities have been undertaken in each site, for each of the goals, throughout the project. The final six months saw a focus on either embedding those activities in everyday practices, thereby sustaining them without additional funding; or identifying sources of funding necessary to sustain those activities after the cessation of LSEY funding.

4.3 The project model and approach

As Section 4.4 describes, the LSEY project team have identified key elements of the project from their perspective of designing, implementing and reshaping the project. These project elements were important in the implementation of the project and are anticipated to be key elements to its sustainability.

Relationships, especially between schools and ECEC services, have been central to LSEY. In a number of cases these relationships have changed the way that schools and services conduct their day-to-day work, and in this way a number of LSEY principles will be sustained:

- A partnership approach to transition, in which the contribution and expertise of both ECEC services and schools are recognised
- Where possible, a community approach to transition, in which schools and ECEC services work collaboratively to inform and engage parents
- An ongoing, reflective approach to smooth transitions for children, which uses successful practices from ECEC
- A focus on community needs, initiatives, and services.

These principles also speak to some points of difference between LSEY and other initiatives. The 2012 evaluation report (Eastman et al., 2012) described the dual focus of LSEY on transition to school and community partnerships. This dual focus is relatively unusual in transition to school programs, especially those for disadvantaged communities. The best known initiatives focus intensively on schools, and have a different model of community engagement. For example, *School of the 21st Century*, based at Yale and developed by Edward Zigler, has a national model that is described as linking communities, families and schools. The six program components are family outreach, school based early education and care, out-of-school hours care, school based health education and services, networks and training for childcare providers, and information and referral services. Although these are implemented differently according to community needs and resources, they are nonetheless universal components at each site, and designed to enable parents to recognise the school as a community resource. The *Harlem Children's Zone* includes a core component of charter schools, with an extended school day and year. Child and family services are involved in both, in the context of a defined service model. In contrast, LSEY prioritised local activities and identification of needs. It was much less intensively resourced than these two United States programs, but just as importantly did not include standardised components. There were common elements to each site: a facilitator, partnership groups, and activities around the three goals—but these were largely developed from the ground up, informed by research evidence. As the project staff identified in their 'core components and key drivers' resource, described below, LSEY prioritised local responses and relationships, rather than a prescriptive model with specific components. It utilised existing services and networks, and

made enhancements to the school environment and curriculum rather than significant changes.

One of the most important challenges for initiatives such as LSEY is the balance between flexibility and structure. Responding to local needs is important, but so too is maintaining a sense of common goals and objectives. The focus on partnerships and community-led change is also a potential source of tension with the focus on evidence-informed change. Again, this is a point of difference between LSEY and some other transition to school initiatives, which focus more on research and are less reliant on local partnerships. To return to the examples of School of the 21st Century and the Harlem Children's Zone, because these initiatives have prescribed components and a standard model, community engagement in driving change is less important. In contrast to these top-down programs, LSEY was driven by local partnerships, and so was vulnerable if local partnerships did not facilitate evidence-driven change. This can happen at local level, for example, if practice wisdom and comfortable ways of working are at odds with research evidence. For example, while the culture of working together between professionals within the schools, early years and child and family sectors has changed to one of collaborative partnerships, this has not occurred to the same extent in attitudes towards families. Despite the many efforts of the professional community to engage families and promote family inclusiveness throughout all project initiatives, there is still work to be done in recognising parents as partners and experts. This may improve as the community works more closely with families as is planned for the next phase of the project through the Building Supportive Communities initiative.

The tension between local partnerships and institutional change was also a significant factor in the implementation of the project: there are limits to school autonomy and with limited engagement from DEECD, there were limits to how much schools could change. LSEY communities were committed to the project and engaged in the principles behind it throughout but project staff found instances where some attitudes and practices were, and remain, difficult to change. A key challenge of any similar initiative will be managing these tensions between local priorities and research evidence, and between flexibility and structure.

4.4 LSEY project team reflections – Core components of the LSEY approach

The LSEY project management and facilitators have developed a set of 'core components', informed by their interpretation of the evaluation findings and implementation experiences. These core components were identified by the project as key success factors to the implementation of the LSEY project in a way that maximises sustainability. The components are summarised at Figure 4.1 and detailed at Appendix A. Both the detailed and summary versions were provided by the LSEY project staff and are available on the LSEY website (Centre for Community Child Health, 2013a).

The LSEY team developed this document to capture the 'core components' and 'key drivers' of the Linking Schools and Early Years project experience that could be shared with other communities and government looking to replicate or scale-up elements of the LSEY approach.

Figure 4.1 Core implementation components (summary)



5 Conclusion

The LSEY project was implemented differently at each of the three sites, and as such had different trajectories. These different circumstances still remained when project funding ceased. One of the sites, Corio Norlane, is highly motivated to continue and has the funding to sustain the project, at least for the foreseeable future. The Hastings site is highly motivated to continue the project but has no funding and fears that the good will of people will only be able to sustain the project in the very short term. The Footscray site does not have the funds to continue the project, and even if it did the motivation within the community does not lie with implementing a community level partnership approach, but more through their micro-level partnerships. Each of the sites implemented LSEY according to a common framework which emphasised local implementation, and with common goals in mind, each of the sites developed transition programs based on evidence of effectiveness. The differences between them were largely due to the nature of the project's focus on local communities, ownership, and engagement. These factors have also shaped the outlook of the project moving forward beyond funding.

The strengths and risks of the LSEY model have been apparent throughout, and are also clear in the current context of the end of funding. The risks are that local engagement and ownership are vital, and where this engagement falters, so too do the activities and initiatives. From the outset, each of the sites has prioritised partnership groups (at least two in each site), and group activities. This has ensured that local priorities are met, and that schools and services are engaged as partners. However, this also meant that attendance and engagement was necessary for effective planning and implementation. Because of the importance of partnerships, site facilitators spent enormous amounts of time and energy in engagement strategies with schools and services. This was rewarding, but also necessarily very time intensive, and when efforts to facilitate group activities were frustrated, there were relatively few alternatives. The project model had local engagement at its core, and in any case the project wasn't resourced to make changes in schools and services without that engagement. The strengths are that local engagement and ownership translates into significant efforts to find funding where it is needed to sustain activities and groups; and also that local ownership has embedded some activities into everyday practice, such that specific resources are no longer necessary. Schools and services in each of the sites have invested considerable effort and resources in improving the transition to school experience for children and their families, building relationships and respect between sectors, and ensuring schools meet the needs of their communities. Although the project funding has ceased, these efforts will continue.

Appendix A Core implementation components

Core components Components that contributed to the effective implementation of LSEY	Key drivers Conditions/factors that contributed to achieving the core components
A locally responsive approach (place-based) Responding to the impact that local realities and context can have on children and their families	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An understanding of where ‘community’ exists in the local area, as defined by families • A shared community identity • A perception of the need to change • Knowledge of local issues, concerns and context • Building on existing community assets and strengths • Availability and use of local level statistical data and information • Availability and use of local community consultation information
A partnership approach Cross-sectoral service partnerships that can provide a continuum of learning and support for children and families	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A shared understanding of the approach and vision for operation • Willingness for change and trial and adapt new ways of working • Effective community level governance (a ‘home’ for the partnership, i.e. organisation, governance structure that is committed to the shared vision and has management responsibility) • Monitoring and evaluating relationships, networks and partnerships • Engagement of and support from the ‘right’ stakeholders (in the partnership) • Time for services/school to meet and develop relationships • Authorising environments in services/schools for working in partnership • Opportunities for local leadership to develop • Local leadership/facilitation with a clear vision for improved and innovative ways of working) • Local project/initiative • Linking with existing local initiatives and broader frameworks (i.e. MEYP, Best Start) • Shared/flexible funding
Outcomes and evidence-informed planning Starting with clear outcomes for children, families and services and using evidence to inform practices to achieve the desired outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Starting with the end in mind – a shared vision and outcomes for children, families, services and community • An outcomes-based action and evaluation planning framework for supporting local children and families • A planning framework that allows for flexibility in local actions – a ‘living’ document • Short and long-term planning • Access to translatable evidence (critical friends, purveyors of research evidence, synthesized research) • A clear program logic that details how evidence informs the logic for specific actions to achieve short, intermediate and long-term outcomes
Community-led Planning and action is led by local families and services and strengthens local leadership capacity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A shared understanding of the rationale for change and raise awareness about this locally • A shared perception of demonstrated community partnership effectiveness • Strong relationships enable community led partnerships to develop • Local responsibility for planning, implementing and evaluating local actions

Core components Components that contributed to the effective implementation of LSEY	Key drivers Conditions/factors that contributed to achieving the core components
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Capacity and willingness to continue to trial and embed (if effective) new ways of working • Authorising environments for partnership working and local leadership Active participation of key stakeholders (services/schools and families) • Activity/process champions • Local individuals and groups leading by example and demonstrating/encouraging innovative thinking
Respectful Relationships Relationships underpin and drive the effectiveness of community level responsiveness, planning, action and outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ongoing linking opportunities between services/school and families <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ engagement focused activities ○ joint/shared activities ○ regular contact/communication • Time for developing relationships A culture of valuing and respecting all expertise/experience and backgrounds (within services and families) • Links workers – short term position is effective in engaging stakeholders in partnership working (services and families) • Meaningful engagement with children, families and other community residents - hearing their voices, parents as partners in learning and development
Towards sustainable change Building community capacity to achieve ongoing long-term practice change and improved outcomes for children and families	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strong ongoing commitment to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ shared vision/outcomes ○ community-led partnership way of working ○ ongoing evaluation and review flexibility of local approaches, relationships, partnerships, activities, etc (evaluation framework) ○ trialling new ways of working • Capacity, willingness and ability to continue to evolve and respond to evaluation findings • Embedding positive practice change (part of core business) Ongoing purposeful professional learning and reflection • Ongoing access to translatable research evidence • Broader climate that is supportive of change being sought (i.e. public value, political will and support) • Authorising/enabling relational and structural service environments • Succession planning to mitigate negative impact of change (staff turnover, reduced funding, etc) • Local processes for state/federal government policy implementation and advocacy

Appendix B Interview Schedule – LSEY project representatives 2013

(This is an indicative guide to the issues to be explored in the interviews)

1. Can you update us on activities since the site stories were completed (anything new this year)?
2. We know that everyone has been very mindful that LSEY will come to an end in 2013. Thinking about the last 6-12 months, how much impact did this have on you? Have on the partnership groups? Have on schools and services?
3. Can you summarise the main activities you've undertaken towards sustainability (what should we focus on in the site stories/supporting documentation)?
4. What are the key lessons you've learnt about sustainability for a project such as LSEY?
5. What have been your biggest successes in: (a) partnerships and network groups, (b) transition to school activities, (c) engaging families, and (d) responsive schools?
6. What do you see as signs that these successes will continue beyond the life of the project in: (a) partnerships and network groups, (b) transition to school activities, (c) engaging families, and (d) responsive schools? (What should we look out for in the site stories/supporting documentation)?
7. What LSEY activities/strategies/groups/events will still be happening in 12 months? What other LSEY principles and lessons have become 'business as usual' for communities?
8. What experiences/lessons from LSEY have surprised you, given the research evidence from which LSEY was drawn and your own expertise prior to LSEY?
9. What does LSEY add to what we know about (a) transition to school, (b) place based initiatives, (c) community partnerships?

Appendix C LSEY 2013 coding frame

Parent Node	Child node	Description
Sustainability	Facilitators sustainability	to Any information about what is facilitating the sustainability of the project
	Challenges sustainability	to Any information about the challenges facing the sustainability of the project
	Strategies sustainability	for Strategies for sustaining the project, aspects of the project, or groups
	Supporters of project	Information about external supporters of the project
	Funding initiatives	information about funding submissions, plans, or rejections that may impact on the sustainability of the project
Next steps for project or community	Needs sustainability	for What is needed for the project or groups to continue
	Commitment project	to Information about the commitment from LSEY partners or practitioners to the project
	What is likely to be sustained	What activities, initiatives or aspects of the project are likely to be sustained
Achievements of LSEY		Information about the achievements of the project or groups
Community engagement	Barriers	Information about the barriers impacting on achievements of LSEY
	Facilitators	Information about the facilitators contributing to the achievements of LSEY
Professional development	Challenges	Challenges to engage families and communities in project activities
	Outcomes to family engagement	Outcomes from community and family engagement strategies e.g. more parental presence in schools
	Community engagement strategies	Strategies to overcome poor community engagement or to further engage families and communities
Professional development		Information about professional development received through the project

Network groups		General information about practitioner and partner groups
	Next steps	Information about next steps for either practitioner groups or partnership groups
	Successes	Information about successes of either the practitioner or partnership groups
	Challenges	Challenges of the partnership or practitioner groups
	Partnership strategies	Strategies to maintain develop and maintain partnerships
Current activities		General information about current activities
	Success of current activities	Information about the success of project activities
	Evaluation of current activities	Internal evaluation of current activities
	Challenges to current activities	Challenges to current activities or initiatives
Project model	Strengths	Strengths of the project model
	Difficulties	Difficulties and challenges of the project model
Key learnings		Key learnings from the project
Changes to schools and services		Changes to schools/services from the project
Contextual/ geographical factors		Contextual and geographic factors that impact on the project
Research within sites		Information about internal research within LSEY sites
Meeting individual learning needs		Information about activities and initiatives to meet the individual learning needs of children
Core components		LSEY core components

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