Vulnerable children action plan

The Department’s plan to implement Victoria’s Vulnerable Children Strategy 2013-2022
Foreword

The *Vulnerable Children Action Plan* details the Department of Education and Early Childhood’s commitment to achieving the whole-of-government goals outlined in *Victoria’s Vulnerable Children: Our Shared Responsibility Strategy 2013-2022*. The Strategy was released by the Premier and the Minister for Community Services on 3 May 2013. It commits the Departments of Education and Early Childhood Development, Health, Human Services, Justice, Premier and Cabinet and Victoria Police to work together to address child vulnerability.

The Strategy rests on the premise that universal services such as schools, early childhood services and maternal and child health have a critical role in reducing child vulnerability.

Through the Strategy, government has adopted a collaborative governance structure, which includes the creation of Children and Youth Area Partnerships of state and local government, including the Department, along with service providers and communities. Through these partnerships we will work together to reduce child vulnerability.

A Performance and Accountability Framework has also been adopted. It sets clear goals, measurable outcomes, monitoring and public reporting at both the state and local levels.

The *Vulnerable Children Action Plan* outlines how all parts of the Department can assist this long-term effort to deliver on the goals of the Strategy.

Supported by the system wide enablers of Area Partnerships and improved data and evidence to respond to vulnerability, the *Vulnerable Children Action Plan* aims to achieve system reform in the following four priority areas:

1. A more accountable learning and development system
2. An empowered workforce that responds effectively to vulnerability
3. Strengthened engagement of children, young people and families
4. An increased focus on a partnership approach.

The *Vulnerable Children Action Plan* will evolve over the life of the whole-of-government Strategy as part of a coordinated effort by Victorian Government agencies to prevent child abuse and neglect, act earlier when children are vulnerable, and improve outcomes for children in out-of-home care.

Richard Bolt
Secretary, Department of Education and Early Childhood Development
1. Executive Summary

The Vulnerable Children Action Plan outlines the Department’s contribution to achieving the goals of the whole-of-government Victoria’s Vulnerable Children: Our Shared Responsibility Strategy 2013-2022 (the Strategy), which was released on 3 May 2013. This Plan builds on existing programs and services that are in place to support vulnerable children, young people and families, and outlines new actions that we are taking to address vulnerability.

Through the Performance and Accountability Framework, we will be held accountable with our partners to the aspiration that vulnerable children are kept safe from harm and have every opportunity to succeed in life. The publication of a Baseline Report in 2013 and the commitment to annual progress reports against that baseline will hold us accountable to the public for delivery on the Strategy’s goals.

This Plan is supported by system-wide ‘enablers for action’. The implementation of Children and Youth Area Partnerships (Area Partnerships) will provide the mechanism for better local coordination of services for vulnerable children and young people. The Department will work in partnership with state and local governments, service providers and communities to play a key role in implementation, and will benefit from more effective partnerships with agencies that will assist our service system to better prevent and respond to vulnerability.

Improved data and evidence to respond to vulnerability will strengthen our capacity to identify, monitor and project outcomes for vulnerable children and young people accessing early years services, in schools, and in higher education and skills to ensure access to these services, the provision of targeted support, and the capacity to monitor the effectiveness of interventions. Accepting a shared responsibility for vulnerable children and fostering collaboration, information sharing and cooperation across different sectors is critical. Sharing of client information between departments and service providers will support improved outcomes and better coordinated services for vulnerable children.

The major focus of the Plan is on achieving practice change within early years, schools, and higher education and skills in order to strengthen the response of these services to vulnerability. The Plan aims to achieve system reform in the following four priority areas:

1. **A more accountable learning and development system**, by building on existing accountability arrangements such as the School Performance Framework, Principal Contracts, and the Out-of-Home Care Education Partnering Agreement, as well as the implementation of a new partnering agreement to improve the participation of children in out-of-home care in early years services and a revised Continuity of Care Protocol targeting vulnerable mothers.

2. **An empowered workforce that responds effectively to vulnerability**, by strengthening professional competence through the provision of resources to support earlier identification of vulnerability, and new models of professional practice.

3. **Strengthened engagement of children, young people and families**, by removing barriers to participation and providing extra support where needed, such as through the review of Maternal and Child Health Services, expansion of the Access to Early Learning initiative, ensuring access to Student Support Services for those in out-of-home care, piloting a family learning partnership, and ongoing monitoring of the Young People Transitioning from Care Initiative, which provides training places for young people in, or leaving, out-of-home care.

4. **An increased focus on a partnership approach**, through linking services both within and outside the Department, such as through the Streamlining Antenatal-4 Services for Vulnerable Children and Families project (in partnership with DHS and Health), working with service providers, child protection and Child FIRST to promote Early Start Kindergarten to increase program uptake by children in out-of-home care, and work to strengthen collaboration and information sharing between schools and community services so that vulnerable children receive a coordinated response.

The priorities outlined above will be boosted by the Victorian Government’s school funding agreement with the Commonwealth. This funding agreement provides an opportunity to consider how the Victorian approach to school funding might better support the needs of vulnerable students, including those in out-of-home care.
School funding reform can support improved funding allocation that better reflects student need. Schools will have the resources to support the educational needs of all students, particularly those of highest need who are most likely to become disengaged, and have poor post-school and life pathways. This will include working collaboratively with the Commonwealth to ensure that the $12.2 billion investment agreed jointly between the Commonwealth and Victorian Governments is delivered in full to Victorian schools over the next six years.

This Plan will be implemented in conjunction with a range of other Departmental strategies, plans and programs that will increase the capacity of the service system and the support provided to vulnerable children, young people and families (see Appendix 1). In particular, the Plan will support a heightened awareness of vulnerable Aboriginal children and young people given the disproportionate number of this cohort in out-of-home care.
2. Vulnerable families and children: Victoria’s approach

Vulnerability in Victoria

The Victorian Government has developed a shared policy definition of vulnerability to ensure all service providers, government departments, and other stakeholders can clearly identify their role in relation to supporting vulnerable children and young people. This broad definition states that:

**Children and young people are vulnerable if the capacity of parents and family to effectively care, protect and provide for their long term development and wellbeing is limited.**

A range of factors can contribute to families and their children becoming vulnerable. Families often have multiple life stressors, including those arising from poverty, and may have multiple or intersecting risk factors. Families from particular population groups – Aboriginal families, some recent immigrants, families who have lived on low incomes for a year or more, young parents and families affected by disability – are over-represented among vulnerable families. The children and young people in these families may be vulnerable to abuse and neglect because their parents have a limited capacity to care for them and ensure their development and wellbeing is provided for. Further, the fluid nature of vulnerability has implications for levels of targeting and resourcing – while some vulnerable children, young people and their families may require one off, time limited support, children and young people in out-of-home care may require more intensive, longer term and specific responses.¹

Vulnerability can be found across Victoria. At the same time, concentrated pockets of disadvantage exist across the state where families are more likely to experience economic and social stressors that can place children and young people at risk. Some rural areas and outer suburban growth corridors have greater proportions of vulnerable families, in many cases associated with higher rates of unemployment and less social infrastructure.² Concentrations of vulnerability can also be found in places surrounded by areas of relative advantage, highlighting the need for highly targeted place-based responses.

Vulnerable children and young people experience poorer learning and developmental outcomes from the early years, during schooling and in higher education.³ This often manifests in difficulties in multiple areas – poor health, educational disengagement, or getting into trouble with police. This has a flow on effect to life outcomes. Prevention, early intervention, and access to effective support are all essential to improving outcomes for vulnerable children and young people.

Victoria’s strategic approach

Following a series of investigations by the Victorian Ombudsman into child protection, out-of-home care and the broader service system,⁴ the Victorian Government commissioned the *Protecting Victoria’s Vulnerable Children Inquiry* (‘the Cummins Inquiry’) in January 2011. The Inquiry was tasked with investigating systemic problems in Victoria’s child protection system, and making recommendations to strengthen and improve the identification, protection and support provided to vulnerable children and families. The Inquiry provided a comprehensive report to the Victorian Government in January 2012.


The Strategy identifies a key role for learning and development services in enabling the Government to achieve its goals to improve outcomes for vulnerable children, young people and families. We know that education is a key factor in breaking the cycle of intergenerational poverty and disadvantage. However, in families where children and young people are vulnerable to neglect or harm, their parents’ circumstances, behaviours and challenges can disrupt effective care, and as a result they are much less likely to succeed in school. Often lacking a positive home learning
environment, and with more health and developmental problems, vulnerable children and young people face greater risk of educational disengagement and poor learning and development outcomes.

The Department’s responsibilities

‘Education and learning are critical to an individual’s life chances, and education is a pathway out of poverty and intergenerational disadvantage.’ (Victoria’s Vulnerable Children: Our Shared Responsibility, Directions Paper, page 11)

The Department’s responsibilities are to ensure that all Victorian children, young people and adults acquire the skills, knowledge and capabilities that allow them to make their way in the world as active, informed and productive citizens.

The Department has responsibility for a wide range of services provided across three overlapping life stages:

- **Early childhood development** (birth–8 years): Maternal and Child Health Services, early childhood education and care services, early childhood intervention services, and school.
- **School education** (5–18 years): primary and secondary education, special education, health and wellbeing.
- **Higher education and skills** (15–65+): vocational education and training, higher education, apprenticeships and traineeships, and adult, community and further education.

Due to the high number of children, young people and families that come into contact with the Department’s universal services every year, the Department is uniquely placed to identify those who are vulnerable or at-risk in order to intervene early by providing support or referring to targeted secondary services. This includes providing services for over 6,000 children and young people living in out-of-home care for whom the state is the proxy parent.

The Department’s universal services are often the first or only platform with which vulnerable families can engage in a positive way, and can be a positive protective factor in the lives of vulnerable children and young people. For example, schools can provide a safe, inclusive learning environment — a secure place and community for all children, but particularly those for whom family life is less secure. This protective effect is enhanced if the school’s connections to health and community services provide a pathway for families who might otherwise miss out.

The Department has a shared public responsibility (particularly with the Department of Human Services, which has statutory responsibility for children in out-of-home care) to ensure that vulnerable children and young people are not denied opportunities due to their family background or circumstances.

The Department has implemented a range of services and supports focused on prevention and early intervention for vulnerable children and young people. However, given the importance of early intervention and education to wellbeing, development, and long-term life opportunities, we know that more can be done.
3. Goal one: Prevent abuse and neglect

A strong focus on prevention is the starting point to reducing the lifetime implications of abuse and neglect. This goal is focused on prevention, so the strategies adopted are often population-wide strategies. Effective universal services, particularly those for families with young children, are essential for preventing vulnerability – hence optimising participation by all Victorians in universal services is critical to prevention strategies.

- Victoria's Vulnerable Children: Our Shared Responsibility

What are the challenges?

Vulnerable families are less likely to use universal early years services that can identify issues early, support children at risk, and prevent issues escalating

Early years services are diverse, and professionals working in one setting may know little of others, and families with complex needs may miss out

Schools have limited capacity to respond to family vulnerability or associated child needs in the absence of stronger links to other support services

What are we currently doing?

The Department is uniquely placed to contribute to this goal. The Department's universal service system can make a significant contribution to the prevention of child abuse and neglect. Participation in universal early childhood and education programs is critical for early identification, referral and intervention for vulnerable children and families.

Programs and services are available to support all families, including vulnerable families where children are at risk of neglect or abuse. These programs and services include Parentline, Maternal and Child Health (MCH), three and four year old kindergarten, and Primary School Nurses in schools. Professionals within these services have an important role in supporting vulnerable children and families and ensuring they are linked into additional support services where required. Early identification of vulnerability for children who may be at risk is critical to addressing identified issues and provides the greatest opportunity for achieving long-term change.

We know that Aboriginal children, young people and families have poorer outcomes than the non-Aboriginal population, including lower rates of participation in MCH, lower rates of literacy and numeracy, poorer school attendance and school retention. The development of a whole-of-life course Aboriginal Education Strategy by the Department (currently in progress) will ensure there is an ongoing focus on actions and strategies to improve outcomes for Aboriginal children and young people who are vulnerable across all Departmental services including MCH, kindergarten, schooling and higher education and skills.

A strong data collection and performance monitoring system supports these universal services. This includes the School Entrant Health Questionnaire, which provides schools with important information about a child's health and wellbeing, and also provides an opportunity for parents or carers to express any concerns that they may have about their child.

Primary schools also have access to data through the Australian Early Development Index (AEDI) which measures five domains of early childhood development. Through the AEDI schools receive information about the developmental needs of individual children as they enter Prep, as well as aggregated data for all children assessed using the AEDI within their school.

In addition, the Department's annual State of Victoria's Children Report provides a comprehensive picture of the health, wellbeing, learning, safety and development of Victoria's children and young people. Each year the report focuses on a different cohort of Victorian children. In recent years, the report has focused on children and young people in rural and regional Victoria, early childhood (0-8 years) and Aboriginal children and young people.
Further data is available through the Victorian Child and Adolescent Monitoring System (VCAMS), which tracks and measures children and young people’s health, wellbeing, safety, learning and development outcomes as identified in the VCAMS Framework, which includes 35 outcomes and 150 indicators. The VCAMS portal brings together data from across government to report against these outcomes and can be viewed for individual Local Government Areas, and by a range of demographic breakdowns at state level.

Despite the significant work the Department undertakes in this area, we know the Department (both centrally and in the regions) and service providers can play a stronger role in prevention.

**What will we do?**

**We will:**

1.1 *Provide more flexible Maternal and Child Health Service responses in order to remove barriers to participation for vulnerable families*

The Cummins Inquiry noted that ‘the engagement of vulnerable children in universal early childhood services is widely acknowledged as one of the biggest challenges facing policy makers and service providers’. While Victoria’s MCH system is highly regarded both nationally and internationally, there is still room for improvement, particularly in relation to the engagement and participation of vulnerable families. The Cummins Inquiry drew the conclusion that increased participation in universal services such as MCH would reduce the incidence of abuse and neglect in the community.

The Department and the Municipal Association of Victoria (MAV) have worked in partnership to undertake a review of the Victorian MCH Service. The aim of the review is to maintain a high quality, evidence-based universal service for all children and families, and to improve outcomes for children experiencing vulnerability. In March 2014, the Department published a discussion paper, *Victoria’s Maternal and Child Health Service - Strengthening the foundations for Victoria’s children*, which presents the outcomes of the MCH review process for consultation and feedback.

The Department’s regions will also work locally with the MAV to ensure effective strategies are in place in the Annual MCH Service Improvement Plans in order to increase the engagement of vulnerable children and families.

1.2 *Develop models for streamlined, collaborative practice across services for vulnerable children antenatal to age 4 and their families in order to improve responses to vulnerable families with complex needs*

The Cummins Inquiry also commented that despite the number and variety of programs in this area, ‘the many individual programs across sectors…do not come together to form a comprehensive, coherent and coordinated system of early interventions that addresses the needs of vulnerable children and families’. In *Victoria’s Vulnerable Children - Our Shared Responsibility Directions Paper*, the Victorian government committed to undertaking a whole-of-government project to explore the options to better streamline and coordinate programs that support the health, development and wellbeing of vulnerable parents and young children (from antenatal to age four).

The Department is currently leading this project, Streamlining Antenatal-4 Services for Vulnerable Children and Families. Three local demonstration projects have been established in Yarra Ranges, Whittlesea and Latrobe to inform the project and enable the reform options to be tested at a local level. The reforms will be focused on achieving change in the following three areas:

- ensuring targeted services for vulnerable children and families are better aligned with universal services
- establishing and demonstrating a seamless continuum of care model for vulnerable children and families
- establishing a common framework for multi-agency collaboration.

The demonstration projects will operate for approximately two and a half years, commencing with a detailed examination of existing service delivery and outcomes for vulnerable children. They aim to:

- examine the effectiveness and efficiency of the existing preventative, early intervention and targeted service system for vulnerable children antenatal to age 4 and their families
- develop and demonstrate models for streamlined, collaborative practice across universal, early intervention and targeted services for vulnerable children antenatal to age 4 and their families.
We know that vulnerability experienced during the antenatal-4 period often leads to persistent poor life outcomes and a failure to reach learning, health and developmental potential. Identifying and responding to risk factors early, as part of a high quality universal service system, minimises negative impacts on children, young people and families. The demonstration projects will help prevent abuse and neglect by providing an evidence base to inform state-wide implementation of the reforms, which will be integrated with other key government reforms such as Area Partnerships.

1.3 **Improve responses to vulnerable children and their families by strengthening professional practice processes and improving links between services**

National and international models of professional practice will be reviewed by the Department to inform new models in order to:

- implement evidence based practice approaches and guiding principles, where services are wrapped around school learners to maximise engagement and reduce the risk of vulnerability
- improve seamless transition from one service to another across early years and schools (currently there is the potential for a child or young person to receive services on separate aspects of the same wellbeing issue from a range of uncoordinated sources).

1.4 **Implement the ‘Student Engagement and Inclusion Guidance’ to support schools to identify and respond to vulnerable students earlier in order to maintain engagement, wellbeing and safety**

A child or young person’s success in learning is dependent on their engagement, wellbeing and safety at school. Future life opportunities for Victorian students are influenced by their participation in education and training. We know that vulnerable children and young people experience poorer educational outcomes than other students. For example, placement instability of children and young people in out-of-home care can impact on school attendance and engagement with education, as does suspension rates for children and young people in out-of-home care.¹⁰

The Department has developed a new resource, *Student Engagement and Inclusion Guidance*, in order to create and maintain safe, supportive and inclusive learning environments and implement a staged response to manage and respond to challenging student behaviour.

Suspension and expulsion are serious disciplinary measures, and are only used as a last resort in the staged response. The guidance sets suspension and expulsion in their broader engagement context, and provides links and connections to other supports that schools can utilise in assisting students, promoting pro-social behaviour, and identifying challenging behaviours.

The process for suspension and expulsion has been streamlined, reducing the administrative burden on principals and giving them more control over their own processes. The new processes are based on the principle of natural justice, and provide the opportunity for principals, students and parents to have a voice.

Ensuring that vulnerable young people do not fall through the cracks of the system is imperative. Since 1 March 2014, Principals have been required to notify Regional Directors when considering an expulsion for children and young people in out-of-home care, and also required to consider the residential and social circumstances of the student when making the decision to expel.

1.5 **Enhance school resources about sexuality, respectful relationships, mandatory reporting and the prevention of violence to increase the resilience of students and build the capacity of school staff to respond to vulnerable children**

We know that school-based primary prevention strategies are effective. A series of evaluations has shown that intensive and long-term education programs in schools are effective in producing lasting change in attitudes and behaviours.¹¹

The Department will build on its resources about sexuality, respectful relationships, mandatory reporting and the prevention of violence with a focus on building resilient behaviours (including help-seeking, understanding personal safety and being safe online) and equipping teachers and school staff with the necessary tools to educate students in these areas and ensure students are more confident about approaching staff.
1.6 **Strengthen parents’ engagement in their children’s learning and provide information and support in times of need in order to improve education outcomes for vulnerable families**

The Department will implement an Early Years Parenting Strategy to provide increased information and support to parents of children accessing early years services. In addition, the Department will investigate potential strategies for engaging parents in their children’s learning in order to improve learning outcomes for vulnerable families. The Department will also promote Parentline as a source of advice and support for parents.

1.7 **Develop training and support materials for teachers and allied health professionals about trauma informed practice in order to improve responses to vulnerable children and young people**

Building on existing behaviour management resources such as *Calmer Classrooms*, the Department will work with key stakeholders and training partners to develop online training and support materials to build the capacity of the workforce to understand the impact of disengagement and trauma, and use trauma informed practice in the classroom.

1.8 **Support parents of vulnerable families to undertake vocational training by piloting a family learning partnership in order to raise the educational engagement and attainment of parents and their children**

We know that education is a key factor in breaking the cycle of intergenerational poverty and disadvantage. The Family Learning Partnership Project aims to concurrently raise the educational aspiration, engagement and attainment of parents and their children. These partnerships do this by engaging with parents in family-based settings (such as early childhood centres, schools and community centres), providing skills instruction for parents and increasing the capacity of education providers to respond to all learners. The Family Learning Partnership project will encourage parents’ progression to further learning and employment and give them the skills to support their child’s learning and development. It will also provide the whole family with the skills and capabilities to become lifelong learners, become more confident and have greater control over their lives.

We know families from particular population groups – Aboriginal families, some recent immigrants, families who have lived on low incomes for a year or more, young parents and families affected by disability – are over-represented among vulnerable families. To better support these families the Department will deliver three demonstration projects that aim to improve educational aspiration, engagement and attainment. The three trial projects will focus on education and training for Aboriginal, newly-arrived and vulnerable families. The trials will run for 12 months and will culminate in the development of a framework to guide the expansion of effective partnerships that support intergenerational engagement and participation in education and training. Work is currently underway to identify partnership organisations and trial locations.

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### Victoria’s Vulnerable Children: Our Shared Responsibility Strategy performance measures:

- Home consultations – maternal and child health (all infants and by Aboriginal infants)
- 3.5 year key age and stage visit – maternal and child health (all infants and by Aboriginal infants)
- Participation in three-year-old Early Start Kindergarten by Aboriginal children
- Participation in four-year-old kindergarten (all children and by Aboriginal children)
- Absent days from school*

**Additional DEECD indicators/measures will be developed to measure the impact of these initiatives**

*Data is not currently available for absence days in non-government schools.*
4. Goal two: Act earlier when children are vulnerable

This goal requires early intervention when vulnerabilities are identified, including referral to secondary and tertiary services where required.
The earlier we can respond to child vulnerability, the more effective that intervention is likely to be.
The children and families we are targeting are more likely to be identified or already known to secondary services and child protection services. It is in this stage of vulnerability that early action is paramount.
There is significant opportunity to turn around the high risk of abuse and neglect through early and coordinated action. In addition, early attention to those children who suffer abuse or neglect, ensuring that their developmental needs are being met, can turn around children’s and families’ lives.
- **Victoria’s Vulnerable Children – Our Shared Responsibility**

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<th>What are the challenges?</th>
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<td><strong>Improved service coordination and service delivery planning for vulnerable children and their families is needed at the local level to better connect families to the services they need, when they need them</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Schools vary widely in their capacity to understand vulnerability, and to identify and support children at risk to prevent them from becoming vulnerable</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Vulnerable families need more support to access specialist services for their children, as well as universal and secondary support services</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Vulnerable children and young people could be better supported across key life transition points, with more integrated and coordinated service responses</strong></td>
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<th>What are we currently doing?</th>
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<td>Where children, young people and families are identified as vulnerable or at-risk, they are supported to engage with relevant secondary services subject to their needs.</td>
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Across early years, programs that focus on intervening early with vulnerable children and families include Enhanced Maternal and Child Health, Best Start, Early Start Kindergarten, Access to Early Learning and Supported Playgroups.

Early Childhood Intervention Services (ECIS) are available to support children who have a disability or developmental delay and link families into appropriate specialist supports. The 2013-14 Victorian Budget committed $34.3 million for an additional 1,000 ECIS places each year to support children with a disability or developmental delay, as well as $21 million for additional psychologists and speech therapists to work with vulnerable students facing barriers to learning.

In-home supports are also provided through programs such as Small Talk Early Home Learning and Aboriginal In-home Support and Home-based Learning. These programs focus on building parenting skills, capacity and confidence in the home environment. By intervening early where risk or vulnerability is identified, these programs can provide targeted support to parents and have a significant impact on the learning, development and wellbeing outcomes of children. Many of the early years programs will be re-examined through the Streamlining Antenatal-4 Services for Vulnerable Children and Families project to ensure their effectiveness and provide more seamless supports for families.

In the school environment, a range of services are also available to promote the wellbeing, learning and development of children and young people. The Program for Students with Disabilities provides schools with additional resources to support learning, engagement and transitions for students with moderate to severe disabilities.

The School Focused Youth Service supports young people to remain engaged or to re-engage in learning. Aboriginal children and young people are supported in schools by Koorie Engagement Support Officers, Koorie Liaison Officers and initiatives such as Koorie school-community partnerships. All Aboriginal children are expected to have an Individual Education Plan and Career Action Plan.
Further, re-engagement programs operate outside mainstream school settings and provide tailored education and support for children and young people who are disengaged, or have been identified as at risk of disengaging, from mainstream school. The Department has developed a policy framework on re-engagement programs, including establishing, delivering and referring to re-engagement programs, information on funding, contracts and elements of quality service delivery.¹²

A range of targeted workforce initiatives have also been implemented to ensure teachers and other professionals in schools have the skills to engage and support vulnerable children. These include a new professional learning program to help build the capacity of teachers to manage challenging behaviours in the classroom, resources on homelessness and refugees, and an eLearning module on mandatory reporting.

Through these programs and resources we are building the skills and capacity of the workforce to ensure that vulnerability is identified early and that students are both supported in the school environment and linked into appropriate secondary services.

What will we do?

We will:

2.1 Revise the Continuity of Care Protocol so that vulnerable new mothers and their children exiting maternity services are linked into post-natal support services in the community

In Victoria’s Vulnerable Children - Our Shared Responsibility Directions Paper, the Victorian Government committed to revising the Continuity of Care Protocol. The Department is currently working together with the Department of Health to revise the Continuity of Care Protocol between the Department of Health (on behalf of Victorian public maternity services) and the Municipal Association of Victoria (on behalf of local government as providers of MCH Services). The revised protocol will include processes to ensure better information sharing between services and comprehensive discharge planning to strengthen community support for vulnerable new mothers and their children.

2.2 Expand and continue to monitor and develop the Access to Early Learning initiative in order to support the engagement and participation of vulnerable children in high quality early learning

Access to Early Learning (AEL) seeks to act earlier when children are vulnerable by improving access to quality early education and care and improving learning and development outcomes for vulnerable children. AEL also supports services to be more inclusive of vulnerable children and families, and increases collaboration between early years and Family Services.

The AEL service model contains five funded components that are designed to support the child, family and early childhood education and care educator to sustain the participation and development of vulnerable children in education:

- quality early childhood education and care provided by degree-qualified educators and consisting of a kindergarten program of 15 hours or more per week for each child
- a key facilitation role to help ensure the continued engagement of children and their families in education and care
- a family support and in-home learning role to support the participation of children and parents in early childhood education and care services by linking the family to additional services and building the home learning environment
- professional and practice development to support early childhood education and care educators to develop and refine the skills and competencies required to successfully engage vulnerable children and their families
- brokerage funding to provide children and their families the flexibility to access support that cannot be accessed by other means.

AEL is currently operating in four sites where there is significant disadvantage. In 2014, the Department will establish three new AEL sites and continue to evaluate and develop the AEL model.

2.3 Engage schools in more meaningful, peer-led models of accountability, with clear expectations for performance outcomes and support to improve

The implementation of the Compact between Victorian government schools and the Department makes it clear that schools are responsible for improved outcomes for students with vulnerabilities, including those in out-of-home
care. Under the Compact schools must have a specific focus on vulnerable students when it comes to using feedback and evidence to strengthen practices and identify areas for improvement that will positively impact on learning (Principle 2). Schools must also support the engagement and wellbeing of vulnerable students by providing inclusive, safe and orderly environments (Principle 3). In addition, schools have specific obligations to students in statutory care as outlined in the Out-of-Home Care Education Commitment.

The Department has developed a School Performance Framework to enable school communities to review how well individual schools are supporting the achievement, wellbeing and engagement of vulnerable students relative to the rest of the student population. Schools will be provided with data on the relative performance of student cohorts against a consistent set of measures to help schools assess whether they are meeting the needs of all students.

Where outcomes for vulnerable students are poorer compared to other students and there is a significant risk to students’ achievement, wellbeing or engagement, schools will engage in a priority review process. Principals’ accountabilities for improving outcomes for vulnerable students will also be reviewed through the performance development process.

2.4 Promote collaboration and information sharing between schools and community services, and within school based specialist support workforces so that vulnerable children receive a coordinated service response

Vulnerable families can find it challenging to navigate the service system and may struggle to access the specialist support services that their children need, due to diminished capacity as well as other compounding risk factors. To support specialist support workforces in schools, the Department’s central office has developed new Health and Wellbeing Principles (see Appendix 2) which will underpin the work of support services to ensure they are working in a coordinated manner. As noted in Victoria’s Vulnerable Children - Our Shared Responsibility Directions Paper, a new online case management system for student support services has been introduced. The Student Online Case Management System (SOCS) is a critical enabler to support improved collaboration and information sharing for vulnerable students.

The School Focused Youth Service has been redesigned to work more closely with Student Support Services with a focus on vulnerable young people. This development is intended to enhance the capacity of schools to support vulnerable young people with the support of community services engaged by the School Focused Youth Service.

The Koorie Education Workforce is another specialist workforce able to contribute to implementation of this Plan, by ensuring that all Aboriginal children and young people who have disengaged, or at risk of disengaging, in particular those in out-of-home care, are connected with a Koorie Engagement Support Officer to facilitate appropriate support, referral and continued engagement with education and training.

Victoria’s Vulnerable Children: Our Shared Responsibility Strategy performance measures:

- Percentage of clients receiving Enhanced Maternal and Child Health services
- Number of children enrolled in Early Start Kindergarten

Additional DEECD indicators/measures will be developed to measure the impact of these initiatives
Case study - Implementing Access to Early Learning

Vulnerable families face a range of factors that impact on their access to universal services such as early childhood education and care. Research tells us there is a need to engage not only with children but also equip families with the skills and confidence to navigate the education system and support their child’s lifelong learning. The following case study illustrates how the Access to Early Learning (AEL) model – Action 2.2 – has improved access and engagement of a vulnerable mother and her child in early childhood education and care.

Background

Sarah and Max (not their real names) were referred to AEL by their Maternal and Child Health Nurse. Sarah was concerned about Max’s development, but was reluctant to work with services given her history with child protection. The MCH Nurse discussed the AEL program with Sarah and suggested that the program may be of assistance.

Implementing the AEL model

To begin the process of introducing the family to the AEL program, the AEL Key Facilitation Worker, Jeanette made contact with Sarah and arranged to collect her and Max to attend a facilitated play group that Jeanette was co-leading. In this context, Sarah built trust in Jeanette, and began to discuss other areas of life that were impacting on the family. This paved the way for Jeanette to introduce further support as part of the model, namely the Family and In-home Learning Support worker, Michelle.

As part of Michelle’s role, she and Sarah began working on Sarah’s mental health issues which included assisting Sarah to reconnect with the mental health service that had worked with her in the past regarding her long term treatment plan. Michelle also contacted a housing service to deal with the family’s accommodation issues. Michelle introduced low-cost play materials into the home to promote a stimulating learning environment for Max, and support Sarah’s role as her child’s first teacher. This prepared Max for participation in kindergarten.

Jeanette and Sarah discussed Max’s educational needs and Jeanette connected with a local early childhood service she knew would suit Max. Jeanette was able to support the family to access one day a week in an integrated long day care service with a kindergarten program provided by a qualified teacher.

Jeanette and Michelle worked together to support Sarah in working through her fears about accessing the early childhood service. This included visiting the service together, completing enrolment materials together, identifying situations that may trigger Sarah’s trauma and organising access to the Special Child Care Benefit to ease the financial burden. Jeanette drew on her early childhood expertise to provide targeted information and advice to the early childhood staff about Sarah and Max’s needs. This helped the early childhood service develop an Individual Learning Plan for Max. The program was supported by in-home learning strategies and routine for consistency. This coordinated approach assisted in promoting Max’s language, toilet training, and enhanced social skills.

While Sarah was initially reluctant, her trust and confidence in the service grew when she saw Max’s excitement in participating in the program and his subsequent progress in development. However, shortly after Max joined the program, an incident occurred with another child. Where previously this issue may have resulted in Sarah disengaging from the service, Jeanette and the teacher were able to work with Sarah and the service to clarify issues, resolve the problem and support Max to continue to access the service. The early childhood service also continued and extended its commitment by rearranging enrolments to increase the number of days available for Max from one to three days.

The Outcome

Over the course of the year, Max’s development progressed significantly including expanded speech and language capabilities, improved peer socialisation and increased cognitive development. Max also built a much needed network of friends in the local community which has resulted in Sarah forming supportive connections with other parents. Sarah has continued to access supports, has a growing sense of confidence in her parenting and with assistance from Michelle, has been able to develop the confidence to re-enter the workforce.
5. Goal three: Improve outcomes for children in statutory care

This goal outlines how government will better meet the needs of children in statutory care, particularly out-of-home care.

When a child is removed from family, the state takes on a special role in their protection and care, by:

- providing safe, stable and secure environments for children removed from their families
- providing vulnerable children with the support and services they need to overcome the consequences of the abuse and neglect that led to their removal in the first place
- ensuring that children in care get the services they need to improve their chance of achieving the same outcomes as children who have not suffered abuse and neglect
- ensuring that children have the skills and opportunities to live healthy and productive lives.

*Victoria’s Vulnerable Children – Our Shared Responsibility*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What are the challenges?</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Children and young people involved in out-of-home care are less likely to have been supported by universal, secondary and specialist services</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Educational outcomes for children in out-of-home care are significantly worse than for their peers and have lifelong impacts</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Implementation of the Out-of-Home Care Education Commitment Partnering Agreement could be strengthened to ensure children and young people are receiving the right supports</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Children and young people leaving out-of-home care need significant community supports to successfully transition back to living with their family and to further education, training and employment</strong></td>
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>What are we currently doing?</th>
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<tr>
<td>In March 2014, the Government released <em>Out-of-Home Care: A Five Year Plan</em>, which includes a commitment to invest $128 million over four years in the 2013-14 and 2014-15 budgets. The five year plan outlines a reform strategy for out-of-home care that will deliver a more integrated, client centred and outcomes focussed service system. This reform is essential to achieving the outcomes under goal three of the whole-of-government Strategy.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Supporting this reform work, our education and care services have to play their part in the shared public responsibility for ensuring that vulnerable children and young people, and those in statutory care in particular, do not miss out on opportunities due to their family circumstances.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Children known to child protection, including those in out-of-home care, can access a free three-year-old kindergarten program through Early Start Kindergarten. Where needed, they are also given prioritised access to services provided by ECIS to support children with a disability or developmental delay from birth to school entry.</td>
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<tr>
<td>During the school years, the <em>Out-of-Home Care Education Commitment Partnering Agreement</em> outlines the commitment of the Department, along with the Department of Human Services, the Catholic Education Office and Independent Schools Victoria, to work together to support children and young people in out-of-home care. It details strategies in place to support the educational and social needs of these children, including for government schools:</td>
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<tr>
<td>- the development of an Individual Education Plan, and access to a Student Support Group and learning mentor</td>
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<td>- access to a disability assessment for entry into the Program for Students with Disabilities outside the usual cut off times, and prioritised access to support</td>
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• an educational needs assessment for young people in residential care, which provides a diagnostic and clinical assessment using identified tools to address a child or young person’s particular and individual learning needs. The assessment provides advice to the Student Support Group and significantly informs the Individual Education Plan.

The Partnering Agreement also commits schools and the Department to regularly monitor and report on the enrolment and educational attainment of children and young people in out-of-home care.

These initiatives provide an additional response to children and young people in out-of-home care. We can do more to support those in out-of-home care to remain engaged in education and to reach their full learning potential.

What will we do?

We will:

3.1 Implement a partnering agreement between DEECD, DHS, the Municipal Association of Victoria and Early Learning Association Australia that sets out clear roles and responsibilities for all parts of the service system in order to improve the participation and engagement in early years services of children in out-of-home care

We know that children and young people in out-of-home care have low engagement and participation rates in core services (both health and education), and these universal service systems do not tailor their approach to the needs of children and young people in out-of-home care. In order to address this, the Department has developed and entered into the Early Childhood Agreement for Children in Out-of-Home Care, a partnership agreement between DEECD, DHS, the Municipal Association of Victoria (MAV) and Early Learning Association Australia. The Agreement will ensure better coordination and support to engage children in out-of-home care in quality early childhood services and to influence positive home learning environments.

The initial focus of the Agreement is on Maternal and Child Health and funded kindergarten, noting that a broad range of other service settings may be highly beneficial for individual children.

3.2 Work with service providers, child protection and Child FIRST to promote Early Start Kindergarten and address barriers to program participation in order to increase program uptake by children in out-of-home care

While participation in Early Start Kindergarten has risen significantly since the commencement of the program, uptake is still relatively low, particularly for children known to child protection. The Department’s central office and regions will:

• promote the program to child protection and Child FIRST to ensure workforce awareness of the initiative
• work with service providers to support kindergartens to respond flexibly to vulnerable children.

3.3 Continue to implement and monitor educational needs assessments so that all children in out-of-home care receive the right educational supports

Children and young people in out-of-home care have poorer educational outcomes, and are more likely to disengage from school. In Victoria’s Vulnerable Children - Our Shared Responsibility Directions Paper, the Victorian Government made a commitment that every school-aged child and young person entering residential out-of-home care will receive a comprehensive individual educational needs assessment, followed by targeted support. This is in addition to the requirement in the Partnering Agreement which states that principals must ensure a Student Support Group is established for all children and young people in out-of-home care.

Although these expectations have been in place since the commencement of the Partnering Agreement, and schools have been provided with resources to assist children and young people in out-of-home care, evidence shows that schools may not fully understand their obligations and need extra support.

The Department is working with DHS, the Catholic Education Office and Independent Schools Victoria to address this need.
3.4 Ensure that all children in out-of-home care are enrolled in school, have a Student Support Group established and an Individual Education Plan in place in order to help improve educational outcomes for this cohort

The Partnering Agreement commits schools to enrol a child or young person in out-of-home care without delay and establish a Student Support Group. The Student Support Group is responsible for the development of an Individual Education Plan.

As with Action 3.3, the Department is developing a new suite of support materials, which will provide extra support for schools to meet their obligations. The support materials will include clearer expectations, in particular that schools are responsible for the timely development and implementation of Individual Educational Plans.

3.5 Provide access for children and young people in out-of-home care to specialist services in schools in order to improve their education outcomes

The Department’s central office and regions will ensure that priorities for Student Support Services within networks of schools are aligned with key government priorities including targeting services toward the highest needs students, such as children and young people in out-of-home care.

3.6 Continue to implement and monitor the effectiveness of the Young People Transitioning from Care Initiative in order to support young people in and/or leaving out-of-home care to access vocational education and training

The Young People Transitioning from Care Initiative provides fee waived training places via a network of training providers to young people in out-of-home care who are under custody or guardianship orders of the state (or those aged under 22 in the year they commence training who have recently transitioned from out-of-home care).

This will provide these vulnerable young people with better access to further education and training that will assist them to become active and engaged adults in the community. A network of 66 training providers offering fee waived training places has been created to ensure appropriate support is available for students.

Victoria’s Vulnerable Children: Our Shared Responsibility Strategy performance measures:

- Proportion of children in out-of-home care achieving at or above the national minimum standard for reading, Victoria
- Proportion of children in out-of-home care achieving at or above the national minimum standard for numeracy, Victoria
- Young people in out-of-home care completing year 10 and/or year 12 or equivalent Vocational Education and Training – measure to be defined

Additional DEECD indicators/measures will be developed to measure the impact of these initiatives
Case study: Implementing the Partnering Agreement for children and young people in out-of-home care

One of the greatest challenges for students in out-of-home care is to have some stability and constancy in their lives. Schools play a crucial role in fostering a sense of belonging and predictability for these students. The following case study outlines the approach one school has taken to implement the Partnering Agreement (Actions 3.3 and 3.4) with the intention to do exactly that.

Background
This primary school is relatively large and set in a regional city, in an aspirational working class area. The Assistant Principal has the responsibility for wellbeing in the school and is the Learning Mentor for Jye (not his real name).

Jye is a twelve year old boy with a Koorie background who has lived in out-of-home care on and off for many years. He has attended numerous primary schools across the state which has led to many disruptions to his education. At the time of his enrolment at this primary school, Jye presented with a history of complex and challenging behaviours. Jye resides in a Therapeutic Residential Care Unit.

Implementing the Partnering Agreement
When the school received a request to take this student in out-of-home care it recognised the importance of holding a pre-enrolment Student Support Group meeting to gather relevant information that would impact the success of his enrolment. The Assistant Principal stressed the importance of preparation and involving the relevant people.

This initial meeting has provided a strong foundation for an ongoing partnership between the Department of Human Services, the Take Two Practitioner, the Community Service Organisation worker, the Residential Care Unit Manager, a representative from the local Aboriginal Cooperative, the parent, the classroom teacher and wellbeing person to support Jye. The Assistant Principal says ‘Jye has been part of the Student Support Groups and he is aware that there are a whole lot of people out there that care about him.’

Similarly, this group has informed the ongoing development of his Individual Education Plan. The school has been very mindful of monitoring Jye’s progress while being persistent, flexible and responsive to his changing needs. An Educational Needs Assessment has been organised for Jye and the results of this assessment will provide valuable information for the Student Support Group. Maintaining open communication with DHS, the Community Service Organisation worker and residential care worker has been an integral part of this process.

The Assistant Principal has been conscious of developing a whole school approach to working with Jye. She recognises that if a student is living in out-of-home care and is covered by the Partnering Agreement, then it can be assumed that the student has experienced trauma. She says: ‘Our staff don’t need to know all of the details, but they do need an understanding of trauma-informed practice’.

The Assistant Principal understands the importance of empowering Jye by giving him the opportunity to have a voice and make choices where appropriate. He has direct input in his Student Support Group, Individual Learning Plan and Behaviour Management Plan.

When Jye was asked what was the most important thing for him at school he said it was to ‘fit in’. This formed the basis of his behaviour management plan. His plan was written in the simple language that he used and has remained in place as a living document. Throughout his two years at school, the plan has been revisited and revised and has provided ongoing opportunities for reflection and celebration.

The Outcome
Jye has now been enrolled in his current primary school for two years and his original goal to ‘fit in’ (and all this entails) has been achieved. His classroom teacher says ‘he is going well and is travelling smoothly. He is doing the same as everyone else’.

The Assistant Principal says: ‘My goal has been to keep him at our school. I want him to finish at our school and graduate like any other Grade 6 child. I want him to always be able to think of this as his primary school. He knows he is wanted at this school and it is his place’.
6. Enablers for action

To support our actions under the three strategic goals, the Department has identified two broad ‘enablers for action’ – linking services and linking data. These enablers are central to our ability to shift practice within early years, schools and higher education and skills and as a result impact on outcomes for vulnerable children and young people.

To support progress against the plan, the Department will:

4.1 Participate in the implementation of Area Partnerships to support stronger links between organisations involved with vulnerable children, at-risk young people and their families

The Cummins Inquiry noted the importance of place-based responses to challenges faced in individual communities. As part of the commitment to build effective and connected services in the Directions Paper, the Department in partnership with DHS is leading a whole-of-government project to work with state and local government, service providers and the community to develop local solutions to identified and emerging issues for vulnerable children.

We know that concentrated disadvantage and vulnerability present complex policy problems that require a locally tailored, integrated service response. The implementation of Area Partnerships will improve service coordination and service delivery planning at a local level to better connect families to the services they need, and will be aligned with the 17 DHS local areas. A plan for the design and implementation of the Area Partnerships model is currently being developed.

4.2 Improve the capacity to identify, monitor, and project outcomes for vulnerable children and young people through the following actions

Both the Victorian Auditor-General’s Office and the Cummins Inquiry commented on the Department’s inability to identify all vulnerable children and families accessing early years services.

As a result, the Department is unable to determine whether these services are effectively engaging and supporting vulnerable families, as well as any barriers to access and participation for vulnerable families. The inability to identify and monitor vulnerable children and families presents a significant challenge to the Department’s early intervention and prevention efforts.

4.2.1 Improve data collections

The ability to identify children and young people who are vulnerable, or at risk, requires data systems that collect information about individual children. In the past, MCH collections have only provided aggregated data. Progress towards individual child level data is currently being made. A new Early Childhood Client Information Management System is under development and will focus on:

- monitoring a child’s engagement/contact points with the various elements of the service system for MCH, kindergarten, school nursing and ECIS
- enhancing sharing of client information amongst service providers to support improvements in service delivery for vulnerable children and families.

4.2.2 Maxmise value of data collections through data linkage

While collections exist in different departments (e.g. Department of Health for births, Department of Education and Early Childhood Development for maternal and child health) and provide sufficient detail for stand-alone analyses, the power of this data is in linking across departments. Where current systems collect detailed data, linkage between data sets is possible, and this has been performed for a cohort of children across kindergarten, school entry and Year 3 NAPLAN. The linkage of kindergarten data with school entry data (School Entrant Health Questionnaire) and educational achievement data (NAPLAN) has enabled the:

- examination of family factors that influence educational attainment
- assessment of the impact of kindergarten on behavioural and emotional issues
- investigation of how health conditions at school entry impact NAPLAN results at Year 3.
The Out-of-Home Care pilot is another example of data sharing between the Department and DHS. This project links children in out-of-home care to education data, to:

- improve the accuracy of education data systems
- ensure that children and young people in out-of-home are receiving the necessary supports

**4.2.3 Monitor and analyse outcomes of vulnerable children to build an evidence base of what works**

The ability to link a child’s records across different data sets is a powerful and cost-effective method for measuring outcomes and the effect of interventions. Some of the constraining factors for linking data include privacy and consent issues. The Department has developed some capability for data linkage and along with this, has protocols for protecting the privacy of individuals.

For example, data has been used to monitor and follow the progress of vulnerable children and their outcomes through the ‘SEHQ-NAPLAN linkage’ which involves analysing child and family factors for children who were in grade Prep in 2008, together with their year three NAPLAN results (2011) to examine the impact of disadvantage (and health conditions) on educational outcomes.

Further analysis is to be conducted for children in out-of-home care, using linked data to track their outcomes through school, and assess the effectiveness of programs and policies aimed at improving outcomes for these children.

**4.2.4 Provide data resources for effective planning for vulnerable children**

Many agencies are involved in delivering services and supporting vulnerable children, young people and their families. Data is central to planning services and monitoring their effectiveness. Some of the resources that the Department will deliver to assist Departmental staff and external stakeholders with access to information about vulnerable cohorts, are:

- the School Information Portal for Principals of Victorian Government Schools
- Victorian Child and Adolescent Monitoring System online
- Regional Dashboards
- State of Victoria’s Children reports
- School Entrant Health Questionnaire profiles.
7. Next steps

Implementation of the Action Plan

Through this Plan, the Department is committed to the implementation of a stronger, more inclusive and targeted service response that provides better support to vulnerable children, young people and families and ensures all children and young people in Victoria have access to services and receive additional support when needed.

Divisions within the Department will have responsibility for progressing the implementation of initiatives included in this Plan. It is anticipated that this Plan will be a living document, updated over the life of the Strategy to include new programs and policies that support the Department to meet the whole-of-government goals.

Monitoring and reporting progress

A Performance and Accountability Framework has been developed to measure whole-of-government progress against the Victoria’s Vulnerable Children Strategy. The Framework incorporates the key indicators outlined in the Strategy, and a commitment to develop additional indicators, which provide a more detailed picture of the participation of vulnerable children, young people and families in services and outcomes.

Of the 15 whole-of-government indicators, five directly relate to the Department’s areas of responsibility. The Department will also monitor progress against the key indicators that relate to programs and outcomes within the Department’s portfolio.

How will we know we are succeeding?


The Victorian Government has previously committed to reporting annually against the Victoria’s Vulnerable Children Strategy indicators. This will enable both government and the broader community to identify areas where positive change is being achieved, and areas requiring further effort in order to improve outcomes.
Appendix 1 – The Department’s Strategic Context

The Vulnerable Children Action Plan will be implemented alongside a range of other strategies, plans and programs to increase the capacity of the service system and the support provided to vulnerable children, young people and families.

- **DEECD Strategic Plan:** This Plan recognises that lifting the achievement, engagement and wellbeing of Victorians requires a significant focus on supporting those most vulnerable. It outlines five areas of focus for the Department: improve opportunities for all learners without exception; boost children’s learning and wellbeing in their early years; achieve large gains in literacy, maths and science; ensure secondary schooling is more inclusive, flexible and engaging and equips young people for further study and work; and give Victorians relevant skills by raising the quality and economic value of vocational and higher education.

In addition, a range of work is underway to implement election commitments and The Victorian Government’s Vision for Languages Education. The Victoria as a Learning Community Action Plan is an online tool available on the Department’s website (http://www.education.vic.gov.au/about/department/vic/Pages/actionplan.aspx) that outlines the initiatives arising from all of these commitments, and also includes school funding reform.

- **School Funding Reform:** The Victorian Government’s agreement with the Commonwealth will provide additional public funding of $12.2 billion to Victorian schools between 2014 and 2019. These funds will increase the quality of the Victorian education system, and in particular the capacity of schools to support students with additional needs.

- **Early Years Strategic Plan:** This plan aims to improve outcomes and enable better support for children from pregnancy up to eight years of age. It will deliver reform around three key pillars: supporting parents and communities to give children a great start; earlier and sustained support for those who need it most; and all children benefiting from high quality learning. A key focus of the plan is to better identify and support vulnerable children.

- **DEECD Plan for Health and Wellbeing (in development):** The DEECD Plan for Health and Wellbeing aims to establish a stronger system for supporting the health and wellbeing of children and young people through education, training, development and child health services. It seeks to both strengthen the support that children and young people receive through education settings, as well as improve the effectiveness of the health and wellbeing services that are provided or funded by the Department.

- **Youth Service Reform (in development):** This whole-of-government initiative is being developed through Youth Partnerships. It will promote greater service coordination through Area Partnerships, more robust reporting and accountability mechanisms within education, training and local community services and the development of clearer avenues for system planning and navigation for vulnerable children, young people and their families.

- **Aboriginal Education Strategy (in development):** This whole-of-department strategy will drive many of the changes needed to address the significant level of vulnerability experienced by Aboriginal families and their children. In line with the Department’s strategic priorities, it seeks to improve the opportunities of all learners, without exception; boost children’s learning and wellbeing in their early years; achieve large gains in literacy, maths and science; ensure secondary schooling is more inclusive, flexible and engaging and equips young people for further study or work; and give Victorians relevant skills by raising the quality and economic value of vocational and higher education.

- **Disability Reform (in development):** A whole-of-department reform project has commenced that will develop a strategic position on funding and policy reform relating to children, students and learners with disabilities. This work will make a significant contribution to reducing vulnerability for people with disabilities.

The Vulnerable Children Action Plan will be implemented within this strategic context, and will intersect closely with the Aboriginal Education Strategy and Disability Reform. Families affected by disability and Aboriginal families are much more likely to be vulnerable or highly vulnerable than other families.

The Vulnerable Children Action Plan will also be implemented within the strategic context of the Department’s partnership with local government. Local government has a key role at the community level in the planning and coordination of services that provide important support to vulnerable families. Local government is required by legislation to receive and follow-up all birth notifications and plan for the health and well-being of its communities – and so has an important role in identifying and supporting vulnerable children and their families.
Appendix 2 – Health and Wellbeing Principles

The Principles for Health and Wellbeing underpin effective professional practice in and across DEECD health and wellbeing services, early childhood services and schools, to support young Victorians’ optimal health, wellbeing and educational outcomes. They offer a common language and approach to developing a service system that meets the needs of the whole person, and promotes and embeds health and wellbeing in our work.

**Principle 1 – Maximise access and inclusion**
Quality universal services for all, with extra effort directed to ensuring education and health and wellbeing services are accessible to, and inclusive of, the most vulnerable and disadvantaged.

**Principle 2 – Focus on outcomes**
Health, learning, development and wellbeing outcomes are the focus when designing, delivering, evaluating and improving education and health and wellbeing services.

**Principle 3 – Evidence-informed and reflective practice**
Current and relevant evidence known to be effective in improving outcomes informs policy making and professional practice. Research and evaluation is undertaken to generate evidence and enable effective and reflective practice.

**Principle 4 – Holistic approach**
Collaboration between services and multidisciplinary professional practice is pursued to meet the needs of children, young people and families and their health, wellbeing and learning goals.

**Principle 5 – Person-centred and family sensitive practice**
People are seen in the context of their families and environment and are supported and empowered to lead and sustain healthy lives.

**Principle 6 – Partnerships with families and communities**
Partnerships are forged with children, young people, families and communities, who are seen as partners in the creation of healthy environments and good health and wellbeing.

**Principle 7 – Cultural competence**
Effort is made to understand and effectively communicate with people across cultures and to recognise one’s own world view. Cultural connection is recognised as playing an integral part in healthy development and wellbeing.

**Principle 8 – Commitment to excellence**
High expectations are held for every child and young person. Professionals continually assess their own work practices to find opportunities for improvement.
Endnotes


2 For example, the Cummins Inquiry noted that in comparison to the average rate across Victoria, children in the Gippsland and Loddon Mallee regions of DHS were more than twice as likely to be the subject of a report to child protection (Cummins, P., Scott D., and Scales, B., *Report of the Protecting Victoria’s Vulnerable Children Inquiry*, 2012, Department of Premier and Cabinet, p. xxxii).


4 Victorian Ombudsman: *Own Motion Investigation into the Department of Human Services Child Protection Program* (November 2009); *Own Motion investigation into Child Protection – Out of Home Care* (May 2010); *Investigation into the failure of agencies to manage registered sex offenders* (February 2011); *Investigation regarding the Department of Human Services Child Protection program (Loddon Mallee Region)* (October 2011).

5 Cummins, P., op cit, p. 290-91.

6 Ibid, p. 133.


8 Cummins, P., op cit, p. 132.


12 This information is available on the DEECD website, see: [http://www.education.vic.gov.au/school/principals/participation/Pages/reengagement.aspx](http://www.education.vic.gov.au/school/principals/participation/Pages/reengagement.aspx)


16 Cummins. P., op cit, p. xxxii.


18 Cummins, P., op cit, p. 135.