

## About this Communique

The Department of Education and Training (DET) – Community Sector Organisation (CSO) Governance Group is a quarterly forum for communication, consultation, engagement and collaboration between the Department and the community sector. Meetings are co-chaired by DET and the Victorian Council of Social Service (VCOSS) and reflect topics of mutual interest to DET and the sector. You can read more about the partnership agreement that underpins this work on [VCOSS](#) and [DET](#) websites.

This Communique has been prepared by VCOSS to increase the visibility of this forum.

## What was discussed in the May 2021 meeting?

The focus of this meeting was Student Re-engagement.

### Clarifying the problem

#### DET insights

**Justin McDonnell, Executive Director, Wellbeing, Health and Engagement, DET** provided an update on primary and secondary school attendance. COVID-19 had differential impacts on the community in 2020, and DET is closely monitoring how attendance is tracking in different parts of the state and for different student cohorts. Justin reflected on factors that impact engagement and disengagement, noting they are complex. He highlighted the work DET is doing to support educators, students and parents/carers.

**Ed Quin, Manager, Engaging Students At-risk Branch, Wellbeing, Health and Engagement, DET** provided an update on the Navigator program. Navigator is targeted to students aged between 12 and 17 years who have attended less than 30 per cent of the previous school term. The program is designed to address issues underlying students' disengagement and help them return to education and learning. From Term 1 2021 the Navigator program is delivered across the state. Additional funding in the November State Budget has enabled providers to boost mental health support and intervene earlier to return newly disengaged students to school quickly. Strong partnerships, time and persistence, and a community-based approach are key success factors for the program.

Further information on the Navigator program and resources can be found here:

<https://www.education.vic.gov.au/school/teachers/behaviour/engagement/Pages/navigator.aspx>

The Mental Health Toolkit which lists all of the Department's mental health and wellbeing support is available via:

<https://www.education.vic.gov.au/school/teachers/health/mentalhealth/Pages/mentalhealthtoolkit.aspx>

It includes a [Quick Guide to Student Mental Health and Wellbeing resources](#) for schools, students, parents and carers looking to access expert guidance and resources to support wellbeing in one place

A case study was provided by Ardoch on the community sector's role in supporting student engagement

**Adele Stowe-Lindner, National Programs Manager, Ardoch** presented on a Mock Interview program that gives students an opportunity to build their aspirations and practice interview skills in a safe and supported environment. Ardoch focuses on improving outcomes for children and young people through building partnerships with schools, early years services and volunteers to boost social connectedness.

**A Senior Secondary Student from Hampton Park Secondary College** shared their experience of the Mock Interview Program. The student reflected on the value of an experiential program (compared with a paper-based exercise), and described how the Mock Interview program has assisted their skills and career development. The student also shared insights on school engagement. For the student and their friends, school is most engaging when there are a variety of subjects to choose from that align with their interests and skills.

Further information and resources can be accessed at: <https://www.ardoch.org.au/>

## Creating a sense of belonging

Firth Review

**Natalie Garcia de Heer, A/Director, School Education Policy and Reform, Policy, Strategy and Performance Group, DET** presented on progress of the implementation of the Firth Review Report into vocational and applied learning pathways. DET has established a Senior Secondary Pathways Reform Taskforce and will continue to undertake stakeholder and public consultations as the reforms progress.

More information can be found here: <https://www.education.vic.gov.au/about/department/Pages/vcal-pathways-review.aspx>

## Supporting children in out-of-home care

**Dr Anne Kennedy, Early Childhood Consultant** set the scene on the importance of creating a sense of belonging in early childhood settings to support engagement. Creating a sense of belonging is core to the philosophy and practice of early learning and requires genuine partnerships with families. It is intentional and needs an ethical lens that is welcoming, attending, non-judgemental and accepts children and families as they are. This includes validating the identity and life experience of children and families.

**Jo Geurts, CEO, Eureka Community Kindergarten Association** spoke about key enablers and barriers in supporting children in out-of-home care from an early learning perspective.

Enablers include building networks and partnerships across the sector and between agencies to support continuity of learning; DET funded pre-purchased places; capacity building from School Readiness Funding; and a DET pilot of outreach workers to support engagement of Aboriginal children in services.

Barriers include high turn-over in Child Protection staff; complexities in the system, including paperwork required for children to engage in early learning; early childhood education and care services not being informed about a child's changing circumstances; and complexities in supporting carers/foster carers.

Further information and resources can be found here: <https://www.dese.gov.au/national-quality-framework-early-childhood-education-and-care/resources/belonging-being-becoming-early-years-learning-framework-australia> and <https://www.education.vic.gov.au/childhood/professionals/health/outofhomecare/Pages/earlychildhoodagreement.aspx>

## Next meeting

Our next meeting will be on the theme of Disability. Please contact VCOSS if there is something that you'd like to share with us, to guide our planning for this meeting.

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