Community story

Doveton, Victoria 3177

## Background

Doveton was established in 1955 when the Housing Commission of Victoria bought a 267ha site 31 km south-east of Melbourne's central business district and built an estate to house manufacturing workers from the factories in nearby Dandenong. By 1966, 2500 homes had been built and the three big factories in the area – General Motors Holden, International Harvester and H.J. Heinz – employed 7,450 people.

Academic and former political speechwriter Dennis Glover grew up in Doveton in the 1960s and ‘70s. His parents and members of his extended family worked at the General Motors Holden plant and at the Heinz factory where he worked on school holidays. Last year Glover released a book, *An Economy is Not a Society*, about growing up in Doveton and the ruin of the suburb following the closure of the automotive factories and other manufacturing plants in Dandenong in the 1980s. “We were working-class but we weren’t poor,” Glover writes, describing a socially cohesive community where there were three jobs in these factories for every Doveton family.

Following the factory closures this figure fell to one job for every two families in 1995 and, in 2015, according to Glover, there was just one job for every five families. The unemployment rate in Doveton in 2015 stands at 21.2 per cent, the national average being 6.1 per cent.

However, between January 2009 and July 2010, 14,632 migrants and refugees made the Southern Metropolitan Region their initial place of settlement in Australia. A report into culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) settlement in the the region prepared for the [Adult, Community and Further Education (ACFE) Board](http://www.education.vic.gov.au/about/department/structure/pages/acfe.aspx) in 2010 showed that the majority of these settled in the cities of Greater Dandenong and Casey, within which Doveton sits. Refugees from Afghanistan, Burma, Iraq, Cambodia, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and the Horn of African nations have been settled in this area. “Lower skilled jobs are available in the short to medium term, but employers are emphasising the importance of knowledge of occupational health and safety and ‘soft skills’ such as workplace communication involving literacy and numeracy,” the report states. “Many residents from the Horn of Africa – particularly women and many youth – have limited, if any, experience of schooling because of war, civil unrest, rural backgrounds and/or long periods in refugee camps. This, combined with the far-reaching effects of torture and trauma on the settlement process, has presented service providers with considerable challenges.”

Jesuit Social Services and Catholic Social Services Australia published a report in July 2015, [*Dropping off the Edge 2015*](http://www.dote.org.au/findings/victoria/). The report maps disadvantage across Australia based on 22 social indicators. The indicators, based on statistics collected from a number of government agencies, reflect factors that may limit life opportunities in the broad areas of social wellbeing, health, community safety, access to housing, education and employment.

With regard to Victoria the report states: “Disadvantage is concentrated within a small number of communities across Victoria. These communities experience a complex web of persistent and hard-to-shift disadvantage.” These communities show high rates of high rates of unemployment, criminal convictions, disability, low education, child maltreatment, family violence and psychiatric admissions, according to the report.

Doveton is in the most severely disadvantaged group in the 2015 study. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics’ standard measure of advantage and disadvantage – Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA) - Doveton is now the fourth most disadvantaged suburb in Victoria.

## The AEDC

The Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) is a national measure of child development initiated by the Australian Government. Teachers of children in their first year of school complete a survey that measures five key areas when a child starts school. These are: physical health and wellbeing, social competence, emotional maturity, language and cognitive skills, communication skills and general knowledge.

In Doveton 4, 290 children were surveyed in the 2009 AEDC. The results revealed 32.4 per cent of children were developmentally vulnerable on one of the domains, compared with 23.6 per cent of all Australian children in that category. By the 2012 AEDC results this had risen to 46 per cent, compared with the national figure of 22 per cent. In 2009 20.8 per cent were vulnerable on two or more domains, with 20 per cent in 2012. These children demonstrate a much lower than average ability in the developmental competencies measured in that domain.

These AEDC results give communities a snapshot of how children in their local area have developed by the time they start school. The results can help educators, health professional and community service providers understand what’s working well and what needs to be improved or developed in their community to better support children and their families in early childhood.

## Early Childhood Development and Doveton College

In 2009 the philanthropic organisation The Colman Foundation committed to becoming involved in the education of children in an area with a high migrant and refugee population. The Foundation approached the Victorian Government. At the time the state government was implementing a state-wide reform program to revitalise schooling in disadvantaged areas of Victoria. It planned to build a birth-to-Year 9 community learning centre, which included early childhood services and a school, at Doveton to replace the existing schools , both primary and senior.

The state government, the Foundation and the federal government agreed to establish a unique partnership to plan, build and operate the new facility, Doveton College. It is the first government school partnership of its kind in Australia. The Colman Foundation donated $1.8 million to the construction of the school and Early Learning Centre, on top of the state and federal governments’ $36 million contribution. The Foundation has also pledged long-term annual funding until at least 2017 for programs and community facilities at the College.

The Colman Foundation’s financial contribution does not replace government funding for the College. It is extra money that gives the College flexibility to strengthen services, develop innovative new programs for children and families and support the community through partnering with other non-profit agencies and philanthropic foundations to provide services to families and the community on-site.

The College, which opened in 2012, has an Early Learning Centre and Prep-Year 9 school at its centre, with wrap-around health, family and children’s services on site. June McLoughlin, Director Family and Children's Services at Doveton College, said this was Australia’s first fully integrated education service, offering child and family services.

According to McLoughlin, who concurrently holds the position of Director Early Learning and Community engagement at the Colman Foundation and is a specialist in Early Childhood Education and Teaching, the children coming into the Early Learning Centre can be extremely traumatized, are often from a non-English-speaking background (there are 50 different languages spoken among College students) or may be relocated by Child Protection Services.

“The AEDC data is an indicator of the difficult issues the children in this community are facing in early childhood. One of our problems is that we have a highly transient population so the group of children who start their first year of school will not necessarily all be there at the end of the school year.

 “We have 140 children aged from 9 months in our Early Learning Centre and we have wrap-around services provided by Community Health. We are very cognisant of the children’s health needs.

“Whatever we ask for Community Health will deliver. For example, we have an occupational therapist who helps children in the Early Learning Centre work on their fine motor skills where needed. We also have speech therapists working here and a paediatric fellow from Monash University seeing children in the centre,” she said. There is a strong focus on wellbeing with dental checks and general hygiene and healthy eating programs.

“We know that for children to develop self-esteem and perseverance skills it must start in the parenting space. That’s why we work with the parents as well as the children. For mothers, education really matters and most of them here have only reached a Year 8 equivalent. We now have 100 parents in Adult Education doing certificate training,” McLouglin said. The Centre has computers available for parents to use and spaces set up for study and community meetings. “With parent engagement in early childhood education, the children’s outcomes improve.”

The Early Learning Centre is continually developing its educational model, McLoughlin said. “We have to train the teachers to modify their teaching instruction so traumatised children can learn. We use a light touch so it is important to have high quality people and competent teaching. We are now seeing results as the children that go from our Early Learning Centre into Prep are starting to stand out against those coming in from the community.”

Data, such as the AEDC results, is integral to the work of the Early Learning Centre. Shannon Newman, a consultant employed for high-level analysis of the data on the children’s development, said the Centre was actively looking at what data to collect and what data to retain. “Previously people had data in silos but the school has grown this area enormously and now it is much easier to get access to information. However, this is a long haul, not a quick fix. We’re starting to see positive trends only now, she said. “To ensure this is sustainable it is being built into the structure of the College.”

While the Colman Foundation is looking at other sites to develop similar schools with integrated services, there is a strong commitment to the community in Doveton. “As soon as people better their situation, they move on. Our long-term goal is that people don’t feel they have to leave to get their child quality education,” McLoughlin said.

## For more information contact

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Catherine Nolan

Victorian AEDC Coordinator

Department of Education and Training

catherine.nolan@education.vic.gov.au

[www.aedc.gov.au](http://www.aedc.gov.au)