Community Story

### Ready, Set, Prep!

### Fawkner, Victoria 2020

Fawkner community collaborates to increase family engagement and demystify early years health and education systems

The Community Wellbeing team at Merri Health has a long-standing commitment to working collaboratively with schools in Fawkner across a range of health and wellbeing priorities. In 2015 the team noticed a surprising and notable change in developmental vulnerability in children starting school.

The 2015 results provided compelling evidence to implement a concentrated, whole of community focused, school readiness intervention to improve educational outcomes in Fawkner.

**Background**

Fawkner is a suburb north of Melbourne in the municipality of Moreland. The 2015 release of the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) results for Fawkner showed 36.6 per cent of children were starting school developmentally vulnerable on one or more domains, a figure which was much higher than the Victorian state average of 19.9 per cent and the national result of 22.0 per cent.[[1]](#footnote-1) The surprise was that rates of children experiencing vulnerability in Fawkner had significantly increased from the 2012 AEDC, which showed 22.5 per cent vulnerability on one or more domains.1

With no clear causal explanation for the significant increase in vulnerability rates reported in the AEDC results between 2012 and 2015, Merri Health sought further insights from school partners and local services. The team found that during this period there had been an increase in the number of newly arrived migrant families to Fawkner, with large numbers of pre- and primary-school aged children.[[2]](#footnote-2)

On further investigation, the Moreland Local Government Area also reported significantly lower attendances at the 3.5 year Maternal and Child Health (MCH) Key Ages and Stages visit than the Victorian average; 61.1 and 66.1 per cent, respectively.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Fawkner pre-school attendance rates were also low. 64.9 per cent of children, compared to the Victorian average of 89.5 per cent, were not attending kindergarten and educational outcomes in Fawkner were also below the Victorian average.1 Further into the school journey, they noted the mean NAPLAN scores were lower in all year levels for both numeracy and literacy,[[4]](#footnote-4) and the year 12 completion for people over 15 years was 50.6 per cent compared to the rest of Moreland (63.6 per cent).2

**Responding to the 2015 results**

For more than 40 years, community health organisation, Merri Health, has delivered services in the community for people at every age and stage of life. It is a not-for-profit organisation with a focus on strengthening the health of entire communities through partnering to respond to local needs.

The *Ready, Set, Prep!* initiative is based in Fawkner. Fawkner is a culturally diverse suburb, with 47.4 per cent of residents born overseas, of which 23.6 per cent arrived within the last 5 years.2 63.2 per cent of residents speak a language other than English at home and ABS data from the 2016 Census also indicates an elevated level socioeconomic disadvantage, with a SEIFA index of 915.6.2

Many families who were settling in Fawkner were socially isolated and not familiar with the Australian education system. Fawkner schools flagged high rates of late school enrolment and a startling number of students arriving on their first day at school not enrolled, nor having attended a transition to school session. Family engagement was considered a key challenge and there were limited resources and opportunities available to engage families from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds in the standard way to prepare their children for school entry. However, the local home-based peer education program for pre-school children – the Home Interaction Program for Parents and Youngsters (HIPPY) – was consistently exceeding its available capacity and reported remarkably high interest from families from culturally diverse backgrounds who saw HIPPY as a way of preparing their children for school.

**Bringing about change**

Focusing on education as a social determinant of health, Merri Health established a partnership with four Fawkner primary schools and Moreland City Council in 2016 to work on strategies to boost engagement in the early years. These strategies were designed to improve and increase family engagement, by demystifying the early years health and education systems.

With Merri Health operating as the backbone organisation, the partnership was successful in receiving a philanthropic grant from the William Buckland Foundation under the Enabling Education Program stream. In 2017 the *Ready, Set, Prep!* partnership was funded $520,000 to support school readiness for Fawkner children and their families across four years (2017-2020). Merri Health matched these funds through its Integrated Health Promotion funding from the Department of Health and Human Services.

**What approach was taken?**

A collaborative approach was supported by Moreland City Council, two local Catholic and two State Government primary schools in Fawkner, with a fifth Independent Islamic school joining the partnership soon after commencement. Through sharing stories of success, developing local innovative solutions and increasing opportunities for families, the *Ready, Set, Prep!* partnership broadened and expanded to include more than 20 partners.

Children, families, educators, and early years health and education services are all benefiting from their involvement in the initiative. Transition programs have been extended, and teachers report more settled Foundation level students. In addition, there has been a 23 per cent increase in parent/carer satisfaction in relation to their school’s transition process.

In 2020, *Ready, Set, Prep!* launched a transition network with a model that was co-designed by kindergartens, foundation teachers, school leadership, the Department of Education and Training, Moreland City Council, and supported playgroups. The commitment from partners to work towards a shared goal is a critical factor in the initiative’s success: “*We don’t want children to just cope (in Foundation), we want them to thrive*,” says Felicity Dess, kindergarten teacher at Lorne Street Kindergarten.

**Achievements**

The *Ready, Set, Prep!* partnership has worked alongside the whole community and together the partnership has developed local solutions to barriers and built a comprehensive, coordinated approach to school readiness preparation for children and their families.

The partnership achieved success through the following strategies:

* Extending and improving transition to primary school programs at all primary schools in Fawkner.
* Hosting a morning tea for families to meet and greet local early years health and education services, kindergartens, and primary schools.
* Delivering shared professional development for project partners to foster collaborative practice and increase critical skills. Key topics included creating welcoming and culturally inclusive environments for families.
* Supporting innovative programs, including the LEAP (Learn, Engage, Appreciate, Play) group for parents of children with additional needs.
* Developing the [*Word Play* English literacy program](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qg2dcy9IpEw) in collaboration with Moreland City Libraries. Funded by the Public Libraries Victoria Network and State Library Victoria, this program meets the aims of *Ready, Set, Prep!* in a community setting. It is now ongoing and part of the weekly library program in Fawkner. In 2019, *Word Play* won a Victorian Early Years Award and was highly commended in the Victorian Public Healthcare Awards.
* Researching the local impact of early school starting age through the *Sooner or Later* project. This research and associated recommendations found that Fawkner Foundation students are more likely to start school at first year eligible than Victorian and Moreland students, and that school starting age is associated with Language Other Than English (LOTE) background and additional needs [link to research if public?]; and
* Sharing co-designed key messages about play-based learning, services to support health and wellbeing and how to enrol in early years services and primary school.

Many of these activities have evolved from consultation, notably a thorough consultation undertaken in 2019 that led to the development of a suite of educational videos. More than 200 community members and stakeholders supported the consultation, filming, and refinement of the videos, including 73 local Fawkner people who participated in the filming across 12 Fawkner locations.

These [educational videos](https://www.merrihealth.org.au/get-involved/health-initiatives/ready-set-prep/) focus on supporting families, providing them with critical information so that they can give their children the best start in life, preparing them for primary school and beyond. Information shared includes key messages about early health, wellbeing, and learning opportunities. The videos bring together stakeholder and community knowledge, and the local perspectives promote and feature the rich diversity of Fawkner.

‘*There are huge gaps for migrants, they don’t have much information about the school system here and they can struggle to find the information,’* said theparent of a primary school student in Fawkner. The videos also aim to demystify the Victorian early years health and education systems, as navigating the systems can be a confusing and frustrating process for newly arrived families, families with English as an additional language and first-time parents and carers.

*‘Teachers don’t understand that parents from migrant families are so lost here as it’s quite different and there are no windows into classrooms at all. It increases the gap between parents and children,’* said the parent of a primary school student in Fawkner. The videos are supported by an illustrated [‘journey to primary school’](https://www.merrihealth.org.au/get-involved/health-initiatives/ready-set-prep/) poster that highlights key places and spaces that support early childhood development and learning prior to starting school. There is the potential for wider distribution of these resources, as the posters have been translated into six languages and key messages are relevant and appropriate beyond the suburb of Fawkner.

**Looking ahead**

*Ready, Set, Prep!* has gained considerable momentum and the team is encouraged by early indicators of success. Undertaking assessments of contribution suggests that *Ready, Set, Prep!* and the collective actions of partners, along with the opening of a new kindergarten in Fawkner by Moreland City Council, has supported an increased number of children starting primary school on track. In three years, the number of children starting primary school developmentally vulnerable on one or more domains decreased from 36.6 per cent in 2015, to 25.5 per cent in 2018.1

Long-term change in population-level outcomes take time and require not only resources but sustained collaborative effort. Despite these early successes in Fawkner, AEDC statistics from 2018 show that vulnerability remains higher than the Moreland and Victorian averages (Moreland: 20.0, Victoria: 19.9). Furthermore, statistics have worsened in the neighbouring suburb of Glenroy (2015: 29.7 per cent, 2018: 32.3 per cent).1

Given this, the *Ready, Set, Prep!* partnership is seeking funding to scale up the initiative to include the neighbouring suburbs of Glenroy and Hadfield. This will involve adopting a co-designed approach that supports community-driven, localised solutions to tackle the complex barriers facing children and families living in the northern suburbs of Moreland. By working in a broader, cross-sectoral partnership with early years services, schools and communities, this initiative will empower children and families to reach their full potential.

**For more information contact**

<https://www.merrihealth.org.au/get-involved/health-initiatives/ready-set-prep/>

1. Australian Early Development Census. 2020. Data Explorer | Fawkner [online]. Available at: <https://www.aedc.gov.au/data/data-explorer?id=137677> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Profile.id.com.au. 2016. Community Profile | City of Moreland [online]. Available at: <http://profile.id.com.au/moreland> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Department of Education and Training. 2015. Maternal & Child Health Services Annual Report 2014-2015. Available at: <https://www2.health.vic.gov.au/primary-and-community-health/maternal-child-health/reporting-data-mch> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Data provided by Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2020. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)