Community story

Warrnambool, Victoria 3280

# Community unites to help children succeed

## Background

Warrnambool is a regional centre and former port city on the south-western coast of Victoria, 263km south-west of Melbourne, about a 3-hour drive away. With a population of 33,501 in 2014 ([ABS ERP 2014](http://profile.id.com.au/warrnambool/home)), the city is at the western end of the Great Ocean Road and, with its beautiful beaches and whale-watching, attracts some 715,000 visitors each year. To the casual visitor Warrnambool is a friendly, large country town. It is a hub for the dairy, beef and other agricultural industries in the region.

Warrnambool has been the most stable of all the communities in Victoria’s Western District. When The Pyramid Building Society collapsed in 1990, leaving thousands of depositors surveying the wreckage, Warrnambool survived. When the Fletcher Jones clothing factory closed in 2005, Warrnambool survived again.

Projections for the region show a potential jobs growth of more than 1500 jobs in the next five years, but the Warrnambool community realised it was facing a skills shortage, aaccording to the Director of Community Development for the City of Warrnambool, Vikki King. “The community and local government needed to look at just what was going on here,” she said.

## The Data

Data on Warrnambool show that the community is facing some serious challenges. The report [*Dropping off the Edge 2015*](http://www.dote.org.au/findings/victoria/), released in July 2015 by Jesuit Social Services and Catholic Social Services Australia, 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. While not in the top 10 most disadvantaged communities, Warrnambool shows up on the report’s map of Victoria as a triangle of red in the state’s south-west corner, a pocket of significant disadvantage.

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. These are: physical health and wellbeing, social competence, emotional maturity, language and cognitive skills, communication skills and general knowledge. The results help communities understand how local children have developed by the time they start formal full-time school. This enables communities to better understand what is working well and what needs to be improved or developed to better support children and their families.

In Warnambool the 2009 AEDC results revealed that 20.0 per cent of children were developmentally vulnerable in one or more domain/s of the AEDC and 11.1 per cent are developmentally vulnerable in two or more domains. In 2012 this had dropped to 15.1 per cent and 7.5 per cent respectively.

According to King, the data proved very valuable in focusing attention on what areas needed to be addressed. “The more data we get the more we can respond and the quicker we can mobilise to get to where we need to be,” she said.

Lisa McLeod, Warnambool’s manager of Community Planning, said people in the city were very committed to good policy and integrated services. “The data from the AEDC gave us the authority to move. We recognise that the earlier the interventions can be implemented the better the outcomes. Without the data we were just speculating,” she said.

The AEDC data have proved vital to putting programs in place at East Warrnambool Primary School. According to Acting Principal, Robyn Ledin, the school’s 482 students are a reflection of their community – “a real cross-section”. With pockets of high disadvantage in the school’s community, Ledin and former Principal Lindy Sharp have implemented a Positive Education philosophy aimed at promoting wellbeing and engagement to address some of the critical issues in the school’s AEDC data.

As part of this they have implemented a nurturing room for students from Prep to year 2 who may be facing trauma such as out of home care or a family crisis. “We have two staff members and take a maximum of 10 students – teachers triage the students attending with the help of the Wellbeing Team. The room was set up for us by a behavioural therapist and the students spend two hours a day there interacting with the staff. In those two hours the students feel successful – it’s empowering,” Ledin said.

The average student participation in the nurturing room was three terms, she said. This successful initiative is now being replicated in other schools in Victoria.

East Warrnambool Primary also runs Flying Start, a school readiness program to assist children and families in the transition from kindergarten to school. Flying Start is open to all children who will be starting their first year of formal schooling at any Warrnambool and district primary school.

“We’ve got terrific networks with our kindergartens and we feel well informed about the children transitioning into school. We also work very closely with the Koori Education Support Officers who are great,” Sharp said. “The AEDC data helps – it’s factual and we have programs in place as a result of that data.”

The school was also aware of low student engagement in Year 6 and implemented a True Grit program. Students in the program spend 2 hours a day developing learning and problem-solving skills as well as resilience and self-regulation. “The students who benefitted most from this were often quiet kids, those just under the radar. We needed to intervene before they transitioned into senior school,” Ledin said.

As part of the Positive Education philosophy Year 5 and 6 students also have a focus on 'Learning to Lead' in their final two years of primary school.

## Beyond the Bell

While the AEDC focused on early childhood development, the community realised that its students at the other end of the education system were also facing a major challenge. Completing Year 12 or its equivalent (Certificate II, VCAL etc.) is now recognised as the minimum level of education needed to go on to further study or to enter the workforce. However, just 57 per cent of students in the Great South Coast region, which includes Warrnambool, achieve Year 12 or equivalent. The state average is almost 75 per cent.

McLeod puts this down to the lack of encouragement to aspiration and barriers to accessibility whether real or perceived.

“These are students who, if they were living in Melbourne, would be going to university. Kids from good families with good schooling experience, but to whom an ATAR score (Australian Tertiary Admission Rank) greater than 75 is seen as beyond their capacity. This is a regional problem and our kids are missing opportunities and the gap [between regional and metropolitan students] is getting wider,” she said.

In addition to the disparity in learning outcomes, adolescents in rural and regional Victoria have higher rates of hospitalisation for intentional self harm, school absenteeism, sexually transmitted infections, being convicted and placed on a community order, teenage pregnancy, cigarette smoking, binge drinking, family violence and substantiated child protection reports.[[1]](#footnote-1)

In 2012 a regional working group was formed to consider how to address the poor education outcomes for the region. The working group developed a ground-breaking collective initiative to ensure that the children and young people of the Great South Coast region succeed. This initiative, Beyond the Bell, is based on the belief that no single policy, government department, organisation or program alone can tackle or solve the increasingly complex social problems the community faces.

Government, community services, the health, justice and education sectors, business and industry, workplaces, families and communities need to work together to make this happen.

Beyond the Bell’s goals are:

* All young people from conception to adulthood are supported by family and community to reach their optimum potential
* All children and young people are supported to maximise their participation in education
* All young people are able to make a successful transition to further education, training or into employment that may include ongoing education
* The community values the critical role of parents in shaping the learning and development of their children
* The community values education and life-long learning.

Local Action Groups were formed in each of the Great South Coast local government areas with participants from a wide range of sectors, organisation and communities, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait communities. Each area, including Warrnambool, developed a Community Action Plan outlining the community’s focus for the next two years. The action areas include establishing partnerships between education and industry, improving spoken language and literacy skills, improving wellbeing and developing strong and supportive parenting skills through programs.

In 2015 the Warrnambool Local Action Group of Beyond the Bell established Communities That Care (CTC) Warrnambool. Using prevention science as its base, CTC promotes healthy youth development, improves youth outcomes, and reduces problem behaviours. CTC Warrnambool conducted a survey of 1,215 Year 6, 8 and 10 students from 13 Warrnambool schools. From the results it determined that the following risk factors be selected as priorities to target with evidence-based prevention programmes:

* Low commitment to school (School risk factor)
* School opportunities for prosocial involvement (School protective factor)
* Family opportunities for prosocial involvement (Family protective factor)
* Laws/norms favourable to substance use (Community risk factor)
* Favourable attitude towards drug use (Peer/individual risk factor)

CTC is currently identifying what existing programmes have been shown to effectively address these priorities and, where there are gaps, identify relevant evidence-based prevention programmes to introduce to Warrnambool. King says it may seem like progress is slow but there is absolute community commitment to this process.

## For more information contact

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1. Beyond the Bell, Regional Action Plan 2015 - 2017 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)