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**Evaluation of Transition:
A Positive Start to School Pilots**

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Executive Summary

Introduction and background

The Victorian government's *Blueprint for Education and Early Childhood Development*, released in September 2008, articulates a vision for Victorian education and early childhood development over the next five years. Improving transitions for children moving between early childhood services and schools is a priority area within the Blueprint, and relates to the goal that: "By the time Victorian children start school they will be ready to learn at school and schools will be ready for them" (p. 15).

To inform government policy in this area and expand the local evidence base on what works in supporting children's transition to school, 30 pilots were funded through the *Transition: A Positive Start to School* Initiative. The pilots trialled, or extended, a range of transition approaches in a diverse range of Victorian communities. The pilots ran from October 2008 to May 2009.

Main findings

The University of Melbourne's Centre for Program Evaluation (CPE) was commissioned by the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) to conduct an independent evaluation of the 30 transition to school pilots. A theory-based evaluation approach was used to inform the collection of a range of data on the perceptions and experience of implementing the pilots.

The main findings of the evaluation can be summarised briefly according to four key areas: (1) the importance of school transition; (2) factors affecting implementation of transition to school pilots; (3) emerging evidence of promising practices; and (4) implications for state-wide implementation promising transition practices.

The importance of school transition

The transition to school represents a significant change in the lives of children and their families. Pilots emphasised that it is not a one-off event but a process that starts before a child commences school and continues well into the first years of school. There was strong agreement from pilots that positive transitions play an important part in shaping life-long learning and development of children.

With few exceptions, the pilots embraced an ecological model of transition. The ecological perspective highlights the significance of relationships and the way interactions between children, families, educators and the community shape the experience of transition in important ways.

Factors affecting implementation of transition to school pilots

Each of the 30 transition pilots began as unique designs. That is, they were not one single program implemented in 30 different locations. The uniqueness of the individual pilots was based on differences in the local communities, schools, early childhood settings and families participating in the pilot.

The delivery of pilots was also influenced by a number of early-start up challenges, such as:

- Limited time and workload commitments, which led to difficulties engaging stakeholders and participants. The timing of funding (i.e. just before the Christmas holiday period) also created initial problems for many of the pilots;
- Historical problems with cross-sector service co-ordination and philosophical differences between early childhood services and schools. For many pilots this was the first time early childhood professionals and school personnel had attempted to work collaboratively; and
- Obstacles associated with involving children and families in transition activities (specifically) and education more broadly (e.g. transport difficulties, costs of childcare, etc).

These implementation challenges were viewed as an inherent feature in the development process of local transition programs. A range of factors relating to successful implementation were also identified. These included:

- Working collaboratively through local transition networks, building where possible on pre-existing relationships and partnerships;
- The importance of leadership and the presence of program champions;
- Systematic local planning, needs assessment and ongoing monitoring and evaluation;
- The provision of a wide range of opportunities for educators to participate in professional development activities, particularly when these are delivered as joint activities between early childhood professionals and school staff; and
- Linking transition to school activities with school and early years policy planning to ensure sustainability and consistency of practice.

Emerging evidence of benefits and promising practices

While it is too early to evaluate the outcomes and impact of pilots, a number of pilots were able to identify emerging benefits. For children these included improved school adjustment (e.g. less anxiety on the first day of school) and earlier identification of developmental delays that might impact educational outcomes. For families the most common perceived benefit was an improvement in their relationship with early childhood and school professionals and a greater overall engagement in their child's education.

For educators, reported benefits were improved communication and linkages between sectors and agencies, and a better understanding and appreciation of each others' educational practices.

A number of promising practice ideas were also identified though the evaluation. These were:

- Reciprocal visits (for children and educators) across early years services and school;
- Transfer of information via transition statements and meetings;
- Joint professional development for early childhood professionals and school staff;
- Local transition networks which involve a broad range of stakeholders;
- Buddy programs for children starting school, as well as parent groups;
- Family involvement strategies, tailored to meet the needs of families attending early childhood services or school;
- Developmentally-appropriate educational practices, also commonly referred to as 'play-based learning';
- The use of social story boards for children; and
- Community-level transition plans and timetables.

More detailed information about these promising practices and the range of ways in which children, families, and educators report benefiting from transition pilots are provided in the body of the report.

Implications for state-wide implementation of promising transition practices

A provisional theory of change model for guiding a staged approach to the state-wide implementation of promising transition practices was developed. The model draws on the experience of the transition pilots as well as insights from the diffusion of innovation literature (see Rogers, 2003).

The main implications for policy roll-out include: (a) the need for strong leadership and consistent messages about the importance of transition to school; (b) a supportive infrastructure and formal service collaboration arrangements between early childhood settings and schools; (c) the provision of clear information and professional development to support the planning and delivery of promising practices; and (d) ongoing research and evaluation to capture medium and longer-term outcomes and any unintended effects.

Introduction

Over the past decade there has been increased recognition among policy-makers and the general community about the importance of education in the early years. A focal point for much of this discussion has centred on the notion of 'school readiness'. Early conceptions of readiness for school focused mainly on children's knowledge and skills as they entered school, but now usually encompasses developmentally appropriate learning, social and emotional skills as well as the need for 'ready schools' (Dockett & Perry, 2007).

This emphasis on schools being 'ready' for children is critically important because it encourages families and educators to view readiness as more than just a set of measurable attributes located within the child. This is one reason why a broader, ecological view of school 'transition' is increasingly preferred. This perspective sees transition as an interactive process involving the development of positive relationships between children, families, educators and the community (Dunlop & Fabian, 2007; Pianta & Cox, 1999).

The Victorian policy context

The notion of 'school readiness' and 'school transition' have been on the Victorian policy agenda since at least the early 1990s (culminating in the Victorian Ministerial Review of School-Entry Age in 1992). Significantly, the Directorate of School Education at this time identified transition as a key factor influencing a child's ability to achieve initial success at school, and recommended the development of transition programs for all children starting school. It was suggested that, ideally, transition programs should be holistic and focus on building relationships between children, families, early childhood settings and schools.

More recently, transition to school has received renewed attention through the Victorian government's *Blueprint for Education and Early Childhood Development*, which was released in September 2008. This document articulates a vision for Victorian education and early childhood development over the next five years. Improved transition is a key priority area within the Blueprint, and relates to the goal that "By the time Victorian children start school they will be ready to learn at school and schools will be ready for them" (p. 15).

Description of the Transition: A Positive Start to School Project

The *Transition: A Positive Start to School* project is an initiative of the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD). The project was implemented in response to the Victorian government's

decision to introduce transition statements for all children entering primary school by the end of 2009. In February 2008, the Victorian Premier, John Brumby, announced in a media release that:

"...new transition statements – also an Australian first – would track a child's development and interests before starting school, as well as noting learning difficulties, disabilities or developmental delays to help schools plan individual support programs. This will be a significant help to prep teachers and to parents, who can ensure they are providing the right support for the child's learning and development at home and in the classroom." (Office of the Premier, February 5, 2008)

These new 'transition statements' will be closely aligned to the Victorian Early Learning and Development Framework for children from birth to eight years. This framework describes how children learn and develop and is currently being finalised by the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority in conjunction with the Office of Children and Portfolio Coordination¹.

To inform government policy in this area and expand the local evidence base on what works in supporting children's transition to school, 30 pilots were funded through the *Transition: A Positive Start to School* project. The pilots were allocated up to \$15 000 to trial, or extend, a variety of transition statements, practices and approaches in a diverse range of Victorian communities. The pilots ran from October 2008 to May 2009. Findings from the external evaluation of these pilots form the basis of this report.

The *Transition: A Positive Start to School* project also draws on a range of additional evidence, including: a literature review undertaken by The University of Melbourne's Centre for Equity and Innovation in Early Childhood; focus groups with parents to elicit their views on early learning and transition; input from two advisory groups (a project advisory group and practitioners' reference group); and broad consultations with the sector through regional forums, a pilot symposium and pilot showcase event².

¹ See <http://www.vcaa.vic.edu.au/earlyyears/> for more information on the Victorian Early Learning and Development Framework (ELDF 0-8) (last accessed 29 June, 2009).

² For more information see the *Transition: A Positive Start to School Initiative* website <http://www.education.vic.gov.au/earlylearning/transitionschool/transitionproject/default.htm> (last accessed 29 June, 2009).

Evaluating the Transition to School Pilots

The Centre for Program Evaluation at The University of Melbourne was commissioned by the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) to conduct an independent evaluation of 30 pilots funded through the *Transition: A Positive Start to School* project. The evaluation commenced in December 2008 and concluded in June 2009.

Aims of the evaluation

The overarching goal of the evaluation was to 'recommend what is needed for successful, state-wide implementation of transition statements and processes...across early childhood education and care services and schools in Victoria' (Request for Quote, 2008, p. 5). More specifically, the aims of the evaluation were as follows:

1. To document and examine a range of perceptions and experiences relating to the design, implementation and effectiveness of transition statements and practices;
2. To identify promising practice ideas and lessons learnt from the 30 transition to school pilots (i.e. what has worked well, not so well and why); and
3. To assist the DEECD to utilise evaluative information to inform and support state-wide implementation of transition statements and promising practices.

Evaluation approach

The evaluation was guided by a 'realist'³ approach to understanding what it is about the transition pilots that work to generate desired outcomes for children, families, educators and the broader community (Mark, Henry & Julnes, 2000; Pawson & Tilley, 1997). Realist evaluation is more commonly seen as a cousin of theory-driven/logic model approaches to evaluating *how* and *why* programs work (see Chen, 1990; Weiss, 1997).

³ Realist evaluation is based on a methodological approach that is grounded in the emerging critical realist philosophy of science and social science (see for example Bhaskar, 1975, 1979; Harre, 1972; Manicas, 2006; Sayer, 2000).

Realist and theory-driven approaches argue that programs *are* theories. That is, all programs are based on some sort of 'if/then' hypothesis which asserts that 'If we deliver a program in this way, then it will generate these kinds of desired outcomes' (Pawson, 2006). Often these 'theories' are never made explicit by program designers and staff. This can be problematic, because if a program is based on a faulty theory of change then it will not bring about desired outcomes no matter how well it is implemented.

This is one of the reasons why it was important to unpack the assumptions behind the transition pilots. Building knowledge about how and why the various transition pilots 'worked' (or failed to work) was also critical for informing government policy and replication of promising transition practices across different contexts.

Evaluation methodology

To address the aims of the evaluation, qualitative data collection methods were utilised. Information was combined and integrated from the following sources of data:

- Examination of policy documents and organisational materials relating to transition, including: (a) consultations with policy architects (n=7) to provide further background and contextual information about transition policy reform efforts; and (b) documents from the transition pilots (e.g. submission for funding, progress reports and final evaluation reports);
- Identification and analysis of relevant social science literature relating to school transition broadly, as well as evaluative evidence on transition initiatives implemented nationally and internationally;
- Semi-structured interviews of up to one-hour duration with representatives from 29 of the 30 transition pilots (n=53). These were designed to collect feedback about: (a) understandings of school transition; (b) background and context of the pilot; (c) key components and activities of the pilot; (d) perceptions of key implementation challenges; (e) views about benefits for children families, educators and other stakeholders who participated in the pilot; and (f) promising practice ideas and ways to sustain transition activities; and
- Participant observation and informal interaction with transition pilot representatives, early childhood professionals, school staff, early intervention services, and local government at regional and state-wide forums organised by the DEECD.

The University of Melbourne, Graduate School of Education Human Research Ethics Committee, the Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, Education Policy and Research Division and the Catholic Education Office approved the research components of the evaluation.

A note on data analysis and theory-building

Analysis of qualitative data was ongoing during data collection, with regular feedback and discussion meetings between members of the evaluation team. To facilitate researcher coding and the generation of recurrent themes a range of different approaches for qualitative data analysis were used such as matrix displays, content analysis, and constant/comparative analytic induction (Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Quotations (without attribution to specific individuals) are used, where appropriate, to add depth, richness and authenticity to the analysis contained in the report. A variety of techniques to enhance rigour in qualitative research were also incorporated including: method, theory and researcher triangulation, an assessment of rival explanations and divergent patterns, audit trails and peer debrief (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Patton, 2002; Wolcott, 2001).

Following Leeuw (2003) a combined 'policy/scientific' and 'stakeholder elicitation' method was employed to construct the theory of change model presented in this report. Section 4 of the report provides a detailed overview and discussion of this model, and advice on how it might be used to inform state-wide implementation of transition statements and promising transition practices.

The Transition to School Pilots: Perceptions, Experiences and Lessons Learnt

Context of program implementation

It is important to understand the nature and context in which the transition pilots were implemented. The transition pilots were not a single program enacted in 30 separate locations. Rather, they were 30 separate programs; each designed to address the distinctive characteristics and needs of local settings, while also addressing the broad guidelines set forth by the DEECD⁴.

The uniqueness of individual pilots was based largely on differences in the communities, early childhood agencies, schools, local agencies, and families participating in the pilots. This included variations in:

- The primary target population (i.e. all children, with a particular emphasis in some pilots on cultural and linguistic diversity, indigenous, disadvantage, disability etc);
- The geographic location of the pilot (i.e. rural, regional, metropolitan distinctions);
- The nature and key focus of transition activities (e.g. networks, transition statements, professional development, information for families etc); and
- The lead agency (e.g. schools, early childhood services, councils, and community organisations).

This diversity is important to understand because it influenced - in complex ways - the design and development of the pilots as well as delivery at the local level. While this diversity in implementation was clearly planned by DEECD to maximise the identification of promising transition practices (and most certainly encouraged local innovation and

⁴ For example, the DEECD expression of interest to participate in the pilot project specifies the importance of: (a) having a clearly identified target population; (b) meeting the diverse needs of children/families; (c) working in collaboration; (d) innovation and information sharing; and (d) a sound project methodology, including processes to evaluate achievements. Also, the selection of pilots was designed to ensure there would be representation from across all DEECD regions.

adaptation) it presented some challenges for cross-case comparison of pilots.

What follows is an attempt to bring together the varied findings from the transition pilots⁵. Overall, the program implementation data, based on our review of pilot documentation and interviews with representatives of the pilots, support the identification of several broad themes, or categories of common issues. Briefly these were:

1. Views about school transition;
2. Implementation challenges;
3. Factors relating to successful implementation; and
4. The benefits of positive school transitions.

When interpreting these results it is important to be mindful of the problems and limitations in generalising findings from case-study evaluations, and the usual precautions apply here as well. It is worth noting, though, that there is considerable theoretical and empirical support in the broader literature on school transition for many of the findings we discuss below. While a detailed review of the research is outside the scope of this report, interested readers are encouraged to consult the literature review undertaken for the *Transition: A Positive Start to School* project by the Centre for Equity and Innovation in Early Childhood (CEIEC) at The University of Melbourne.

Views about school transition

During the preliminary stage of the interview, we asked representatives from the pilots to describe what the concept of 'school transition' meant to them, and their project. Part of the reason behind asking this question was to build rapport before launching into more specific questions about the experience of implementing the pilot.

Importantly though, we were also acutely aware that 'school transition' often means different things to different people. Furthermore, the term is sometimes used interchangeably with concepts such as 'school readiness' or 'orientation to school'. While differences in interpretation might be brushed aside as semantics, it is clear from the experience of the pilots that meanings and understandings often matter for practice.

⁵ A brief individual profile of each of the 30 transition pilots is available on the DEECD website <http://www.education.vic.gov.au/earlylearning/transitionschool/transitionproject/pilot.htm> (last accessed 23 June 2009)

As the following selection of quotations illustrate, many representatives of the transition pilots appear to be aware (and are often intimately familiar) with the knowledge and research base on school transition:

Transition is a process rather than an event...it is about building relationships between all stakeholders – children, their family, educators and the community [S6⁶].

Transitioning can be a positive or negative experience. Children's first experiences of school and their attitudes to school can greatly affect their further learning outcomes, and their cognitive, social and emotional development [CA3].

And

Transition is about supporting a child so that when they enter school they can say: "I am in a place where I am valued, where I am comfortable and ready to learn"...it should not be about focussing on a child's deficits, but working with their strengths [CA8].

We can see in these remarks an indication that many pilots have been strongly influenced by current thinking, which views transition as an interactive process involving the development of positive relationships between children, families, educators and the community. Briefly, this 'ecological' view of transition recognises that interactions between different contexts (e.g. children, family, school, and community) affect transition experiences in both positive and negative ways. This stands in contrast to what are sometimes referred to as 'narrower' views of transition, where the primary goal is to ensure that children are ready or prepared for school by teaching them specific knowledge and skills (see Dockett & Perry, 2007).

With few exceptions, it appears that transition pilots have embraced the broader, ecological perspective on transition (notwithstanding variations in how they translated the knowledge and research into practice). As we will see next, this raised some challenges for the pilots who came up against prevailing orthodoxies which tend to maintain a narrower conception of school transition.

⁶ To establish rigour in analysis as well as protect participant anonymity we developed an alpha-numeric coding framework (i.e. audit trail) for the interview data. We organised quotes into three categories based on the lead pilot agency (S = school; LG = local government; and CA = community agency). In total there were 11 schools, 6 local government agencies and 13 community agencies involved in the study.

Implementation challenges

The process of implementing transition pilots was not static, nor was it determined solely by strict adherence to initial plans and designs. Rather, implementation was an emergent and dynamic process through which initial plans were modified to accommodate changes in the internal and external operating environment. This was particularly the case for pilots undertaking work in the area of transition to school for the first time. For these pilots and their stakeholders, the process of implementation was very much about growing and moving forward by learning from mistakes and building on experience.

In this context, implementation barriers might be viewed as an inherent (and perhaps necessary) feature of the learning process in developing and sustaining local transition programs. Indeed, transition pilots that had used DEECD funding to build on existing transition work were often reflective during interviews, noting that different barriers emerged over the life of implementation. During, the early start-up phase of implementation there were specific challenges associated with raising awareness about transition, designing programs, addressing staffing and resource allocation issues and establishing effective partnerships. As implementation progresses, new challenges arise such as maintaining and strengthening the initiative, consolidating knowledge about what works well and why and fostering sustainability.⁷

Below we outline some of the main 'early-start up' challenges to implementation that were identified by representatives of the pilots. These obstacles interacted, and contributed significantly to the variation in implementation quality that was evident across the transition pilots.

Short-time frames

Implementation of the transition pilots occurred over an 8-month time frame (October 2008 to May 2009). There was very strong agreement among pilot participants that this time period was far too short, and was seen to have placed unrealistic expectations on staff. As one pilot representative noted:

The main challenge has been the time frame. It has been an absolute rush to implement the pilot...we have managed by working extra hours and with a lot of stress for everyone [S10].

Additionally, the timing of implementation was problematic because it coincided with the Christmas break and this "is one of the busiest times for schools as you are finishing off one year and deep into planning for

⁷ See also similarities to findings from the United States Head Start/Public School Report on the National Early Childhood Demonstration Study (Ramey et al., 2000).

the next year" [S6]. As the following quote illustrates, the timing of funding led to problems for project planning and engaging stakeholders such as teachers, early childhood educators and families:

...it made it hard to target and recruit appropriate families and then we had to try to run the pilot across the Christmas holidays to get them ready for the start of their prep year in 2009 [CA3].

And

We would certainly have been able to achieve more if it wasn't for the time constraints...it was very hard to get the teachers to come to the PD [professional development] sessions we ran [LG3].

Importantly though, many of the pilot representatives felt that the 8-months of work undertaken as part of the pilot helped to both extend their existing work around transition as well as lay the foundations for improving school transition in the future. The vast majority of pilots also expressed a strong desire to continue their work, and many had plans in place to enable this to happen. As one pilot representative affirmed - "The real work is just starting as the pilot is finishing!" [S2].

Having said this, several pilot representatives did convey concerns that without further funding it would be difficult to continue, and consequently were worried about how they might sustain their pilot beyond the initial funding period.

Cross-sector service co-ordination and philosophical differences

Pilot representatives felt that although there is a common overall vision between early childhood educators and school staff, historically, these two sectors largely appear to have operated as 'silos'. As a consequence, many transition pilots bravely attempted to implement activities that were dependent for their success on the presence of strong collaborations which did not actually exist. Lack of cross-sector integration proved to be a major obstacle for many pilots and appears to have substantially impacted on the degree and quality of implementation.

Additionally, while pilots acknowledged the work of national, state and local governments, who in recent years have embraced the need for a more integrated early childhood education system, several felt that lingering philosophical differences have the potential to hinder effective collaboration between early childhood settings and schools. As one interviewee commented:

There is a lack of common educational philosophies and mutual respect between staff in early childhood services settings and schools. This gets in the way of us being able to resolve and

understand the various issues which confront each setting in the transition process [CA11].

A key area of tension was a perceived difference between the 'child-centred' early childhood approach and the 'curriculum-centred' school approach' [LG6]. Early childhood professionals spoke about placing priority on child 'agency'⁸ through play-based pedagogy and encouraging choice of learning experience. Schools were seen to focus more on the importance of curriculum and academic learning, particularly in an environment of increasing emphasis on accountability and outcome-focused education. Relatedly, there was also a perception among some pilots that an unhealthy 'push-down' of academic curriculum to early childhood settings was occurring and this meant that "prep teachers are under a lot of pressure to reach their literacy and numeracy benchmarks" [CA11].

There is some support for these views in the academic and research literature, with commentators noting that early years professionals and school teachers often operate from different pedagogical frameworks (Tayler, 2006). It is not surprising then that several interviewees were effusive about the need to 'promote communication and common understanding between early childhood services and schools...to become more familiar with each other's practice and break down any misconceptions about what happens at school and vice versa' [S3].

Workload commitments

Across most sites where transition pilots were implemented, workload commitments were raised as an issue of great concern. Interviewees explained that although the involvement of early childhood educators and prep teachers was often critical for success, these stakeholders were invariably hard to engage because of high workloads and competing demands.

In many schools for example, professional development calendars are often booked well in advance and currently emphasise the importance of school leadership and accountability. Involving teachers in pilots was generally much easier when the principal was supportive of transition, or where decision-making processes were less bureaucratized and devolved to staff. This allowed for direct access to prep teachers who were often very keen to attend meetings and forge relationships with early childhood educators and professionals.

In many early childhood settings, similar issues were identified. Pilots provided many examples of the difficulties associated with engaging

⁸ This term implies that children have the capacity to create, change and influence their social environment as well as make purposeful choices about their education, learning and development.

early childhood educators and in particular those who worked for commercial providers. This was often despite the offer of financial incentives, such as resources for time release. While it is important to acknowledge then, the affect that workload pressures have on involvement in transition initiatives, the historic context, structure and philosophy of schools and early childhood settings also appear to have had a substantial impact on the implementation of pilots.

Involving children and families

Pilots emphasised the need to involve children and families in the process of transition. Pilot representatives stressed that early childhood educators and teachers should not assume that their experiences and understandings of what is important about transition will necessarily reflect the concerns of children and families. As such, there was consensus around the importance of building respectful relationships with families and ensuring that their views and perspectives are included, valued and acted upon. As one interviewee stressed - family involvement is critical otherwise "transition becomes the business of professionals only" [CA10].

Although these principles were supported widely, pilots often described difficulties associated with encouraging and strengthening family involvement in transition activities (specifically) and education more broadly. As one pilot representative explained:

Encouraging parents to participate in the life of the kindergarten or school is a real challenge. We held a parent forum last week and few families were able to come along. Many of them said that they were either working or had to look after their children and therefore could not attend. We have tried holding activities at different times of the day and night but there are always families that would not turn up [S5].

Barriers to participation are complex, and were seen to result from the unique characteristics of the child, their families, and their life circumstances, as well as problems with accessibility and inclusiveness of early childhood services and schools. Some of the main barriers identified by pilot representatives included:

- Location and transport difficulties which often make it hard for families to attend programs and services;
- Some families not seeing transition as important;
- Perceived stigma of attending program and services, such as those formally labelled as 'parenting skills';

- School environments not seen as warm, welcoming and family-friendly; and
- The costs of childcare can prohibit some families from leaving home to attend events, programs and services.

As a corollary of these barriers, there was also a strong view that tailored (and more intensive) transition supports were required for 'hard to reach' families and those that are particularly vulnerable to experiencing negative school transitions. Groups that were identified included: children with additional needs (e.g. Autism, developmental delays); children from indigenous backgrounds; children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds; non-literate families; low socio-economic background families; and children who had little or no experience of early childhood settings prior to commencing school.

Many of the pilots were very aware of these barriers and worked hard to address them, albeit within the short-time frame and resource constraints of the pilot. For example: by holding community events and offering free social activities; hiring a bus to transport families; using interpreters and liaison workers; translating written materials; involving allied health workers (e.g. speech therapists); talking to community leaders about the best way to involve newly arrived migrant families; home visits; and making schools more family-friendly by offering parent workshops which are culturally, socially and educationally appropriate.

For many of the transition pilots, addressing participation barriers and engaging 'hard to reach' families' was initially quite daunting. However, pilot representatives were optimistic, saying that it takes time to build relationships, understand what works in your community and develop trust. Pilots explained that they had learnt a lot over the initial 8-month implementation period and were confident they could build on the experience to improve the way they engage families and respond to their needs in the future. The move towards 'community-oriented schools' was seen to be critical in providing a supportive context for improving experiences of transition. School entrants are not a homogenous group, and many interviewees argued firmly that there needs to be greater recognition of the reality of diversity in children, families and communities.

Factors relating to successful implementation

This section presents further insights about the process of designing and delivering transition activities and programs. In particular, evidence from the transition pilots is drawn upon to identify a range of factors that were thought to contribute to successful implementation. While it is important to remember that implementation approaches will vary in response to local needs, the experience of the pilots suggest that the

following pre-conditions and factors are likely to affect successful implementation:

- Broad-based and collaborative networks and partnerships;
- Strong leadership and the presence of program champions;
- Systematic local planning and evaluation;
- Professional development opportunities; and
- Sustainability planning (e.g. transition activities are linked/embedded within broader school and early years policy and strategic planning cycles).

Each of these five pre-conditions and factors relating to successful implementation are described in more detail below.

Working collaboratively through local networks and partnerships

In many instances, the implementation of transition pilots was significantly helped by the presence of pre-existing early years and/or transition networks. In several pilots, pre-existing partnerships and networks (or their representatives/members) applied for the DEECD funding to build on work they were already doing with families and children in birth to eight years cohort.

Notable early years initiatives which pre-dated and prompted the pilot applications included: Best Start, Communities for Children, Linking Schools and Early Years Project and local government Municipal Early Years Plans⁹. Pilot representatives often attested to the importance of tapping into these existing networks. For example:

Because we have had C4C [Communities for Children] in the area there were lots of examples of networking and relationship building going on [CA8].

And, similarly

I can imagine that if we hadn't already been having these conversations [via the networks] it would have been extremely difficult to get the pilot going [S9].

⁹ Specific details about these initiatives can be accessed easily via the internet. Other initiatives in which pilot partners drew upon were: the Royal Children's Hospital Centre for Community Child Health (several publications circulating as policy briefs: Rethinking the transition to school: Linking schools and early years services; and Rethinking School Readiness); Australian Early Development Index (AEDI); and HIPPO (Home Interactive Program for Parents and Youngsters – Brotherhood of St Laurence). Again, information about these initiatives is publicly available on the internet.

When schools, kindergartens and early childhood services had pre-existing relationships and/or were located in close proximity this often facilitated implementation (e.g. primary schools with kindergartens located on-site). Co-location of kindergartens, early childhood services and schools does not; however, appear to be common at this stage in Victoria. In several of the pilot projects, the activities delivered constituted the first time that staff across the early childhood settings and schools had worked together.

In this context it is not unusual or surprising for pilots just beginning to develop interagency links to experience difficulties. Indeed, several pilot representatives who were in this situation reported feeling frustrated at the difficulty of engaging stakeholders, forging relationships and developing lines of communication. Despite a strong natural affiliation across partner agencies (i.e. 'we are all working for the same reason – to provide what is best for families and children' [S2]) it was reported to be difficult to encourage some organisations to become involved, especially when senior management did not see value in releasing their staff for transition-related activities.

The advice about what works for those just getting started on the development of transition networks included the importance of being patient, taking a personalised approach and recognising that individuals and agencies are often at different stages in terms of their understanding of transition and readiness to adopt new strategies. More generally, there was agreement about the need to:

- Foster shared understandings and reach agreement on values and goals;
- Develop a broad-based network that includes a variety of agencies (i.e. not just schools and early childhood services, but families, community agencies, maternal and child health care services etc);
- Prepare local action plans and monitor and evaluate the implementation of these plans; and
- Find ways to sustain innovative programs beyond the initial funding period.

Issues associated with governance and decision-making processes in transition networks were also mentioned frequently. It was widely held that power should be equally distributed and balanced among partners (e.g. while a lead agency is often important, decision making should not rest solely with one agency/person). This was seen to be important for building trust as well as authentic and respectful relationships towards each other. As one person noted in the context of discussing philosophical differences between early childhood educators and school teachers:

'There is a bit of 'them' and 'us' and it will take a while to break-down - before we can really support families we need to learn more about each other first [CA12].

In many pilots, local government was often seen to be ideally placed to lead the development and maintenance of transition networks, although many also felt that DEECD was now well positioned to take a more active role at the regional level.

Leadership and the presence of program champions

According to pilots, successful implementation requires strong leadership and key personnel - often called program champions – to co-ordinate and manage day-to-day delivery of transition activities and programs. As one person pronounced: "I am the key person who makes sure things happen. If we didn't have a co-ordinator, then nothing would happen!" [S3].

Program champions were described as the drivers behind transition innovations and are important for fostering communication, addressing philosophic conflicts underlying early years pedagogy, supporting stakeholder engagement, establishing partnerships, and dealing with administrative, staffing and resourcing issues.

The following comment highlights how important a highly committed, knowledgeable and credible champion(s) can be for ensuring implementation success:

There were difficulties around the level of support within the school at the beginning and [name of program champion] had to work hard to persuade the school that the project was needed. With his belief, knowledge and background in the fundamentals of early learning he was able to drive the pilot and get over any misperceptions that it is just about playing games (referring here to play-based learning) [S3].

Pilots reported that it was often advantageous when program champions were located within key implementing agencies, such as schools or kindergartens. This provided a supportive organisational context for transition activities. In these cases, the champion might also be a charismatic leader, such as a principal or vice-principal who has sufficient authority to access resources and administrative support to ensure that new activities are embraced (e.g. funding for staff time release).

Alternatively, it was also felt that in many circumstances it was better when the program champion was an 'outsider' (e.g. from local government or a community agency). This helped to alleviate concerns about perceived conflict of interest and power imbalance, such as

schools or kindergartens dominating decision-making to pursue their own agendas and/or boosting enrolment numbers.

Local planning and evaluation

Systematic planning was consistently reported to provide a strong foundation for implementing transition pilots. Indeed, it is hard to imagine how many of the pilots would have been able to deliver any activities within the short-time frame had they not already been working on transition prior to the announcement of funding. In some cases there had been years of planning work, and the DEECD funding provided the impetus to enact specific plans already in place (e.g. to implement a 'proven' program model or to trial and adapt transition resources and information in different contexts).

When this was not the case, the delivery of transition activities appeared to be more challenging, as a lot of work was required first to prepare the foundations for successful implementation. These pre-conditions have been noted earlier and include, for example, the development of strong local networks and collaborations, shared understandings, dealing with early-start up problems such as logistical and administrative issues, promoting the program, recruiting participants, and hiring staff.

Another way of putting this is that it is difficult to successfully deliver transition activities unless you have carefully planned and prepared for likely implementation challenges. As one pilot representative explained:

The schools and their communities can't put transition structures in place until they get the dialogue going. At the local level, people need to explore ideas, talk together and then decide what will work best for their community (S7).

It was also seen as critically important for local transition planning to have a strong conceptual and empirical base. An essential first step for many pilot projects was to conduct front-end evaluation, such as a local needs assessment (and indeed this was typically what many pilots were actually doing, even though this might not have been explicitly understood in this way). So, it was common to hear that pilots had been consulting with stakeholders, surveying families to better understand their needs, examining Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) or Australian Early Development Index (AEDI) data, and researching and compiling literature on 'what works' in transition.

Understanding salient features of the local context, so that activities delivered match the needs of the community, is a logical first step prior to implementing any new initiative. An initial needs assessment often helped to ensure that work undertaken by transition pilots was more readily accepted by key players and, importantly, was responsive to the needs of local children, families and educators.

Professional development opportunities

The provision of opportunities to participate in a range of information-sharing and professional development activities was also seen as an important factor in successful implementation. Interestingly, the benefits of professional development were more frequently expressed in terms of “networking” rather than the acquisition of new knowledge and skills about early years and school transition. Indeed, what pilots often referred to as professional development (PD) is perhaps better understood as a seminar or information session, rather than a comprehensive training package.

Indeed, participant reactions to joint ‘PD sessions’ that were provided in the pilots’ final evaluation reports suggest that one of the reasons why PD was important for effective implementation was that it brought together professionals from across the early childhood and school sector that would otherwise not have had the chance to meet, network and learn about each others services, practices and educational pedagogies.

Often pilots would employ a high-profile, enthusiastic and knowledgeable speaker/expert in the area, which was seen to be helpful in encouraging PD attendance as well as promoting the work of their transition pilot in the local community. Some examples of the kinds of professional learning activities that were delivered by pilots include:

- Multi-dimensional lay-based approaches and the importance of early brain development;
- Issues and perspectives around school transition/readiness (e.g. what the research tells us, the importance of taking an ecological approach etc)
- Developing and sharing transition statements/information as well as planning common orientation days;
- Exploring and learning about innovative ways to engage ‘hard to reach’ and vulnerable families; and
- Working with children who have additional needs (e.g. Autism Spectrum Disorders).

Professional training and development activities were often delivered alongside additional opportunities for reciprocal visits between staff in early childhood and school settings. This enabled professionals to learn more about each others environments and plan strategies for better linkages between their services. There was a common view that funding for staff time release was critically important for enabling joint learning to occur and that organising professional development was often more difficult in rural areas. This was due to a lack of staff backfill in rural

areas and the higher costs associated with guest speakers' travel and accommodation expenses. Typically, pilots noted that a key benefit of providing joint professional development and regular meetings was that it helped to increase understanding of each others educational approaches and the philosophies underpinning these.

Linking transition to school and early years policy planning

In simple terms, sustainability refers to the capacity of a transition to school program to continue to deliver desired outcomes to children, families and educators. Sustainability was a common issue for many pilot representatives. There was some evidence to suggest that transition initiatives are more likely to be successfully implemented, and sustained, if they are embedded within broader strategic/organisational planning processes (in the sustainability literature this is often referred to as 'routinisation'¹⁰).

For example, several pilots mentioned the importance of linking their work to school strategic plans, kindergarten cluster management plans, and municipal early years plans. This helped to ensure that transition stayed on the policy agenda, and increased the likelihood that sources of ongoing funding are made available as a line item in administrative budgets. As one person affirmed:

These types of programs are very vulnerable to funding cutbacks, particularly in schools that don't value transition programs. They need to be embedded into the school's overall program delivery and should be seen as a necessary part of the school program [S3].

Pilot representatives explained that enabling this to happen was not easy though, particularly in the current socio-political context of schooling where competing policy priorities often appear to take precedence over school transition and community relationship building (e.g. the emphasis on school leadership/coaching, accountability and transparency, benchmarking etc).

It was also reported that some key players in schools remain unconvinced that investing more in transition (i.e. beyond what is already done in terms of orientation) is worthwhile, and would like to see the 'hard data' first. Pilot representatives felt that further integration of transition into schools and early childhood services would require strong and consistent messages from DEECD, backed up by further funding to ensure widespread implementation. Otherwise 'it will remain

¹⁰ See for example Elsworth and Astbury (2005). Available at http://www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/~media/ResourceCentre/PublicationsandResources/healthy%20eating/Food_Insecurity_Circle%20Evaluation.ashx (last accessed 23 June 2009).

largely dependent on the passion and commitment of individuals' [CA13].

Some further insights into the various ways of enhancing the sustainability of transition programs and processes were also provided by pilot representatives. Some of the key factors included:

- Building community support for the program, which is often achieved by developing and maintaining a diverse and effective range of networks and partnerships;
- Having a clear conceptual model detailing what you are doing in the program, why and to what effect (e.g. a program logic model);
- Regularly monitoring and evaluating the project;
- Broad-based marketing and promotion of the project and its achievements;
- A diverse funding base (i.e. not relying on a single source of funding);
- Ensuring a close philosophical 'fit' between the project and the organisational context in which it operates; and
- Strong champions of the program and effective leadership.

Benefits of positive school transitions

While it is too early to evaluate the outcomes and longer-term impact of the transition to school pilots, representatives were able to report a variety of initial benefits, which they linked to the transition activities delivered through their pilots. The emerging effects identified by pilot representatives during interviews, and end of project evaluation documents, appear to be consistent with the 'kinds' of short-term outcomes described in the transition research and evaluation literature.

This suggests that although the evidence-base is limited and fragmentary, many pilots appear to be making positive progress towards desired intermediate and longer-term outcomes (such as improving children's educational achievements). For example, pilots provided considerable anecdotal evidence to demonstrate that new transition activities were helping to reduce children's anxiety, and facilitate adjustment to the school environment. These early indicators are promising as longitudinal research suggests that positive childhood transition experiences often help to set in motion a 'virtuous cycle' of educational achievement (Fabian & Dunlop, 2007).

The main perceived benefits that emerged from the experience of the pilots are discussed below from the perspective of children, families and educators. It is important to recognise the interconnectedness of benefits within an ecological model of transition (c.f. Bronfenbrenner, 1979). That is to say, benefits for each group are not necessarily independent, and are likely to interact in complex ways. For example, if early childhood educators and teachers work together to develop stronger relationships with families who are starting school, then families may express more positive attitudes towards education. In turn, some families might, for example, take a more active role in promoting learning at home. As a result, their children are likely to also develop positive feelings about school. Ultimately, this chain of positive effects may lead to improvements in a child's life-long learning and development.

For children

Benefits of improved transition practices for children, as reported by pilots, typically focused on the child's initial adjustment to the school environment as well as attitudes and feelings about school and learning in general. It was often noted, for example, that a reduction in the level of separation anxiety was a good indicator that transition programs assisted school entrants to adapt to the structure and culture of the school setting. A prep teacher in one pilot explained that the play-group session they ran had helped children to develop a sense of familiarity with the school context (particularly the new routines and teaching staff). She conveyed the following illustrative vignette:

There was a little boy who hid behind his mother when he came to the three day (play-group) sessions or when he came with his mother to collect his older sisters. He was so quiet that we were not sure if he could speak. He has turned from being a shy little boy to being very confident and outgoing and able to approach teachers. He has just blossomed this year. If he had started school this year without our three-day program, he would have been overwhelmed [CA5].

Other pilots provided similar stories and often drew comparisons to past student cohorts as evidence that the transition pilot had made a difference to how children felt about school. For example, one teacher described that 'in the past we would have seen many children and parents upset and behaviour problems throughout the year, this year only one child cried and they have all settled much more quickly' [S8].

Several pilots, particularly those associated with early childhood intervention services, described how improved communication between schools and local services had facilitated the early identification of developmental delays in children starting school (e.g. Autism Spectrum Disorders). This helped to smooth the transition process because schools

had sufficient lead time to prepare and process applications for additional funding and support (e.g. for speech pathologists)¹¹.

It is not possible to predict at this stage whether reported improvements in initial adjustment to school and more favourable attitudes to learning will necessarily translate into continued growth in children's social, emotional and academic development. However, as one pilot representative explained:

Children are at school for such a long time and if that first experience of school is a positive one, we know it sticks with them and gives them a very different outlook on school [CA9].

There is good evidence, also, from the research literature that these 'early markers' of successful transition are linked to positive educational outcomes in the longer-term (Ramey et al., 2000).

For families

The most common reported benefit for families was a perceived improvement in their relationship with early childhood and teaching staff as well as a greater overall understanding of what happens in early child services and school. This was seen to be important because it was felt that increased family engagement and involvement in education is linked to improved academic outcomes for children (an assumption strongly supported by empirical evidence). One prep teacher highlighted, for example, that the preparation of transition statements had encouraged families to become more involved in the life of the school and that 'parents now feel they are empowered' [S10], while a kindergarten teacher noted that several parents had reported that 'they were glad to know how their child was going and what they were learning at kinder so that they could reinforce these learning's at home' [S5].

In one pilot the school ran parent sessions alongside playgroups for children. This gave families a chance to find out about the school, to have their questions answered and get to know other parents. This reportedly helped to smooth the transition for families and 'led to new friendship groups, acted as a self-support group and eased a lot of their anxieties about how their children would cope with starting school' [CA5]. Additionally, it was mentioned that 'if they [parents] continue to network well, then they are more likely to stay connected to the school for many years to come' [S8]. The program was seen to be particularly successfully for parents of children with additional needs because 'they

¹¹ There was a strong view, expressed on many occasions during interviews and at regional forums, that funding arrangements for children with additional needs often 'broke-down' during the transition from early childhood services to schools. This led to a lack of continuity of care and support.

often find it very difficult to let go of their child, as they have been, in most cases, the fulltime primary caregiver and are very protective of their children' [S8].

Additional examples of the positive benefits of pilots were reported for culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) families. Some pilots had developed tailored approaches to working with CALD and newly-arrived migrant families. For example, one pilot employed a native language-speaking liaison officer. This person was able to successfully engage CALD families and newly-arrived migrant groups by, for example, running culturally appropriate events on the school site, talking to community leaders, and translating school newsletters. These strategies helped CALD families to feel welcome in the school and promoted understanding of Australian approaches to education.

Several teachers also frequently noted that in the past they started talking with the families when the school year commenced. As a result of the pilot they were able to visit early childhood services and kindergartens to meet the new children and interact with parents. They now realised the importance of genuine engagement with families in their prior-to-school settings. The extra time taken to get to know families helped to forge stronger relationships with families and individualise the transition process for children.

For educators

Several of the pilots reported positive affects on levels of inter-agency collaboration, particularly between early childhood services and school staff. Many described, for instance, how their pilot had 'brought the different sectors in early childhood education together for the first time [and that] it was inspiring to hear people talking about the need for common understandings and to work together' [S6]. Similarly, another pilot enthusiastically concluded that: "Relationships are the biggest outcomes for this project. Staff from across the sector have never met each other before! [CA12].

Greater co-operation between sectors and enhanced linkages among agencies was often reported to have helped raised awareness about the importance of transition as well as strengthen local networks. One prep teacher indicated that as a result of the pilot their transition network had grown from a small group of schools and kindergartens into "a much bigger network including many of the smaller out-of-town schools and hopefully soon the private childcare centres [S2]. And, another commented that the pilot funding had allowed them to expand their network and 'raise the profile of transition so that now more people in and outside the school are aware of the need for a quality early years transition plan [S10].

Moreover, the implementation of the pilots provided the opportunity (e.g. time and resources) and impetus for educators to come together, often for the first time, to engage in professional dialogue. This coming together of staff from early childhood services and schools helped to improved trust, respect and understanding of each others educational pedagogies and practices. This was seen, in several pilots, to have led to greater acceptance and use of developmentally appropriate practices in the classroom. For example:

The exciting change has been the amazing shift in the way the prep teachers at our school think about their pedagogy. They are wonderful teachers but prior to the pilot, they were not challenging their own practices...they are working together much more as a team, and thinking more about the overall process of transition and how the voice of the child can be heard in this process. We are now moving towards a great understanding of the importance of play-based learning and supporting transition and continuity of learning from kindergarten to prep [S6]

The direct impact on children entering school that followed from incorporating aspects of play-based learning into prep classrooms was espoused by a number of teachers:

The pilot had a huge impact on my teaching practice. I got the idea to organise my prep classroom similar to a kinder room and it was amazing to see how quickly the new prep children relaxed, settle and were so enthusiastic about their work [S2].

One of our teachers has gone holus bolus on implementing play-based curriculum this year [after attending professional development on this]. She said: "I thought I knew my kids, but now I really know them". And since putting it in place she reports that the kids are now much more engaged [S5].

Finally, some reported that as a result of the 'critical mass' created by pilots there was growing awareness among some schools that "orientation is not all there is to providing a smooth transition experience for children, particular those with additional needs" [S3]. The advice to other schools was that they should not be "trapped into thinking that what the school is doing in transition now is enough. The bare minimum is not acceptable. Families need a diverse range of transition strategies so that you get the maximum number of families involved in the life of the school from the beginning" [S3].

Spreading Good Ideas and Sustaining Promising Practices

The diffusion of innovation literature

Over four decades of research into the 'diffusion of innovations' suggest that many attempts to take pilot programs, demonstration initiatives, or promising reforms 'to scale' have met with disappointment (Rogers, 2003). In part this is probably because of misleading ideas about what 'going to scale' means, that have been perpetuated by an emphasis on the 'mass production of tangible products' rather than what is required to sustain social and educational interventions that are 'predominantly dependent on human operators, rather than technologies, for their implementation' (Elias, Zins, Graczyk & Weissberg, 2003, p. 304).

The concept of 'diffusion of innovations' grew out of the seminal work of Everett Rogers (1962) in the rural sociology tradition. Roger's work has helped generate a strong and growing body of empirical evidence on the attributes of successful innovations, the characteristics and behaviour of innovation 'adopters', and the interpersonal and communication processes that influence adoption decisions. Scholars and researchers have applied Roger's theory of diffusion to explain the spread of innovations in diverse fields and settings, such as: medicine; marketing; organisational behaviour; health promotion; and education (see for example, Greenhalgh, Robert, MacFarlane, Bate & Kyriakidou, 2004). These inter-disciplinary extensions have validated many of Roger's original ideas as we as shed new light on the complexity of diffusion and sustainability processes in human service and educational systems.

In this section of the report we draw selectively on Rogers (1962/2003), as well as more recent theoretical models of diffusion in service organisations, to inform the development of strategies for supporting the transfer of promising transition practices to other communities in Victoria.

Promising practice ideas

In the context of the *Transition: A Positive Start to School* Initiative, promising practices are defined as: strategies, programs, approaches or techniques designed to support positive transitions for children, families, educators and communities that are based typically on practitioner-

focused wisdom and research but are often not yet empirically 'validated' through systematic research and evaluation.

The identification of promising practices (as distinct from 'best' or 'evidence-based' practices) is part of a growing trend in social work, community development, family studies and early childhood education (Gray & McDonald, 2006). There is also some evidence in the research literature of efforts to identify promising transition to school practices (see for example, Einarsdottir, Perry & Dockett, 2008; Pianta, Cox, Taylor & Early, 1999; Rous 2008).

The promising practice movement has recently gained additional support among Australian governments through the national evaluation of the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy (2004-2009). Several research centres, government departments and community agencies are increasingly using 'Promising Practice Profiles' to share information about current good practice in the field¹². According to Soriano, Clark and Wise (2008) the information contained in promising practice profiles:

...reflects and honours the daily experiences of service providers [and] responds to a gap in accessible information about effective practices within the early childhood, community development and social service sectors (pp.2-3)

The transition pilots developed, trialled, or extended a very diverse range of approaches and techniques designed to improve the transition process for children who leave early childhood services and enter school. A total of ten "promising practices" were identified through the evaluation and are reported in Table 1 below¹³. A brief description of each practice is provided, along with information about how the practices might be usefully combined and implemented in different settings.

¹² For example, the Australian Institute of Families Studies and the Australian Centre for the Study of Sexual Assault manage a readily accessible database collection of promising practices that are promoted among key stakeholders in the field. This is available at <http://www.aifs.gov.au/cafca/ppp/ppp.html> (last accessed 15 June, 2009).

¹³ These promising practices were identified through analytical 'cross-case comparison' (Yin, 2003). This is a common procedure used in multiple case-study research designs to identify recurrent themes in qualitative data. While formal criteria to assess and weight evidence regarding these promising practices were not used (e.g. the scientific scales associated with the Campbell Collaboration) we applied trustworthiness checks on the data provided by the pilots (see Denzin and Lincoln, 2005) and also cross-checked practices with those identified in the empirical literature on transition to school (see especially, Einarsdottir et. al., 2008)

Table 1: Summary of commonly used transition to school practices

Practice idea	How it works	Why it works
Reciprocal visits - for children	Children attending early childhood services visit the primary school before school starts (e.g. in Term 4). Prep students may also go back to visit early childhood services. Visits may occur on multiple occasions and involve different types of activities.	Children who are familiar with the school environment, expectations, rules, people etc prior to commencing school are less likely to be anxious and will adjust more quickly. Prep students may gain a sense of self-confidence from attending early childhood services.
Reciprocal visits - for educators	Early childhood professionals and prep teachers regularly visit each others' environments to participate in meetings, joint teaching, transition planning etc.	On-going communication between educators improves professional relationships and contributes to curriculum/pedagogical refinements which will better support continuity of learning and transition. Teachers also get to know each child before they start school.
Transition statements and meetings	Written information about a child's learning and development is jointly prepared by early childhood professionals, families and the child and is passed on to the prep teacher.	Provides an opportunity for educators, families and children to talk and engage in meaningful conversations about transition needs/expectations. Helps prep teachers plan individualised support which incorporates the child and parent perspective.
Joint professional development	Training/information sessions or more formalised professional development between early childhood services and school teachers.	Helps to build trust, understanding and mutual respect between early childhood services and school teachers as well as an opportunity to learn more about successful transition and education practices.
Local transition networks	A diverse collection of individuals and agencies who share a common interest in improving school transition and outcomes for children and families generally.	Builds the capacity of local communities to design and deliver locally responsive transition to school programs. Enhances linkages between sectors and agencies and promotes service collaboration for the benefit of children and families.
Buddy programs	The use of peer-to-peer support strategies for children (and sometimes parents) to assist transition to school.	Children worry about losing their friendship groups when the move to primary school. Having a buddy may improve adjustment to school and educational engagement. Mixed views about whether the 'buddy' should be similar in age (e.g. prep/grade 1) or older (e.g. grade 5/6 student).
Family involvement	Broad-based, tailored strategies designed to encourage parents to become more actively involved in the early childhood services and/or school community (e.g. information sessions, open days, reading programs, social events etc).	Increased involvement of parents in education is linked to longer-term improvements in the social, emotional, physical and academic development of children.
Developmentally-appropriate learning	Often referred to as 'play-based learning'. Used widely in early childhood services and increasingly in schools.	Enhances continuity of learning experience between early childhood services and schools, which helps to smooth the transition for children.
Social story boards	Social story boards are documents which visually depict the nature and processes involved in transitioning to school in a way that is meaningful to the individual (e.g. photos of their prep teacher, school environment, how to get ready in the morning).	Helps to prepare children for school and relieves anxiety. Often used for children with Autism Spectrum Disorders, children who have not been to kindergarten etc who may be more likely to experience difficulties with the change from home to school environment.
Community-level transition timetable	An integrated plan describing common sequences of activities (often organised by school terms) that are designed to support transition. Also may include common orientation weeks, community events, etc.	Promotes awareness in the community of the importance of early years learning and school transition. Assists local agencies to co-ordinate and align services for the benefit of children and families.

Using the promising transition to school practices

Although we position the ten transition to school practices within the broader context of the promising practice movement, we are mindful that they have emerged from a small-scale review of pilots, and hence would benefit from more rigorous evaluation. As such, they should be seen as 'good ideas' rather than 'proven' practices that can be taken off the shelf and implemented in any context. Ideally, these practice ideas would also be located within a more integrated and holistic community transition strategy/program.¹⁴

It is commonly held that there is no 'one size fits all' approach to transition. However, this does not mean that practices which have worked well in one location will not be effective in another location. The important issue is that provisions are made to ensure practices fit local conditions. This is because successful transition outcomes are generally context-dependent. Establishing a transition network and working together in local partnerships is a good way to think about how promising practices and programs might be adapted to suit local needs.

In support of this process Gomm (2000) provides a useful framework to help determine whether promising transition to school practices that have been effective in one setting (Context A) would work in a different setting (Context B) (i.e. the 'would it work on my patch' question, see Pawson and Tilley, 2004). When thinking about the potential transferability of promising practices from Context A to Context B it is important to consider carefully:

- *The practice itself:* what exactly was involved in the practice, what are its component parts and salient features as currently used in Context A?
- *The resources:* what resources (e.g. time, staff, money, equipment, technology, space, infrastructure etc) were used to make the practice work in Context A?
- *The people:* what are the important characteristics of the key actors in Context A with respect to their levels of expertise, knowledge, experience, commitment and so on?
- *Institutional factors:* how was the success of the practice in Context A dependent on organisational cultures, inter-agency arrangements, other policy initiatives etc?

¹⁴ A more systematic attempt in the future might follow a similar process of assessment which led to the five 'school readiness' profiles available through the Australian Institute of Family Studies Promising Practice Profiles database. See <http://www.aifs.gov.au/cafca/topics/issue/issue.html#school> (last accessed 27 March, 2009).

- *Environmental factors*: how was the success of the practice in Context A dependent on political, legislative, community factors etc?
- *Outcomes*: what are the key outcomes, for whom, and how were they produced (see above bullet points)?

The experience of transition pilots also suggests that while learning from others is often helpful for generating new ideas and insights, it is more important to base local planning efforts on underlying evidence-based principles. It was common, for instance, to hear that pilots had found it valuable to draw upon guidelines and principles from the transition to school research literature (for instance the 10 guidelines developed through the Starting School Research Project¹⁵). Dockett and colleagues (2008) – who developed these underlying principles of successful transition – support the notion that principles are more amenable to replication across sites than specific transition practices or programs¹⁶:

Rather than replicating what happens in other transition to school programs, transition teams need to be encouraged to consider the underlying principle for particular actions and experiences and to work through how that principle can be enacted in their own location...while the specifics of programs may not be transferable, many of the general focus areas are. In other words, the same principles underpin successful programs, even if the specifics of the programs differ (p. 63).

A provisional theory of change model

This section articulates a provisional theory of change model for supporting state-wide implementation of promising transition practices (see Figure 1 below). The model draws on findings from the evaluation as well as insights from the diffusion of innovation literature. It offers a visual depiction of the hypothesised links between enabling activities and components of the state-wide implementation strategy and desired outcomes at three levels – children, families, and educators.

Explaining the model

The model should be read from left to right - starting with the three boxes aligned in the 'resources/inputs' column on the left. These three

¹⁵ These have been widely reported in the academic literature and are available, for example, at <http://ecrp.uiuc.edu/v3n2/dockett.html> (last accessed on 15 June, 2009)

¹⁶ Although Dockett and Perry's (2007) guidelines and principles for successful transition are derived from different methodological approaches, there are interesting parallels to the 'what works' experimental (meta-analysis) movement where the view that principles are transferable is also often maintained.

boxes identify– (1) appropriate leadership; (2) site readiness to change; and (3) the knowledge and research base - as salient features of the context which are needed to implement various 'enabling activities' while concurrently managing the introduction of promising practices (the two interconnected boxes in 'column 2' after the parentheses).

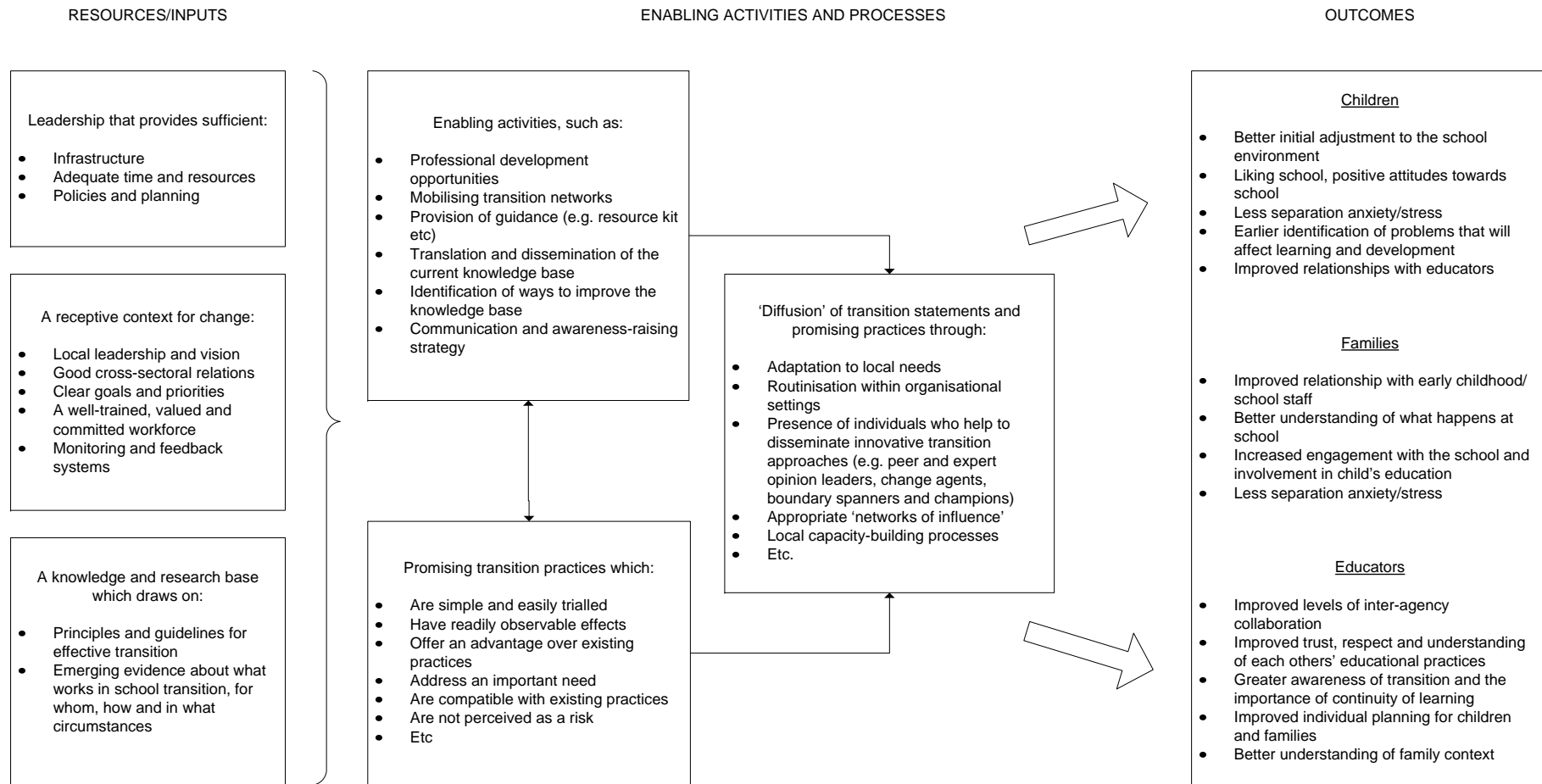
The third column identifies various processes through which 'diffusion' of promising practices are likely to occur. These include, for example: professional networks, local adaptation, peer and expert opinion leaders, change agents, boundary spanners, and the presence of local champions.

The last column lists outcomes at multiple levels. It is plausible that a range of positive benefits might logically flow as a result of more widespread dissemination and adoption of promising practices. The provisional theory of change model identifies three levels of outcomes. These include:

1. Outcomes for children;
2. Outcome for families; and
3. Outcomes for educators

The model also attempts to identify some indicative examples of the kinds of desired outcomes that increased adoption of promising practices hopes to achieve. There may of course be other levels of outcomes and/or unanticipated outcomes that are not identified in the provisional model.

Figure 1: A Provisional Theory of Change for Supporting State-Wide Implementation



**NB: Elements in boxes are indicative only

Conclusion and Implications

The final section of the report summarises main findings and identifies a range of issues that arise from this multiple case-study evaluation of transition to school pilots. In particular, we discuss: (1) implications for policy and implementation (e.g. state-wide roll-out of promising transition practices); (2) implications for transition planning and practice at the local level; and (3) implications for research and on-going monitoring and evaluation.

Implications for policy and implementation

The introduction of The *Transition: A Positive Start to School* Initiative has brought considerable attention to the importance of developing a broad range of strategies, practices and programs to support children and families during the transition to school period. The provisional theory of change model identifies some of the ways in which implementation of promising transition practices might be supported.

In the first instance, the system needs to be prepared adequately so that the environment into which transition practices are introduced is receptive to change. There are a range of resources and inputs at the organisational and system level that are likely to be critical for enhancing readiness for change, such as:

- Strong leadership and consistent messages about the importance of transition. This is likely to require central co-ordination by DEECD (head office and regions) along with local support from schools, local government, and a wide range early childhood services to build motivation and maintain commitment among stakeholders;
- A supportive infrastructure to guide the planning and delivery of promising transition practices. This might include the development of stronger collaboration and inter-agency co-ordination agreements between schools and early childhood services (e.g. documented protocols, memorandums of understanding, dedicated personnel, and joint transition planning meetings); and
- The provision of clear information (e.g. resource kits, templates, manuals, and research evidence) on how to develop local transition programs, complete transition statements and implement promising practices. This could be followed-up with training as well as technical assistance where required to provide early childhood educators, schools and community agencies with

the necessary knowledge, skills, and confidence to implement enhanced transition processes and practices.

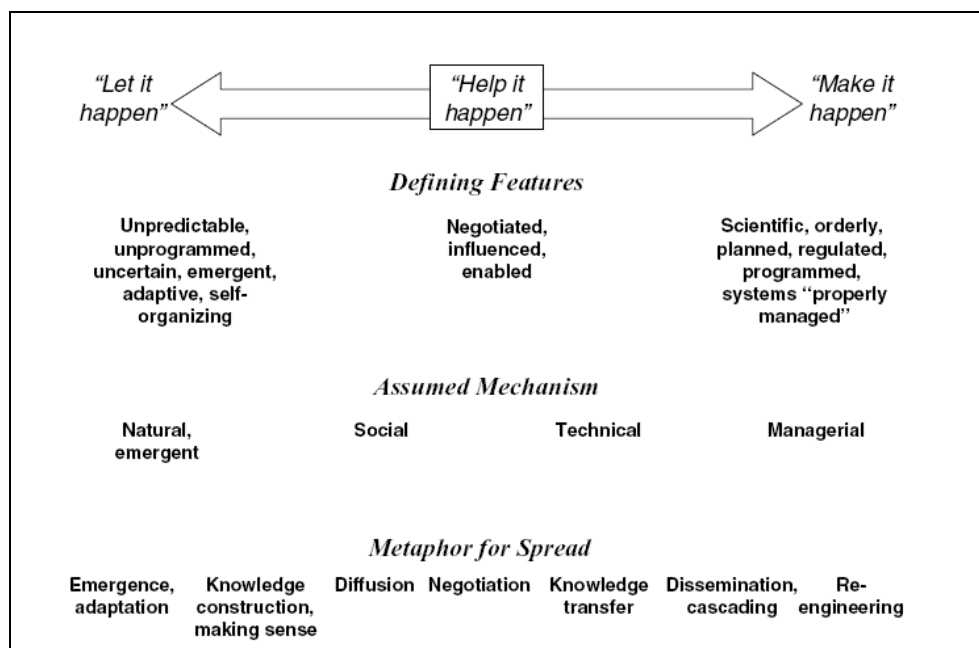
The DEECD, local governments, schools and early childhood services have been working over the past year to establish these supportive foundations. For example, through complementary strategies in the *Victorian Blueprint for Education and Early Childhood Development* as well as the specific activities associated with the *Transition: A Positive Start to School* project (e.g. literature review, funding of transition pilots, regional forums across the state, stakeholder and practitioner advisory groups and the pilot showcase event). What is required now is strong leadership, consistent messages and adequate resourcing to maintain the momentum for change across early childhood and schooling sectors.

A staged approach to implementing promising transition practices

The work undertaken to date has helped create greater awareness about the importance of school transition. However, this does not necessarily mean that all stakeholders across the early childhood and schooling sectors will be able (or willing) to implement promising transition practices effectively. Both of these sectors are currently undergoing considerable reform – in terms of workforce planning, regulatory reviews, system improvements, and so on.

Considering the timing and context in which transition practices are being introduced it would be sensible to adopt a staged approach to implementation. Figure 2 below is a useful representation of how change might be managed by the DEECD at the central level, as well as at the local implementation level. The metaphor of 'helping it happen' is useful and may allay concerns that the introduction of transition practices is something that is being 'forced upon' professionals in the field by head office managers.

Figure 2: The diffusion and dissemination continuum



Source: Greenhalgh et al (2004). Diffusion of innovations in service organisations: systematic review and recommendations. *The Millbank Quarterly*, 82(4), 581-629.

If there is a perception, for example, that transition practices are being implemented hastily in order to satisfy government ‘performance indicators’ then it is unlikely that their presence will translate into real outcomes for children and families. Instead their implementation could become a managerial, paper-based exercise.

It was common to hear remarks in this regard at the regional forums held across the State. Many forum attendees warned that some of the promising practice ideas, such as information sharing *vis a vis* transition statements, may become ‘bureaucratized’ if their introduction was not managed appropriately (e.g. ‘The form is only as good as the person filling it out’; ‘If we send the teachers the paperwork it is going to end up where all the paperwork goes’; and, ‘Transition is complex – not a simple quick-fix that can be resolved by throwing a lot of paperwork at the issue’).

To guard against this, Figure 2 suggests that state-wide implementation of promising transition practices should be considered along a continuum, with each practice idea matched to an appropriate point on the continuum. This moves us away from the idea that there is a single best way to put ideas into practice, and towards what might be called a contingency approach to implementation. When determining where a practice idea might lie on the continuum it is important to consider a variety of contingencies, such as: the nature of the intervention itself (i.e. is it simple, complicated, complex); the need, in some instances,

for consistency of approach both within and across communities, existing transition practices; available time and resources; the presence (or not) of local champion(s); and any pre-existing transition networks. A local needs assessment, followed by an implementation analysis would help to identify the appropriate combination of 'let it happen', 'help it happen' and 'make it happen' approaches for a particular community.

The findings from the evaluation underscore the importance of rigorous local planning and needs assessment prior to introducing new transition to school practices. Sound local planning will help stakeholders to make more informed decisions about the most appropriate mix of promising transition practices. A systematic and considered approach to implementation also cannot be underestimated. This is because the strength and durability of outcomes for children and families is largely dependent upon the quality and sustainability of implementation.

Implications for practice

Taken together, the findings from this evaluation of transition pilots affirms the view that the transition to school period is a critical time for building positive relationships between educators and families to support children's learning and development. When given the opportunity, early childhood professionals, educators, community agencies and other key stakeholders have demonstrated that they are willing and able to collaboratively plan and implement locally-driven transition programs.

The experience of the pilots also suggests that several challenges are likely to emerge during the initial start-up phase of local transition planning. Most pilots reported problems relating to limited time and resources, historical and philosophic conflicts between local agencies, difficulties in engaging families and key stakeholders as well as a range of obstacles associated with inter-agency service co-ordination.

However, these barriers are not insurmountable and should be viewed as an inherent feature of the developmental process of implementation. The pilots report that establishing local transition programs takes time and dedication, sound planning and research, strong leadership, effective and broad-based networks and organisational and administrative support. Local stakeholders should consider these factors when planning their own transition programs.

Attributes of promising practices that are likely to increase their adoption

The ten promising transition practices that have been identified in this evaluation are not stand-alone interventions. They will work best when delivered as part of a comprehensive and tailored local transition strategy. While the various transition practices each serve different purposes, the overall rationale should be to ensure 'continuity of learning' and encourage better connections, conversations, and relationships between key players in the transition process (i.e. children,

families and educators). In the longer term it is hoped that this will contribute to improved educational outcomes for children.

The diffusion of innovation literature (see especially Rogers, 2003; Greenhalgh et al, 2004) and experience of the transition to school pilots, also suggests that there are several characteristics of promising transition practices that are likely to influence their prospects of being adopted successfully. These are:

- *Relative advantage*: Early childhood services and schools believe that the proposed new way of doing things is a real advance over the current way (e.g. orientation focus, portfolios);
- *Compatibility*: Promising practices are compatible with people's existing values and preferred ways of working;
- *Complexity*: Promising practices are perceived as simple and straightforward to develop and use;
- *Observability*: Opportunities are provided for people to see what promising practices look like before they decide to implement them;
- *Trialability*: Early childhood professionals and teachers have the opportunity to try out promising practices before committing themselves;
- *Potential for re-invention*: Early childhood services and schools can customise promising practices, where appropriate, to suit their local context;
- *Risk*: Early childhood professionals and teachers do not feel that the introduction of promising practices will pose financial and/or other risks;
- *Nature of knowledge*: Promising practices come with clear instructions that are easy to follow; and
- *Technical support*: If there are specialised technical aspects to implementing promising practices sufficient support is provided by knowledgeable experts.

In addition to these attributes the theory of change model identifies a range of enabling activities and diffusion processes that are also likely to support the dissemination of promising practices. The two most prominent among these is the role of local transition networks and the presence of program champions, boundary spanners¹⁷, and change

¹⁷ The term 'boundary spanner' was first used by Friend, Power, and Yewlett (1974) to identify people in organisations who engage in 'reticulist' or network-forming activities. The term was popularised by Daft in his 1989 book 'Organisation theory and design'. In contemporary usage boundary spanners are special people in networks who play a role in bringing together unlikely partners, break through red-tape and see things in different ways. They are entrepreneurs and innovators who help to develop trust, which is pivotal

agents who can help to promote and 'diffuse' innovative transition practices across local communities.

Implications for research and evaluation

It is important to emphasise that the theory of change model is not intended as some kind of 'blueprint'; rather it is a simplified version of reality that provides a framework to guide initial implementation of promising transition practices. In the real-world things are likely to be much more complex and messy. Nevertheless, in its present form there are two main ways in which the provisional model might be immediately helpful for further research and evaluation activities.

First, (and although not specified in the model) there is a need to monitor the potential for unintended consequences and effects that might arise through the state-wide implementation of transition practices (e.g. labelling/stereotyping of children). Labelling of students was a common issue that pilot representatives reported when talking to families about transition statements and also links to strong empirical evidence concerning teacher expectancy effects¹⁸ (e.g. Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968). It would be unfortunate if promising practices, like transition statements, were misused by schools to 'sift and sort' children according to their perceived academic potential. This could lead to further entrenchment of educational disadvantage.

Second, the model provides an initial logic map that could be used as a basis for informing evaluation planning with respect to implementation and impact assessments of transition statements and promising practices (say in 2-3 years down the track). For example, further clarification of the kinds of outcomes that might be generated by the introduction of promising transition practices should be undertaken (e.g. delineation of an outcomes hierarchy and representative indicators for outcomes). The result of this work would provide a strong basis for the development of an outcome-focused data collection and monitoring system, similar to those that have been established for evaluations of transition demonstration projects delivered in overseas jurisdictions¹⁹.

for effective collaboration when working across inter-agency boundaries (see Williams, 2002).

¹⁸ If a teacher expects disadvantaged students to underperform at school, then they will underperform. This is because of the principle that expectations, even if initially false, are brought about because of the belief that they are true.

¹⁹ For example, Head Start and High/Scope in the United States and the Effective Provision of Pre-school Education Project in the United Kingdom. See also local monitoring frameworks, data collection tools etc used to evaluate Victoria's Best Start Initiative; survey instruments used by the Australian Early Development Index and so on.

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Appendix 1: Transition Pilots by Region

Table 2: Pilots by DEECD region (alphabetical order)

DEECD Region	Pilot name and lead agency
Barwon South Western	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • City of Greater Geelong Early Years Transition Project City of Greater Geelong • The Colac District Early Years to School Transition Network Glastonbury Child and Family Services – Colac and District
Eastern Metropolitan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transition to School bestchance Child and Family Care, Glen Waverley • Transition: The Child's Perspective Box Hill North Primary Kindergarten • Strengthening Links – Supporting Transition to School Knox City Council
Gippsland	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Djillay Lidj Best Start to School Morwell Local Aboriginal Education Consultative Group - LAECG • Baw Baw Pilot Project Baw Baw Shire Council
Grampians	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transition A Positive Start to School Child and Family Services - CAFS Ballarat • Birthday Postcards Moorabool Shire Best Start Project Partnership
Hume	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wodonga Kinder School Network Baranduda Primary School
Loddon Mallee	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transition: A Positive Start to School Echuca South Primary School • Valuing a Child's Perspective – Transition to School Loddon Mallee Preschool Association – Bendigo • Beyond the Rainbow Story-Play Playgroup Mallee Family Care – Mildura
Northern Metropolitan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learnings from Meadows: Transition to School for Arabic families in Broadmeadows Anglicare Victoria and Meadowbank Primary School • Building Stronger Bridges to School City of Darebin • Oak Park Transition to School Network Oak Park Primary School • Transition to School Project, Thornbury Yappera Children's Service Cooperative LTD

Southern Metropolitan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The "Care" (Community Alliance and Relationships in Education) Preparatory Transition Program Bentleigh West Primary School • Biala Peninsula Biala Peninsula Early Intervention Service Inc - Mornington • Student Wellbeing: Transition – Ready...Set...Go A Positive Start to School Catholic Education Office – Dandenong • Inner South Community Health Service South Melbourne, Port Melbourne • Hastings Transition Pilot (Linking Schools and Early Years) Mornington Peninsula Shire and Centre for Community Child Health • Information is the Key Springvale South Primary School
Western Metropolitan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Warringa Park School Hoppers Crossing • Successful Transition to School via Personalisation of Learning Catholic Education Office – Werribee North (Bethany Primary School) • Transition to School Plan for Children Diagnosed with an Autism Spectrum Disorder Catholic Education Office – Maribyrnong • Footscray Transition Activity (Linking Schools and Early Years) Footscray Primary School and Centre for Community Child Health
State-wide	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • KPV Transition to School publication: Review of inclusivity and Chinese language pilot Kindergarten Parents Victoria - Dandenong • AusParenting Transition to Primary School Parent Program Parenting Research Centre - Carlton • Country Education Project Rural Early Years Country Education Project – Rushworth, Mitta Mitta and Balmoral Statewide including Loddon Mallee, Hume and Barwon South Western Regions