

## Capacity to submit

Community Information & Support Victoria (CISVic) is the peak body representing local community information and support services representing 60 community-based, not-for-profit agencies, staffed by over 1,279 paid staff and in excess of 5,353 volunteers.

Our local services assist people experiencing personal and financial difficulties by providing information, referral and support services including Emergency Relief (ER), financial counselling and financial literacy. Our agencies provide free services to an average of 300,000 people every year.

We direct people who need help to local centres for services.

**Helping those most in need** Our main work is with the vulnerable and disadvantaged, including those on welfare payments, single parents, newly arrived, refugees, those with mental health issues, drug and alcohol issues and those experiencing family violence and family breakdown.

**Emergency relief** Many of our agencies can provide emergency relief, both financial and practical, by providing food, food vouchers, travel cards, petrol vouchers, assistance with household bills, rent, pharmaceutical supplies and telephone bills.

**One voice for many** We liaise with all tiers of government and other peak bodies, conduct training and undertake sound, evidence-based research. We are grateful to the State and Federal Governments for their funding support for core and special projects. We also have increasingly strengthening contact and cooperation with a range of peer organisations.

This is a vital interface for not just CISVic and its members but also for the community support sector as a whole, exploring more effective use of resources, skills and funding conduits. This has included partnerships to deliver important training to volunteers and community workers.

We also sit on a number of state & federal government groups including a State Ministerial Advisory Council and Federal Consultative Committee and other relevant peak body advisory groups, including VCOSS (Victorian Council of Social Services), the ultimate state community peak body.

### **CISVic agencies are embedded in their communities**

The CISVic membership service model is placed-based and holistic in working with its communities and clients. The provision of supported services by CISVic member agencies is primarily directed at vulnerable and disadvantaged families and individuals who fall through service gaps. As generalist services providing a range of free, confidential and supported services, we connect vulnerable people and families to vital services and their communities.

Collectively, the CISVic ER Consortium of thirty (30) agencies, is the second largest Federal Government funded provider of ER services in Victoria. In total, forty-two (42) CISVic agencies deliver ER across forty-eight (48) sites from a combination of government, philanthropic and donated funds. Our engagement with community, local service providers and stakeholders is built on a strong local presence, place-based focus to problem identification and solution, and by drawing upon and enhancing local social capital.

## Submission

CISVic member agencies provide support to families experiencing financial and personal crisis through the provision of material and/or financial aid through emergency relief (ER) programs. Twenty-five (25) member agencies across metropolitan Melbourne provide some education support to families, predominantly this consists of support towards the cost of education. All clients accessing our ER services experience financial difficulties, and families receiving ER do so because they cannot make ends meet. The rising cost of education is a contributing factor to the financial stress that families experience at the beginning of each school year.

Our submission responds to **Equity** as an area of achievement under the Education State, and to **Working in Partnership with Communities** under the area of how we can work differently. According to the Equity and Quality in Education Report by the OECD, the highest performing education systems are those that combine equity with quality. Systems that fail its students fail society, as education canvasses not only learning and skills, but health and wellbeing, social inclusion and economic prosperity. “More educated people contribute to more democratic societies and sustainable economies, and are less dependent on public aid and less vulnerable to economic downturns.”<sup>1</sup>

## Equity

We welcome the changes to the current funding model ‘to sharpen the way social disadvantage funding is allocated’. We however recommend that equity funding be based on a broader range of indicators than is currently proposed. Whilst we acknowledge that parental occupation and education level are reliable indicators of education outcomes, we submit that social and personal circumstances also play a critical role. Our experience with families requesting assistance with education costs is that multiple disadvantage and chronic financial crisis have a deleterious impact on children’s health and wellbeing, on social inclusion, education outcomes and lifelong engagement in learning.

With regard to the first proposed method of school allocation, we submit that it should include loadings that take into account:

- The concentration of disadvantage within a school *and* the community around the school (such as based on ABS SEIFA index);<sup>2</sup>
- A consideration for ‘pockets of disadvantage’ and the relative needs of low socio-economic students compared to higher-resourced families in the same school community;
- Family income, in recognition of the impact of rising education costs on students’ engagement with the education system, health and wellbeing and social inclusion.

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<sup>1</sup> OECD (2012), Equity and Quality in Education: Supporting Disadvantaged Students and Schools, OECD Publishing, p.9. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264130852-en> accessed 22/07/2015

<sup>2</sup> The 2015 Dropping off the Edge Report reaffirms that locational disadvantage is deeply entrenched and difficult to shift. These communities experience a complex web of persistent disadvantage that include high rates of unemployment, criminal convictions, disability and low education among other indicators of disadvantage.

With regard to the second measure in which additional funding is provided for students entering secondary schools who were identified as struggling with basic skills in primary schools, we support measures that recognise that students falling behind, regardless of their socioeconomic circumstances, should be supported to achieve better education outcomes.

We finally submit that the overall quantum of funding be increased, and recommend that the percentage of equity funding be increased to 10 per cent, in parity with leading education systems such as Ontario.

### **Working in partnership with communities**

Civil society plays a crucial role in building community capacity and social capital. The civil society sector traditionally provided opportunities for individual and collective giving through volunteering and other services to vulnerable people in our communities. Strengthening partnerships with communities and civil society ensures that schools build capacity to engage with location-based stakeholders to trial, innovate and leverage resources to tackle disadvantage in their community. Whilst innovative approaches to solving complex social problems point to collaborative efforts and partnerships, there is more to be done to ensure that new structures and relationships do not simply replace old practices and approaches.

It is increasingly acknowledged that a coordinated approach to place-based disadvantage that involves government agencies, communities, social services and businesses in a targeted and localised manner is one way to shift entrenched disadvantage.<sup>3</sup> Building capacity for schools to engage in place-based solutions requires investment in school leadership, human resources and teacher skills to make connections outside the education system to achieve outcomes for disadvantaged students. This can be done in two ways:

1. By building schools' internal capacity to engage and build relationships with local social and welfare services, through information sharing and a coordinated, client-focused approach to assisting vulnerable and disadvantaged families experiencing chronic or unexpected financial and personal crisis; and
2. By supporting regional or cluster coalitions of service providers, professionals and stakeholders that can leverage and share existing resources and services within a framework of a fully integrated education service, offering family and parent support services.

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<sup>3</sup> Vinson, T., Rawsthorn, M., Bevis, A., & Ericson, M. (2015) Dropping off the Edge, Jesuit Social Services and Catholic Social Services Australia. <http://www.dote.org.au/findings/executive-summary/> accessed 22/07/2015

## Case Story – Lisa

Lisa is 43 years old mother of two (India is 14 years old, Jake is 11 years old) who recently escaped a family violence situation. As a result, Lisa is 'staying' with a friend and looking for accommodation for her family. The situation is very stressful for Lisa as her children are sleeping in one room whilst she was sleeping on the couch. Lisa is in receipt of Newstart and struggling to obtain the correct welfare payment for her family. Lisa is new to the welfare system, so she is finding it difficult to navigate through the maze of services and payments that she is entitled to. Lisa has limited furniture to furnish a property, and limited access to pay for rent in advance or bond. Lisa also has health issues that impact on her mental and emotional wellbeing, and was overwhelmed both financially and emotionally with the presenting issues.

Lisa's children are happy in the schools they are enrolled in and she is very reluctant to move them. However, her changed circumstances and the decision to leave an abusive relationship are causing feelings of guilt and shame. Lisa doesn't really want to let the school know what is happening at home just yet, as she is concerned with how they will react. The school is in an affluent suburb, and the school community does not 'deal very well with disadvantage'. She attends our local agency for help with food and assistance with looking for accommodation. Lisa also needs to source funds to pay for India's school camp and registration for a nation-wide science competition which is long overdue. Lisa was provided with a food voucher by a volunteer (due to limited funds, ER clients are assisted with a maximum of \$25 food voucher, four times a year) and referred to a caseworker to assist with appropriate referrals and further financial support.

The caseworker sourced brokerage funds in conjunction with other housing providers and assisted Lisa to secure rent in advance and bond. Lisa was also assisted with ongoing financial support whilst Centrelink payments were finalised. The caseworker was able to utilise the agency's school support fund to pay for school camp and registration. The caseworker continued to assist Lisa and her family once they moved into the property with referrals around education support, job support, health and tenancy issues.

Whilst Lisa's accommodation is now secure, she struggles to pay for daily costs such as utilities and rent, and is worried about not having her children 'miss out' on school activities. However, due to ongoing health issues, Lisa is unlikely to work in the foreseeable future, and continues to access the agency's ER services for material aid and costs towards her children's education. Lisa also reports that India has been expressing anger towards Lisa about how much her life had changed for the worse, and showing less interest in school. Coupled with terminating karate classes for Jake due to costs, Lisa is increasingly worried about her children's emotional wellbeing.

Many clients become so overwhelmed that it affects their mental health and they are not clear on how to manage a crisis on their own. The situation then continues to deteriorate. Caseworkers in CISVic agencies work with clients to make presenting issues 'manageable' by working with them step by step and by also providing the information needed so that clients can hopefully prevent similar situations presenting again.