

# Family Engagement in Schools

## East Gippsland Review

March 2015

---

Authors: John Kinniburgh & James Mulcahy

---

### Intent

We all benefit from approaches and practices by individuals, groups and organizations that helps maximise our sense of belonging and connectedness.

Transition to schooling is an important stepping stone that in many ways helps shape our future in education, community, relationships and career while poor transition practice contributes to absenteeism and a decline in engagement and outcomes.

Communities for Children- an early intervention program for children up to the age of 12 provided by the Australian Government-has recently funded UnitingCare Gippsland for a further five years to support families and communities increase child safety and wellbeing.

UnitingCare Gippsland has been mapping how transition is provided by the educational sector in East Gippsland with an emphasis on isolated communities and vulnerable families.

The target group has been families about to attend a new school, particularly those not engaged in a preschool setting and those who have attended multiple schools.

Families from across the region were asked to share their experiences of transition programs to help identify what is working well and where there are gaps. This work has provided a more detailed understanding of what is needed in East Gippsland to achieve the following objectives:

- Create strong child-friendly communities
- Children and families more involved in their community therefore building community connectedness and respect of their environment
- Increase the confidence of parents
- Increase the connectedness of isolated communities and vulnerable families in the wider community and support services.

The focus on transitions is an important element of this work with the goal to ensure all children get the best start in their new learning environment no matter what their geographical location, race, cultural background or personal circumstances.

Through identifying what is currently considered best practice and where there are gaps, the project aims to identify strategies that strengthen links between early childhood services and schools.

### Methodology

Communities for Children team worked with the East Gippsland Schools Network to develop survey questions that would drive a consultation process. An educator with extensive local knowledge and experience, John Kinniburgh, was commissioned to conduct the survey and report on his findings.

A representative sample of schools, preschools and childcare centres was selected and 15 providers were contacted and agreed to participate in the survey. Parents, staff, leadership, management and other key players were involved in the process. East Gippsland Shire Early Years Planner and a community member experienced in transition from pre-school to school were also interviewed.

Interview sessions went for about 80 minutes, usually done individually with some pair and small group sessions. Parents interviewed were sourced through the providers and interviews took place at each location. In total 40 people participated in interviews.

An overriding principle of the consultation was to 'ask, not assume', to identify and share best practice and identify any gaps and deficiencies in transition that could be addressed in the future. Additional data was sourced from school based written parent surveys and school review data sets.

There were 16 base questions which guided the consultation interviews. They were:

- What are the current transition processes in this setting?
- What works well and what is successful?
- What would make it work better?
- What are the issues and impediments that compromise transition?
- What important things should inform parents when selecting a school for their child?
- How are parents currently informed?
- How do you connect with families throughout the year?
- How do you find out if a child is having a tricky time at home?
- How do you welcome new students/families from outside the area during the year?
- What is your belief about children repeating year at preschool or school?
- What is the 'favourite' school in this area? Why?
- Why did you choose.....school for your child?
- What would you like to see Primary schools and preschools doing better to support transition?

## Findings

The consultation identified positives in the current transition process and areas where improvements are needed.

All parents interviewed were overwhelmingly positive about their child's transition and the preschools, kindergartens and schools could clearly articulate the strengths of their transition processes. Parents often viewed lack of separation anxiety ('no tears') as a key indicator of a successful transition.

Most preschools have a particular philosophy which guided them. These included 'Play Based', 'Reggio Emilia', 'Steiner', 'Literacy Based' or 'Mini School'. These philosophies often appeared to be determined by the belief system of the educational leaders in the centres.

Limited available time for collaboration with others was a particular concern in the childcare industry. Regulatory requirements, formulas and ratios, access to qualified staff were highlighted as restrictors to flexible provision.

A key finding of the consultation process is that, while there are many commendable successes in the transition processes currently provided, there are significant issues that need to be addressed across all sectors if we are to continue making gains in providing strong child friendly communities.

### ***Positives***

Consultation interviews demonstrated that all stakeholders have a clear view of the things that should inform parents in choosing a school that best meets the need of their child. The tone of the school, the observed relationships between staff, students and each other, the observed learning environment, the teaching and extra curricula programs, class sizes, student support, school values were all cited as being critical whilst location, transport, family connection and religion were considered.

The following elements were consistently seen as examples of best practice:

- Teachers visiting children in kinder and kinder staff following up next year in schools
- Frequent, high quality and lengthy transition sessions later in the year
- Initial sessions in small groups to enable close relationships to be forged with parents and children
- Welcome letters, photos with teachers, social story books, 'Prep gift bags including a Collin's story book, drink bottle and a fridge magnet with key dates
- Using student buddies, student leaders or the previous year's Preps to break down the barriers
- Access to many and varied aspects of school life during transition visits including Visual and Performing Arts, Library, playground, Physical Education and Technology
- Follow up through mailed personal letters, art work from transition days, laminated photos and personal phone calls
- Provision of additional staff for transition programs
- The school principal, leadership and office staff presenting a positive and reassuring 'face of the school'
- Involvement of kinder kids in special school activities throughout the year such as Drama, Circus and Music performances
- Flexible parent information sessions and parent interviews
- Play groups and 'practice Prep' concepts
- Effective information and background sharing between kindergartens and schools
- Brochures and detailed information packs
- Provision of transport support to enable attendance at transition and information sessions
- Close relationships between kinder/childcare and school staff.

### ***Areas for Improvement***

All transition programs operate in isolation from neighbouring schools and most set up their timing, dates and frequency with little or no collaboration between local schools and preschools. Some schools are fed by 9 or 10 preschools and some individual preschools are feeding up to 9 schools.

Most providers acknowledged the need and value of purposeful network to share good practice, develop understandings and improve what we do but the demands of the childcare industry meant there was very little time.

Overt and subliminal negative attitudes such as racism and discrimination against those from lower socio-economic backgrounds continues to play a role in choice of schools (where choices are available). Perception, reputation and hearsay rather than analysis of the quality of provision influences choice. This practice further marginalises individuals and groups who need support.

The school funding model, based on enrolment numbers, impacts on the level of cooperation between schools. While schools have made concerted efforts to overcome this factor, it continues to have a pervasive influence in the marketing for enrolments which in turn can become an obstacle in developing a united approach to transition.

The timing of transition was identified as a major area of concern. Some schools were identified as beginning their transition program too early when preschools are transitioning children themselves, others too late in the year while others have very early enrolment deadlines. It was clearly felt a consistent approach was needed.

While parents, preschools and schools all felt confident about accessing support services and agencies there was some confusion regarding services and the degree of duplication. The brokerage model of specialised support at times added to the confusion.

The most vulnerable families and children in our community are still the ones at risk of a volatile transition. Parents own negative experiences at school, transport challenges, less connection to preschool, poor literacy, unstable accommodation, transience and household chaos pose huge challenges to many East Gippsland families.

The consultation process confirmed that there are children in East Gippsland who have little or no formal transition with their first school contact beginning at the start of the school year. Some schools focus on providing extra support for these children and in these cases transition occurs after school has begun. Many of our transient families face similar challenges.

## Recommendations

1. Establish a purposeful network between preschools, childcare and schools to build understandings, relationships and shared purpose.
2. Investigate mechanisms and processes that generate benefits for transition beyond individual settings.
3. Review current transition programs including timing, duration, frequency and communication.
4. Seek support from health services, local agencies and community knowledge to identify vulnerable families as early as possible to facilitate best start transitions from preschool and beyond.
5. Clarify with and challenge schools to promote and provide inclusive enrolment practice and to differentiate between marketing, recruitment and transition.
6. Develop appropriate methods to support families in making informed choices that best meets the individual needs of each child.
7. Advocate for additional resources to enable best practice—transport, co-ordination, facilitation, support of preschools and childcare centres to meet, visit other centres, schools and attend cross sector meetings in work time when required.

## Conclusions

It was clear from the consultation process that there is a strong positive intent from preschools, kindergartens and schools to provide children with the best possible transition experience. All participants in the consultations were generous with their available time and were keen to develop best practice.

However, unless there is a process to develop and guide transition practice beyond individual settings, transitions in East Gippsland will continue to operate on an ad hoc basis (largely influenced by historical practice) and fail to address in a meaningful way the issues in this report, particularly for those who are already experiencing disadvantage.