

Submission to the Victorian Legislative Assembly Legal and Social Issues Committee

Inquiry into early childhood engagement of culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) Communities.

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Definitions, Abbreviations and Names

Unless otherwise specified, these definitions apply for the purposes of this submission:

Migrants: all temporary and permanent migrants, regardless of their circumstances of arrival in Australia.

Community hubs/hubs: the place-based community hubs operated in primary schools and community centres in culturally diverse Australian communities under the National Community Hubs Program.

Key abbreviations:

CHA: Community Hubs Australia Incorporated

NCHP: National Community Hubs Program

Introduction

Community Hubs Australia

CHA works to develop a socially cohesive Australia. Our goal is to help culturally diverse people, however they come here (refugee, migrant, temporary visa), to integrate into Australian communities.

We work in partnership with government, businesses, philanthropy, not-for-profits, and community organisations to fund and facilitate locally generated programs that reduce isolation and increase connection.

The National Community Hubs Program

CHA delivers the National Community Hubs Program (NCHP), established in 2013, to engage with and support migrant women with pre-school children. CHA delivers the national hubs program on behalf of our funding partners, with assistance from several specialist support agencies in each state.

Our hubs operate under the evidence-based Community Hub Model. They are located in communities with high migrant and refugee populations and high levels of socio-economic disadvantage. The hubs leverage existing family friendly community facilities, with the vast majority located in state and Catholic primary schools. Hubs welcome all migrants, including fathers, however women with young children are their primary client group. The NCHP is resourced through one of Australia's biggest partnerships between the philanthropic sector and federal, state and local governments.

Our Network

Community Hubs have been established in Victoria, New South Wales, Queensland and South Australia. In 2020, the NCHP network will be expanding and establishing the first hubs in Western Australia.

Funding partners and costs

The NCHP is funded through a combination of state, federal and philanthropic funding. In Victoria the program is supported by the Victorian Government Department of Premier and Cabinet, alongside philanthropic supporters and the Commonwealth Government Department of Home Affairs. Each hub costs around \$75,000 per year to run – a relatively small investment for a significant social impact.

Supporting women and children

Hubs bridge the gap between migrants and the wider community. They connect women with schools, with each other, and with organizations that can provide health, education and settlement support. The hubs are mainly embedded in primary schools and leverage existing school infrastructure and government and community services in local communities.

Community hubs:

- ❖ Engage families in culturally diverse communities ^[L]_[SEP]
- ❖ Connect preschool children into playgroups and prepare them for school ^[L]_[SEP]
- ❖ Help women and children learn and practice English, and ^[L]_[SEP]

- ❖ Build pathways to volunteering and employment. ^[1]_[SEP]

Response to the Terms of Reference

1. Importance of Early Childhood Education and School Readiness.

Early childhood education is important in preparing young children for kindergarten and school. Research tells us that children who are not appropriately prepared for school when they commence are less likely to do as well at school overall and are more likely to face challenges later in life, compared with their better prepared peers. Early childhood education is important in promoting school readiness, as any emerging problems are much easier to address well before a child steps into a classroom.

School readiness is ‘the level of functioning in children’s cognitive, social and physical skills that permits them to benefit maximally from formal instruction and related classroom experiences’. School readiness is achieved when a young child has experienced the physical, social and emotional development needed to not just enroll in primary school, but also succeed in the classroom.

The definition of school readiness has expanded over recent years to include all the environments that a child is exposed to in their early years, such as early childhood settings, schools, neighborhoods and communities.

School readiness is a joint effort - the child must be ready for school, the school must be equipped and ready for the child, and the community must have the capacity to provide the appropriate support to ensure a child’s development and learning.

1.2 Disadvantages in School Readiness

There are two significant disadvantages in school readiness in Australia

- ❖ Children are more developmentally vulnerable if they are not English proficient and/or grow up in a household that does not speak English;
- ❖ Children are twice as likely to be developmentally vulnerable if they live in the most economically disadvantaged areas of Australia.

These effects can compound for culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) children, as CALD families have an increased likelihood of living in disadvantaged areas, and face disproportionately high rates of unemployment and poverty.

It is more difficult for CALD families to access preschool education because the complex school system in Australia can be difficult to understand. This is especially relevant for recently arrived families or those with limited English. In addition to this, families may be unaware of the importance of early childhood education and/or lack access to resources and knowledge of child development.

2. Community Hubs impact on School Readiness

Community Hubs offer an effective early childhood program for engaging and meeting the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse communities. Hubs are established in communities with a high migrant/refugee population and high levels of socio-economic disadvantage. By placing the hubs in primary schools they are more accessible to families, as they are within a safe school environment.

Hubs offer a range of early childhood programs, including playgroups, supported playgroups and parent/child language programs. Evaluation of the program has shown that it has increased the uptake of early childhood education programs by CALD, migrant and refugee families.

Evaluations of the hubs have shown that they are achieving their goals, increasing the wellbeing and school readiness of children before they start school. Following the evaluations families, hub staff and volunteers noticed

- ❖ Children have better literacy and spoken English skills
- ❖ Children are feeling more familiar, comfortable and develop a positive attitude towards school
- ❖ Referrals to additional support and services were made when needed
- ❖ Behaviour improved among children attending hubs

2.1 Hub benefits for Children

Hubs are having a positive impact on young children, supporting their health, development and wellbeing at a critical time in their lives. This fills a crucial service gap, as 2/3 of hub parents with a child under the age of five have not taken their child to any other early years services outside the hub.

Hubs

- ❖ Improve English and literacy
- ❖ Help children engage with early learning services
- ❖ Encourage friendships
- ❖ Support smoother transitions into school
- ❖ Improve social cooperation and self-regulation skills

All hubs have reported improvements in general skills of students following their engagement in hubs programs, such as in their ability to follow instructions and school routines.

“She can now play and share toys with others. Talk and be more friendly. Always happy and asks me to come to playgroup”

- **Hub parent, Hume**

2.2 Hub benefits for families

The positive impacts for early childhood learning are not limited to the children, parents and families also experience benefits from the hubs program.

Hubs help families by

- ❖ Improving English language and literacy skills
- ❖ Improving parenting capability
- ❖ Connecting them to the school, local community and services
- ❖ Providing vocational training and volunteering opportunities for parents
- ❖ Instilling a sense of empowerment

Migrant and refugee families can often feel isolated, unaware of the importance of early years learning or distrustful of large organisations and institutions. Hubs are a gateway that allows hub leaders and volunteers to build meaningful relationships with migrant families, building trust and promoting family involvement in the child's education. **Ninety-six per cent of families agreed that they were more confident and supported in their parenting because of involvement with the hub.**

“It's the conversations that I've had there that I think open the opportunity for conversation about, okay well going to bed early is important. Having a good breakfast is really important. Me playing math games with my child is really important. Even if they haven't had any exposure to playgroup, kinder, or whatever, and they just come in for the first time, it's just a really good conversation starter and what's expected of them as a parent.”

- **Hub Leader**, Coolaroo South Primary School

Involvement in a child's education can take many forms. A number of hubs have witnessed families beginning to improve their own English skills to assist their child, or increased participation by parents in school activities. The shared experiences and contacts produced from parents' involvement in their child's school often had positive effects on family relationships at home.

2.3 Hub benefits for Schools

Hubs are improving the cultural competence of schools, and having positive impacts on the wider school community. Evaluations conducted in 2015 showed that Hubs in schools have:

- ❖ Enhanced respect for cultural diversity
- ❖ Increased cultural inclusiveness
- ❖ Increased capacity to respond to the needs of migrant families
- ❖ Increased capacity to work in partnership with migrant families

The schools are also contributing to bridging the gap in service delivery, with 100% of principals and staff surveyed in 2015 agreed that their awareness of, and connections to, early years and other community services has increased as a result of the Community Hubs program.

In 2018, hubs made 12,748 referrals to additional services and support, and partnered with 523 external organisations and services. Services include family support, maternal child health services, preschool, and community health services. Without the hub, isolated migrant and CALD families can miss out on these essential services.

“I think forearmed is forewarned, we know about these little people that are coming to our school. We know about them as learners as well, and we're ready to kick off the minute they get here.

We're not fussing around finding out. We'll find out more obviously, because they'll be with us five days a week, but that familiarity already has been amazing, and the impact it's had in determining a relevant and authentic learning program for those kids.”

- **Acting Principal**, Broadmeadows Valley Primary School

3. Dandy Pals Playgroup

Dandenong Primary School's Step into Kinder program won a 2018 Victorian Early Years Award for *Supporting Parents to Build their Capacity and Confidence*.

Created out of Dandenong Primary's Dandy Pals Multicultural Playgroup, the program is a partnership with the RE Ross Trust, The Smith Family, The Water Well and the City of Greater Dandenong.

The Step into Kinder program was a way to increase the capacity of young children to begin four-year-old kinder, without needing to be ready for a fully structured program. The program has helped children develop their social, emotional, numeracy and language skills and, identified children needing early intervention.

This playgroup has helped children and their families become more confident and better prepared for kindergarten and school.

“It's social and emotional wellbeing, it becomes about the whole community ... feeling welcomed and wanted builds strong connections and confidence”

- **Alison**, Hub Leader, Dandenong Primary School

4. Recommendations

Community Hubs Australia recommends that the Victorian Government:

- Recognises the critical role that CHA plays in Early Childhood Engagement of CALD children

- Continues to expand the NCHP into Victorian communities with high levels of cultural and linguistic diversity.