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Taking your baby to school:

The Young Parents Access Project at Corio Bay Senior College

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The ‘at-risk’ status of pregnant and parenting students is by now well rehearsed in literature. In this paper we report on one school-based intervention in a Victorian secondary school, designed to improve the educational and social outcomes for a group of young mothers.

Early parenthood is the greatest single cause of dropping out of school for teenage girls, and what is more, the younger the pregnant teenager is, the more likely it is that she will never complete a senior school qualification. Given that later social and financial well-being are related to school completion, schools are in a unique position to provide both prevention interventions and efforts to ameliorate the ill outcomes of non-completion by teenage parents. The provision of in-school childcare that enables a speedy return to study after childbirth can ensure the sometimes fragile personal resources of teenage mothers remain connected to a sense of educational competence and motivation required for school success and completion.

Our review of the literature suggests that a successful program for parenting teenagers adopts a multi-dimensional approach, providing childcare, fostering high aspirations and supporting opportunities to graduate. These opportunities can occur through negotiated, realistic, supportive academic programs, through equity of treatment, health services that include contraception, prenatal care and nutrition, through social support such as transport and through case management including mentoring and counselling.

Why a creche at Corio Bay Secondary College?

The policy context

At Federal, State and Local government levels there has been a generic focus in recent years on the causes and consequences of non-completion of senior secondary school. In Victoria, the Ministerial Review of Post Compulsory Education and Training Pathways in Victoria (2000), commonly known as The Kirby Report, has fostered a host of recent policy developments, eg. Neighbourhood Renewal, Best Start, and Community Capacity Building.

At the local Geelong level, a number of projects have been
funded through the Smart Geelong Region Local Learning & Employment Network (SGR LLEN). Following The Kirby Report, schools had been encouraged to further develop partnerships with local community agencies to support their students to successfully complete their schooling and make transitions into further education, training or employment.

While transitions continue to be highly gendered with teenage parenting remaining a significant reason for early school leaving, there is no specific recommendation in The Kirby Report in regard to the particular issues surrounding teenage pregnancy and parenting in Victoria, there is no detailed policy, but the Department of Education and Training provides advice for schools in relation to pregnant and parenting students as part of the Schools of the Future Reference Guide. The guide affirms the right of pregnant students to continue their education regardless of their pregnancy and had developed flexible solutions to practically support them in this. Prior to the Young Parents Access Project (YPAP) this included modified VCE programs, welfare support, assistance with transport, interaction with childcare providers, flexible attendance arrangements, babychange and breastfeeding facilities.

Lack of access to childcare can be the factor that makes the challenge of parenting and schooling too difficult, particularly for those adolescent parents living independently. By access, CBSC means not only availability but also feasibility — even if places are available in community childcare, adolescent parents often live in the vicinity of the school and the logistics of taking up an available place without access to transport create a

Establishing the Young Parents Access Project at CBSC

The need for some kind of response to teenage parenting in the Corio area had been apparent to the staff at CBSC for many years. The school had encouraged pregnant teenagers to focus on continuing their education regardless of their pregnancy and had developed flexible solutions to practically support them in this. Prior to the Young Parents Access Project (YPAP) this included modified VCE programs, welfare support, assistance with transport, interaction with childcare providers, flexible attendance arrangements, babychange and breastfeeding facilities.

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disincentive to attendance at school.

In 2002 the seeds of the Project were planted in a meeting convened by the LLEN when Centrelink and Department of Human Services representatives expressed interest in supporting the establishment of an in-school creche.

A Working Party was formed in May 2002 and representatives from local, State and Federal government agencies that work with parents and children attended the first meeting. Support at the local level was forthcoming and encouraging. The Department of Human Services offered to fund the school nurse a further two days per week, while the City of Greater Geelong offered support in understanding and progressing through local regulations. The Department of Education and Training looked for options to house the childcare centre and Centrelink provided statistical data on potential numbers. Some funding was gained at the local level with Rotary becoming the major sponsor in the absence of dedicated government funding.

Around the same time, CBSC was considering applying for a Skills Centre Grant. The Skills Centre would allow teenage parents to not only build their understanding of child development but would also enable them to gain credit for that learning. The Centre would also allow other CBSC students and students from other schools to undertake childcare work placements. These two ideas came together in one project: an in-school childcare centre that included a training room where all students, including those that were parenting, could pursue nationally recognised courses including parenting and Certificate III Community Services (Childcare).

Both the local TAFE and ACFE providers saw opportunities to engage with the project. The Gordon TAFE was willing to use the centre as a training site for their students, and a local ACFE provider offered labour to develop outdoor play areas. SGR LLEN provided short term funding for staff, and the Department of Human Services offered use of a house adjacent to the school for family day care provision until a large enough purpose-built area could be acquired. The Department of Education and Training offered portable classrooms. Costs of moving, re-locating and refurbishing appeared promising at first, but have proved to be both extremely time-consuming and expensive, and the question of whether the costs can be justified even if funding were available, is yet to be resolved.

From that time to the present, the concept has evolved into a reality. However, the context of implementation has shaped the development of the Project in specific ways. While the Skills Centre component of the Project rested easily within policy discourses articulated within the work of the Australian National Training Authority, and the Victorian government’s focus on skills development, the childcare centre lacked any policy anchor. Within the Federal policy discourse of moral responsibility the provision of childcare created a tension between the Liberal government’s traditional values and the amelioration of the consequences of teenage pregnancy. At a State level there is, to all intents and purposes, a policy void: while schools are provided with an injunction to support pregnant and parenting students by “modify[ing] the curriculum program if necessary” this falls far short of the innovation required to provide in-school childcare and long-term integrated multi-dimensional support.

This lack of policy articulation has created a context where, despite declared support from various Ministers and the use of the YPAP as an example of the innovation occurring in Victorian schools, there has been an inability on the part of government departments to collaboratively and simultaneously give policy priority to the Project. A policy priority across government departments would have enabled sufficient funding to be committed to enable the CBSC to cover the establishment costs associated with the project. Initially there appeared to be a number of ways to approach this matter as both Federal and State bodies fund different aspects of childcare. For example, in Western Australia the Balga State High School childcare centre was funded through Federal policy on “Building Better Communities” and WA State Lottery funds. The focus during 2003, provided students with childcare under a Family Day Care model, and in 2004, it developed into a Long Day Care model within a licensed childcare centre, in the absence of previous funding, the Project has defaulted to making progress despite financial barriers.

The need to provide for the children of enrolled teenage parents has persisted despite the lack of any resolution on support. The staff at CBSC have waded through regulations for childcare services that are complex and rigorous and well outside the experience of school personnel. The achievement of progress despite the lack of
financial commitment by any, or many, government departments has led to an incessant focus on cobbled together sufficient funding for the physical establishment of the childcare centre, a shift from a primary concern with integrated and multi-dimensional provision to teenage parents as students, to a focus on how many children are needed to 'break even' and a lack of progress on the Skill Centre component of the Project.

This situation has persisted into 2004 and despite the pressure it has created for CBSC in responding to the government's injunction to innovate in renewing neighbourhoods. In the drive for an integrated approach to policy, it was decided that the Project should sit within 'Neighbourhood Renewal', an initiative led by the Office of Housing in the Department of Human Services. It thus forms part of the 'Growing Victoria Together' agenda of the Victorian government, which is intended to:

- empower local communities to shape their own futures, building on the strengths of each community and enhancing local skills, capacity and leadership;
- harnessing and coordinating Government and community resources to improve housing, infrastructure, employment, education, safety and health.

To date these ideals of "harnessing and better co-ordinating" have not been experienced at a level sufficient to realise the potential of the YPAP. The difficulties encountered with bureaucracy beyond that at the local level have been ongoing and remain unresolved. During 2003 the project received a constant stream of visits from 'head office': politicians, ministers, former and current departmental heads. They spoke to the young parents about their progress. They all returned convinced of the success of in-school childcare in supporting young parents to continue at school. Yet between the thought and the action falls the shadow. Eighteen months on, the first group of parents have completed their VCE and moved into further education or are returning to school to continue in 2004. The childcare centre has been registered and opened, the Director and staff appointed, the parents and their children enrolled. Yet the school is still waiting for government funding to materialise - "government funding is tight" has become a familiar mantra.

Postscript: In 2004, 15 young mothers have enrolled their children in the crèche and the school is still waiting on news about on-going government funding.

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References