

# Northern Schools Early Years Cluster

## Reflections on the Access to Early Learning program

### Overview and context

The Northern Schools Early Years Cluster (NSEYC) is the first Early Years Management organisation to implement the Access to Early Learning (AEL) Program through School Readiness Funding (SRF).

The NSEYC was formed in 2011 as a result of the amalgamation of several schools in the Hume/Moreland area of Melbourne, and the determination of the school principals not to lose the kindergartens on their sites. They formed an Early Years Management organisation (then called Kindergarten Cluster Management) with the aim of providing integrated and accessible Kindergarten to Grade 6 education for local families and improving outcomes for children and families.

The NSEYC services are situated within the northern suburbs of Melbourne, with our 11 kindergartens located across the municipalities of Hume and Moreland, in the suburbs of Glenroy, Fawkner, Coburg, Dallas, Meadow Heights and Broadmeadows. The communities we work within are vibrant and richly multicultural. Our families and children speak many languages, with the most predominant being Arabic, Punjabi, Turkish and Urdu, with an increasing number of Samoan and African families also moving into the area. These diverse cultures are also reflected amongst our teams and within our programs.

There are also many families experiencing high levels of vulnerability and disadvantage amongst our communities, which is why it is so important that we work with our communities and partners to provide the highest possible quality early learning experiences in these most formative years. We aim to empower children in their learning journey, and to support families as their first and most important educators and close the gap of disadvantage for children entering their formal school years.

This article provides reflections on implementation of the AEL SRF program as it relates to two families attending our kindergartens in the municipality of Hume, after four months of implementation.



### Why AEL SRF?

Regardless of their circumstances, all children should have the opportunity to participate in quality early learning. Evidence shows the benefits of early learning are greatest for children experiencing vulnerability and disadvantage, yet they are the least likely to access high quality early learning programs. Through the research we undertook to inform our School Readiness Plans, and also

anecdotally, we know that many children experiencing vulnerability in our local community are not accessing kindergarten programs, or they attend inconsistently. This issue has only been further impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

We selected the AEL program as part of our School Readiness Plan with the aim of providing a service and resources for families with complex needs and support for their children to access and fully participate in NSEYC kindergarten programs, so that they experience the benefits of quality early learning that they may have otherwise missed out on.

## Our approach

AEL-SRF provides an experienced and degree-qualified facilitator to work with families, educators and services to ensure children experiencing vulnerability participate in kindergarten and in-home learning, as well as funding for eligible children to access a kindergarten program that is planned and delivered by a degree-qualified early childhood teacher for up to 15 hours per week. Our AEL funding provides 13 places across our kindergarten services.

As the lead agency for our AEL program we worked in partnership with the Hume City Council (which also has an AEL program) in establishing a Governance group. The governance group comprises of key partners from the NSEYC, representatives from the Hume and Moreland City Councils, the Department of Education, Child Protection, Child First and an Enhanced Maternal and Child Health Nurse. The governance group establish processes to support the implementation of the program and provide strategic advice. The governance group is implementing a joint intake procedure and developing opportunities for shared resources across both the Hume and NSEYC Access to Early Learning Programs.

In appointing an AEL Facilitator, we sought to attract someone with a mix of early childhood and social work skills and experience, with a slight preference towards the early learning aspect. This was so that the facilitator would have the skills to support families as their child's first teacher with learning at home and be able to effectively support inclusion in the program through coaching, mentoring and professional learning for educators. After a competitive recruitment process, we appointed Leonie, a highly experienced Early Childhood Teacher who has spent many years working in early learning settings supporting children and families with highly complex needs and circumstances.

The focus of Leonie's role is to:

- identify, engage and support children and families experiencing high vulnerability to access and fully participate in kindergarten and in-home learning
- provide consistent and individualised support for children that extends from kindergarten to home
- provide tailored support for families, including additional resources that promote kindergarten participation and in-home learning
- provide mentoring and professional learning for educators to enhance their engagement and support of vulnerable children and families
- build trusting and respectful relationships with and between children, families and educators that provide the foundation for effective support by focussing on family strengths and children's learning needs.

As at the beginning of June, there are 7 families enrolled in the program. Two case examples are presented below: Example A demonstrates how the AEL program can have an almost immediate positive impact, while Example B demonstrates that a great deal of patience and flexibility is required for some families – and the importance of celebrating small wins. Names and details have been changed to maintain families' confidentiality (indicated with an asterisk \*).

## Case examples

### *Case example A – Yasir and Nala*

Yasir\* was referred to our AEL program through the Hume Council kindergarten engagement officer. Yasir is one of three children and has Autism Spectrum Disorder. His mother, Nala\*, has been forced to move several times due to family violence, and experienced rejection from her cultural community due to Yasir's diagnosis. After some negative experiences at other kindergarten services, Nala no longer felt confident to take Yasir to any early learning service due to his behavioural challenges, despite being a strong advocate for her child and valuing early education.

After the referral was made, our AEL Facilitator Leonie contacted Nala, listened to her concerns, and worked to reassure her that this next experience of early learning would be different. Leonie briefed the kindergarten team, then facilitated the first meeting with Nala and Yasir. This included meeting them at the gate to welcome them to the service, helping Nala choose the group that would provide the best environment for Yasir in discussion with the teachers, and developing strategies to help him settle into the kindergarten program.

Through regular, supportive contact and a non-judgemental approach, a trusting relationship has been developed between Nala, Leonie, Yasir and the kindergarten team. Yasir now loves coming to kindergarten and is attending regularly. Leonie has supported the team to apply for KIS funding for Yasir and has facilitated connections with the Autism Centre he attends when not at kindergarten to support continuity. Leonie is currently working with Nala to find a suitable Long Day Care centre for him to attend when the Autism Centre access finishes (including helping her understand the National Quality Standard and rating system), as well as helping her start to consider options for schooling. Nala is now more confident and optimistic about Yasir's education and how to support it, and she can see how he is benefiting from his kindergarten experience.

### *Case example B – Sofia and Megan*

Sofia\* was referred to our AEL program by her kindergarten teacher who was concerned about her sporadic attendance during her second year of kindergarten. Sofia attended kindergarten regularly while she was in kinship care living with a relative, however this had changed for the worse after returning to live with her mum Megan\*. Sofia's family has a background of complex generational trauma, mental health issues, and family violence. Her mum Megan was doing her best to deal with these challenges but was finding it difficult to get her children to kindergarten and school, despite having a good relationship with the kindergarten team. The children have trouble sleeping, and the whole family often goes to bed late and wakes too late in the day.

Leonie has been working hard to build a connection with Megan and Sofia, despite many failed attempts to meet, visit the home or talk on the phone with Megan, and it took some time for Megan to feel comfortable to sign up to the AEL program. Now that she has, Leonie has facilitated a Brigance assessment for Sofia, which identified several areas of delay, and is working with Megan and the educators to provide appropriate support and referral as part of a care team. Leonie has also worked with the team to provide Megan with information and support on establishing healthy

sleep routines for the children, and toys for her to borrow and return to the kindergarten. Leonie sometimes walks Megan and Sofia to the kindergarten to create more opportunities for support and connection – even though some days there is no answer at the door when Leonie arrives, and sometimes text messaging is the only form of communication that works. The team is careful to emphasise that any time spent kindergarten is better than none and Sofia will always be welcome, even if she arrives late, and Megan is invited to stay and participate in the program to build her confidence and sense of connection.

Even though Sofia's attendance is still sporadic, it is important to recognise and celebrate the small yet significant steps that have been made in the first few months of the program. Trusting relationships have been developed between Megan, Leonie, Sofia and the kindergarten team, and Sofia is getting more support for her learning and development than she was previously. Importantly, Megan has expressed a determination to get Sofia to kindergarten every day, indicating her recognition of the value of the kindergarten experience and her desire to do the best she can for her child.

## Early outcomes and challenges

Even at this early stage of implementation, we are seeing some promising early outcomes for children and families experiencing vulnerability, as well as for the kindergarten teams that support them. We are also seeing some challenges and opportunities for improvement.

Some positive changes resulting from the program so far include:

- Overall, the children want to come to kindergarten and are benefiting from more consistent attendance and holistic support.
- Trusting relationships are being developed between parents, children, the AEL Facilitator and the kindergarten teams, which open the door for conversations about children's learning and development.
- Parents are placing a higher value on early learning, especially through play, and in some cases are open to improving learning in the home environment.
- Educators value the role of the AEL facilitator, see her as a trusted adviser and are keen to draw on her experience.
- While referrals and take-up of the program were initially slow, we are seeing a 'snowball' effect as more families and educators understand the value of the program.

Some of the challenges for implementation have so far included:

- It takes time to build connections and trust with families and to help them place a higher priority on education in the context of multiple stressors in their lives. Facilitators need a high degree of patience and persistence. It will be important to have realistic expectations as to the impact that can be achieved over one year of the funding, and to measure the 'green shoots' that indicate early change.
- Some families are concerned about stigma that may come with participation in the program, may not want someone visiting their home, or are reluctant to sign up for a whole year of support when they feel they may only need short-term assistance. A range of approaches is needed to engage families who require different levels of support.
- When planning our SRF allocation we were required to choose a set number of AEL places per kindergarten based on evidence of vulnerability in the community, and are required to

acquit funds against those allocations; however, this has not matched up with where there is the greatest actual need. Flexibility is required to reallocate places as needed across an EYM.

Overall, we are excited by the early outcomes we are seeing of the AEL program for our children, families and educators, and are finding that the benefits far outweigh the challenges. As one of the first EYMs to implement the program, we are keen to share our experiences so that others may be encouraged to do the same.