The Geelong Project: ‘a community of schools and youth services’ model

By Associate Professor David Mackenzie and Dr Monica Thielking, Swinburne University and Mike Kelly, CEO of Time for Youth

The Geelong Project is one of eleven innovations projects funded under the Victorian Government’s Homelessness Action Plan. The development of a community of schools and youth services model in Geelong preceded this funding opportunity, but the alignment of significant funding with an important community-driven research and development project is an historically fortuitous confluence. As well as Department of Human services (DHS) funding, there is Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) funding under Youth Partnerships and Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA) homelessness research funding via Swinburne and a component of Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP) funding through Swinburne.

The Geelong Project initiative was conceived as a place-based whole of community model rather than a program that delivers a specific service. More complex for that reason, it is however, a model with a clearly specified program logic that draws on a depth of research and practice experience on early intervention.

Early Intervention in Australia

In Australia, early intervention and prevention have been highlighted as key policy settings for addressing homelessness. In Australia, early intervention was first advanced in the mid-nineties through a Prime Minister’s Youth Homelessness Taskforce. By 2001, there were Reconnect program workers in some 100 sites around Australia, taking referrals for young people at risk of homelessness or recently homeless in order to ‘reconnect’ them with their families where appropriate as well to keep them engaged in education. Since the mid-1990s awareness of early intervention has increased, and today, cooperation between schools and youth agencies is more common, and many homeless agencies play an active role in early intervention and the diversion of young people from entering the homelessness service system.

Reconnect receives referrals from schools and other agencies. Schools are important sites for referral into Reconnect but not the only pathway into the program. Some have argued that as schools have become better resourced and more committed to student support, more is done to support at-risk or homeless school students so that referrals to agencies like Reconnect are later rather than earlier. However, this claim has not been independently verified. Then there is the nature of the systemic relations between the education and community sectors with their different cultures and priorities. The problem of service systems trapped in silos shaped by departmental imperatives and funding accountabilities is not new. Is a more integrated and cross-sectoral approach possible?

The Foundations

The Geelong Project model builds on four core foundations. The first is the Early Intervention Working Group (EIWG) that began in December 2009 to work on the development of an early intervention model and framework for youth homelessness in Barwon. A wide-range of stakeholders have participated in the EIWG—schools, other agencies, the Swinburne University team—which has truly been the crucible in which the collaboration embodied in the Geelong Project was forged, resulting in the ‘community of schools and youth services’ model. Other structures have been established to manage and operate the funded Geelong Project in action, but the Early Intervention Working Group continues as an important forum focusing on practice.

The Geelong Project Foundations

1. COMMUNITY COLLABORATION
   Early Intervention Working Group
   • New partnerships and connections formed across service sectors
   • New ‘Heads of Agreement’ developed between the key youth and housing service providers and partnering with Swinburne University
   • Planning for an EIWG framework and service model undertaken through extensive consultations
   • Service mapping and approaches to entry point, screening, assessment and integrated care teams developed

2. EARLY IDENTIFICATION
   Geelong Student Needs Survey
   • Survey funded through FaHCSIA, with at risk of homelessness indicators introduced to service providers, DEECD and secondary schools
   • Approvals and cooperation of DEECD and schools obtained to undertake survey
   • Surveys commenced in October 2010 across all state secondary schools in Barwon which will provide baseline data on risk of homelessness
   • New connections forged with Barwon secondary schools within the context of early intervention developments

3. TRACKING, SCREENING AND REFERRAL
   e-Wellbeing
   • Barwon Youth Partnership DEECD connections developed and Early Intervention adopted as a key direction of BVY strategic plan
   • Common tools to underpin early intervention, to be developed into e-products supported by BVY funding
   • Including a system-wide tracking of young people’s interaction with the support system
   • Formalisation of new partnerships and pathways between secondary schools and the EI service system

4. MAKING A DIFFERENCE
   Action Plan Pilot Sites
   • Demonstrating an early intervention service model
   • Strengthening and formalising the underpinning early intervention system
   • Monitoring and evaluation of the impact of service delivery and system reform on client outcomes and reduction of homelessness

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The Geelong Project — Model of Early Intervention

A second foundation of the Geelong Project is early identification. Currently, young people at-risk are identified on the basis that someone notices indications of their risk of homelessness. But often referral comes at the point of incipient homelessness. In 2011, the Swinburne research team undertook a Geelong Student Needs survey of all students in state secondary schools using a validated at-risk assessment tool for identification of risk at any point in the system or data entry systems that are currently in use. The data is being used as part of the screening process in the catchment schools and will be supplemented by new data from young people in alternative education settings and then a little later from students in Catholic secondary schools.

The third foundation is the e-Wellbeing toolbox. For early intervention to be more proactive and effective as well as efficient, school support staff and community early intervention workers need to be working closely together on a regular basis. The proposed e-Wellbeing IT tools are being designed to bring together salient information routinely accessible to both parties.

Currently, there are a range of program requirements and ICT case management systems or data entry systems that are program specific and locked into the accountabilities required by the various programs and departments.

The e-Wellbeing toolkit prototype, which is under-development, will eventually embody the following features: screening that allows for identification of risk at any point in the service system but important in schools; a record of contacts with the service system that provides for the first time a picture of the ‘system’ as used by vulnerable young people; an electronic tool for cross-sectoral referrals from one point in the system to another service; and early intervention support which captures the casework and other support being done with young people who are supported by the Geelong Project.

The fourth foundation is the implementation of early intervention support in the pilot schools—the Geelong Project Early Intervention Team. The project will field a team of early intervention workers who will be able to work directly with at-risk young people and their families.

This work will extend the youth-focused family-centred practice that has been developed over many years by Time for Youth across several cognate early intervention and diversion programs.

The team, headed by a coordinator, will consist of six EFT early intervention workers. The coordinator is located at Time for Youth while Barwon Youth and Time for Youth each employ three of the workers in the team, reflecting the investment that the two key youth homelessness agencies have in the project. In addition, at Time for Youth, there are several workers such as an at-risk of homelessness youth health worker from Headspace Barwon, a Reconnect worker and family reconciliation workers, while located at Barwon Youth are drug and alcohol and Youth Connection workers.

Brokerage funding is an important feature of The Geelong Project model. The brokerage fund will be available for additional educational and other support beyond what can be provided by the team but also as a way of accelerating what is needed so that the whole early intervention effort can be as timely as possible. Brokerage could underwrite coaching to help turn around a failing pattern in school, counselling, mentoring and so on. Flexibility is important.

The early intervention team will be working closely with the DEECD, student support staff and student well-being staff in the pilot schools. The new support effort is not intended to replace the supports that schools currently provide but complement and extend what exists through a more integrated approach, and if the model can be continued, through a series of place-based local system reforms.

Measuring Outcomes and Evaluation

From the outset the Geelong Project has been committed to a sophisticated measurement of outcomes and a strong internal evaluation of all aspects of the model. This will also include participation in both a meta-evaluation of the Action Plan innovations projects and DEECD Youth Partnerships project evaluation.

Measuring Outcomes

Once young people have been identified as at-risk of homelessness and their case is assessed, early intervention covers a range of supports including where necessary full wrap-around case management. The current resources will provide support to 210 young people in the catchment areas. A range of time series measures will assess changes in the young people especially their levels of risk of homelessness. Reducing risk is clearly an outcome to be monitored.

For large-scale interventions in a single community, it is not methodologically appropriate to put in place a evaluation design that has control and treatment comparison. The intervention in Geelong is in two catchments from which about 70 per cent of referrals have previously come. Some within-community comparisons can be made.

However, it will be possible to monitor young people entering the Geelong homelessness service system as well as the flow of early school leavers (not necessarily or even in most cases homeless) but who are at higher risk of becoming homeless subsequently.
Evaluation
The measurement of outcomes is how the effectiveness of the project will ultimately be judged. But, there are other questions about the model and the project that should be addressed in any evaluation. Efficiency is one. Is the delivery of services the most cost efficient way of achieving the project outcomes? Based on the Geelong data, a cost effectiveness simulation will be done to quantify the various costs of what the project has achieved and to provide cost data on the inputs and outputs/outcomes and indicative cost data on the benefits of the intervention.

Another issue is the complex partnerships in the Geelong Project. Partnerships can be seen as a special case of ‘social networking’ more broadly, and social networking tools will be explored to assess the collaboration achieved in Geelong.

There is already existing Homelessness Outcomes Star, but not a star that can be applied to at-risk young people who are not homeless. Swinburne University and the Geelong partners will be working with UK-based Triangle Consulting to develop an ‘Early Intervention’ Outcomes Star. Overall, the evaluation needs to provide information about the essential features of the Geelong project model that can usefully inform any consideration of more broadly replicating the model in Victoria.

Going Forward
The homelessness White Paper, The Road Home, proposed a national target of halving homelessness by 2020. Whether or not this is still an achievable target is perhaps debatable. However, there is a strong consensus that early intervention and prevention are policy imperatives and the challenge is not whether or not to undertake ‘early intervention’ but how to be as effective as possible.

A premise of the Geelong Project is that a place-based community approach is a promising focus, so outcomes need to be assessed over the whole of the community rather than just the outcomes of a funded agency program. However, in order to attempt this, innovation and reform is required on a number of levels. There is clarity about early intervention not only theoretically, but based on practice experience in Geelong.

The core partnership—Time for Youth, Barwon Youth and Swinburne University, along with other close partners such as the Geelong LLEN and Headspace Barwon—is deeply committed to a whole of community model.

Strong partnerships and collaborative relations exist and are being formalised. A rigorous screening process is in place and the assessment of risk in the catchment areas is underway. The e-Wellbeing monitoring tools are being designed. The new early intervention staff team is in place and beginning its work. The project plan for outcomes measurement and the internal evaluation is a priority under development.

The Geelong Project is an example of innovation born out of a community’s desire to develop beyond its existing limitations. The Geelong Project partners are totally dedicated to demonstrating that through effective early intervention vulnerable young people can be supported to stay at home where that is possible, remain in school or in education and connected in their community. The project catchphrase is ‘making a difference’ which ultimately means reducing youth homelessness in Geelong.