Submission to the Inquiry into the State Education System in Victoria

December 2023

Acknowledgement of Country

Beyond the Bell acknowledges the Gunditjmara people of the Maar nation as Traditional Custodians of the land on which we meet today. We pay our respects to the Elders, past, present, and emerging, and recognise their continuing connection and contribution to this land and waters.

About Beyond the Bell

Beyond the Bell is a not-for-profit collective impact backbone support organisation operating across the Great South Coast in Victoria, Australia. Regional leaders in place-based initiatives, and valuing innovation, creativity, equity, and sustainability, Beyond the Bell works collaboratively with its partners to achieves its aim of ensuring every young person in the Great South Coast is connected to education and actively engaged in their learning.

The Collective Impact framework is a structured approach to addressing complex social issues by bringing together diverse stakeholders to work collaboratively toward a common goal. As a backbone support organisation Beyond the Bell works closely with both the education and community sectors, playing a critical role in facilitating and coordinating the collaborative efforts of these stakeholders through facilitating communication between partner organisations, guiding the development of a common agenda, mobilising resources, and collecting and analysing data.

By utilising this framework Beyond the Bell supports numerous initiatives across the region that work towards supporting educational outcomes across the Great South Coast. This includes early intervention and school transition support such as the Stepping Stones to School program, offering services like playgroups, parenting programs, and transition networks assistance. The organisation extends its commitment to students through support of the Level-Up project which supports numerous partner organisations to deliver in-school support programs, including targeted cultural support and specialised interventions. Additionally, Beyond the Bell supports mentoring programs that connect students with adult mentors, alongside career development initiatives that equip students with the skills and knowledge for informed career decisions. Finally, Beyond the Bell is committed to empowering youth voices through supporting youth leadership initiatives such as the Making a Difference youth reference group, whilst also supporting education transition initiatives such as individualised career advice, that ultimately prepares young individuals for leadership roles whilst guiding them through educational transitions into the workforce.

As a regional leader in place-based and collective impact initiatives, Beyond the Bell emphasises innovation, creativity, equity, and sustainability in its collaborative efforts with partners in the education and community sectors. By facilitating communication, guiding the development of a common agenda, and mobilising resources, Beyond the Bell plays a crucial role in ensuring every young person person in the Great South Coast is connected to education and actively engaged in their learning. The organisation's strategic use of data is central to informed decision-making and continuous improvement. Through various initiatives, including early intervention, school transition support, in-school programs, mentoring, career development, and youth leadership, Beyond the Bell actively contributes to enhancing educational outcomes in the Great South Coast.

Executive Summary

Victoria's education system faces several challenges, including disparities in educational access and outcomes, particularly in rural areas. Factors contributing to these challenges include the rising teacher attrition rates, post-COVID social inclusion and wellbeing issues for students, a crowded curriculum, and inadequate funding for school-based supports. These issues underscore the need for a different and more comprehensive approach to address the emerging diverse needs of students and educators alike.

The Collective Impact model offers a promising solution. It involves cross-sector collaboration where government, business, nonprofits, and the community work together towards a common goal. This approach is particularly effective in education, where complex issues often require multifaceted solutions. By aligning the efforts of different stakeholders, Collective Impact ensures that resources are used more effectively, leading to more sustainable outcomes.

In the education sector, Collective Impact has demonstrated significant benefits. At Beyond the Bell, we have experienced these significant benefits of the Collective Impact approach in delivering responsive and at-need programs to combat emerging issues within our community. Operating in South West Victoria, we are committed to improving educational engagement and outcomes. Our approach is collaborative and community-driven, emphasising adaptability, co-design, and evidence-informed strategies. We've achieved promising results in enhancing social and emotional well-being, supporting disadvantaged children, and boosting learning engagement.

Looking to the future, there is a vision of an education system where every child and young person in Victoria, regardless of their background or location, has access to high-quality education. This vision includes a system that is adaptive, inclusive, and responsive to the unique needs of each community. Through continued and expanded use of the Collective Impact approach, there is potential for significant progress in closing the educational gap, enhancing student well-being, and preparing all young Victorians for a successful future. This aspiration is not just about improving academic outcomes but also about fostering a more equitable, supportive, and resilient education system that can adapt to and meet the evolving challenges of our time.

Recommendations

1. Schools to formulate and execute community sector collaboration and cooperation frameworks, fostering enhanced community engagement.
2. Policymakers, key decision-makers, and leaders within schools and the Department of Education undergo training in community collaboration skills and the Collective Impact Model, ensuring a strategic and unified approach to educational initiatives.
3. To optimise engagement with the community sector, policymakers, key decision-makers, and leaders within schools and the Department of Education should receive training encompassing a comprehensive understanding of the community sector, its underlying models, and potential support avenues available for schools and students.
4. Ensure the development of future interventions and initiatives through a place-based approach, tailoring strategies to the unique needs and characteristics of specific communities for more impactful outcomes.
5. Facilitate accessibility to comprehensive and localised school data for community organisations collaborating with the education sector, fostering transparency and data-driven decision-making for more effective collaboration.

6. Advocate for the support and funding of collective impact backbone support organisations, recognising their pivotal role in orchestrating and sustaining collaborative efforts within the education sector.

Submission

(5) examples of best practice in other jurisdictions and educational settings used to improve student learning outcomes and wellbeing;

For twelve years Beyond the Bell has been practicing Collective Impact in South West Victoria, supporting educational outcomes and student wellbeing as a Collective Impact backbone support organisation. This submission focuses on the role Collective Impact, and Backbone Support Organisation such as Beyond the Bell, can play in supporting educational obtainment and engagement within our schools, and how it can be utilised as best practice between the community sector, that is not-for-profit organisations addressing community needs, the private sector, and educational settings to improve student learning outcomes and wellbeing. Through examining how collective impact can be utilised by and benefit education settings and the broader education system, whilst drawing from Beyond the Bells extensive experience and numerous successful initiatives in this field, a series of six recommendations has been crafted that, if implemented, will act as a beacon of positive change and outcomes for our schools and students.

What is Collective Impact?

The Collective Impact Model is a transformative framework for social change, providing a structured approach to addressing complex societal challenges through collaborative efforts. Collective impact diverges from traditional linear problem-solving approaches, emphasising the power of collective action among local diverse stakeholders. The Collective Impact Model is characterised by its commitment to fostering collaboration, shared measurement systems, mutually reinforcing activities, continuous communication, and the presence of a backbone support organisation. Most importantly, Collective Impact seeks to utilise the expertise, skills, knowledge and resources of community stakeholders to solve place-based problems efficiently, effectively and agilely.

Within the education sector this means bringing education settings together with community organisations, such as children, youth, employment, universities, and/or indigenous support organisations and the private sector, such as industry leaders or other relevant private enterprises, that all have a stake or interest in supporting learning outcomes and student wellbeing. Beyond the Bell has brought primary and secondary schools in the South West of Victoria together with local not-for-profits and enterprises to provide in-school mentoring, indigenous student support, school transition support programs for families, youth action groups, teacher professional learning hubs, and support to at-risk students.

At its core, Collective Impact, and Beyond the Bell, has challenged the conventional notions of isolated institutional or government led interventions, illustrating the sustainable, efficient and positive outcomes that the synchronised, multifaceted efforts of collective impact can obtain. Collective impact rests upon the recognition that complex social issues, such as supporting student wellbeing, demand coordinated action across various sectors. The model, as demonstrated by Beyond the Bell, posits that meaningful and long-lasting change is attainable only when stakeholders from diverse backgrounds, including nonprofits, government agencies, businesses, schools, or community members, collaborate in a strategic and integrated manner.

Collective Impact, whilst being flexible and adaptable to specific community needs, has consistent key components that present straightforward opportunities for government support. These key components include:

1. **Common Agenda:** The first component of the Collective Impact Model is the establishment of a common agenda, where all participating organisations align their goals and objectives. This shared vision serves as a unifying force, ensuring that each stakeholder contributes to a collective understanding of the issue at hand. Through facilitated dialogue and consensus-building processes, a cohesive strategy emerges, fostering a sense of ownership and commitment among collaborators. The shared vision and agenda developed by Beyond the Bell alongside their partners is to ensure every child in the South West of Victoria is connected to education and actively engaged in learning, which focusses their efforts on the education system with partnerships detailing the need for such an agenda.

2. **Shared Measurement Systems:** A distinctive feature of the Collective Impact Model is its emphasis on shared measurement systems. Effective collaboration requires a common set of indicators and metrics to track progress consistently. Shared measurement not only facilitates data-driven decision-making but also enhances accountability and transparency among stakeholders. The adoption of standardised metrics ensures that all contributors are working toward the same benchmarks, thereby promoting a unified approach to impact assessment. Beyond the Bell achieves this by working alongside schools and other partners to explore what data metrics they currently capture, using them to develop a shared evaluation and measurement mechanism for each initiative, with Beyond the Bell supporting partners to undertake evaluation and measurement, reducing the administrative or management burden on partners and schools ensuring that partners can focus their attention and resources on initiative delivery.

3. **Mutually Reinforcing Activities:** The model recognises that diverse organisations bring unique strengths and resources to the table. To optimise these contributions, mutually reinforcing activities are identified and implemented. This component emphasises the interdependence of initiatives, encouraging stakeholders to complement one another's efforts rather than duplicating work. Through strategic coordination, the combined impact of interventions is amplified, creating a synergistic effect that enhances overall effectiveness. Beyond the Bells Level Up initiative acts as prime example of this approach, bringing together youth, mental health, post-education transition organisations, and secondary schools in the region to provide individualised engagement programs whilst extending career pathway knowledge and experiences to students.

4. **Continuous Communication:** Communication lies at the heart of successful collective impact initiatives. Ongoing and transparent communication channels are essential for maintaining alignment, addressing challenges, and adapting strategies in response to evolving circumstances. Regular feedback loops and information sharing ensure that all stakeholders remain informed and engaged, fostering a culture of collaboration that transcends organisational boundaries. Beyond the Bell achieves this by supporting open communication between schools, the community sector and government, ensuring that all stakeholders are kept updated on the initiatives of each, with communication and connection between schools and other stakeholders facilitated by Beyond the Bell, ensuring that schools can utilise Beyond the Bell networks and expertise and knowledge of often complex sectors, without having to do the groundwork, and commit the resources, to establish their own networks.

5. **Backbone Organisation:** Central to the Collective Impact Model is the concept of a backbone organisation, a dedicated entity responsible for orchestrating and supporting collaborative efforts. The backbone organisation serves as the first point of contact and administrative backbone of the initiative, facilitating communication, managing data, and providing logistical support. While it does not implement programs directly, it plays a crucial role in catalysing and sustaining the collaborative process. Beyond the Bell is a backbone support organisation within South West Victoria, playing a pivotal role of supporting schools throughout the collaborative process.

In essence, the Collective Impact Model stands as a beacon of innovation in navigating the intricate landscape of social change. When supported by backbone support organisations such as Beyond the Bell, it redefines problem-solving paradigms by acknowledging the intricate interplay of various actors in the pursuit of a common good. As the model gains traction nationally and globally, its significance cannot be overstated, especially in challenging traditional interventions. It recognises that the sum is greater than its parts, leveraging the rich tapestry of skills and perspectives from diverse stakeholders to weave a comprehensive solution to place-based issues experienced by schools and other education settings. By embracing the principles of a common agenda, shared measurement systems, mutually reinforcing activities, continuous communication, and a backbone support organisation, Collective Impact not only challenges the status quo but also offers a dynamic blueprint for fostering sustainable, community-driven change. In a world where collaboration is key, this model emerges as a testament to the collective strength of diverse voices converging for the betterment of our education settings.

The Role of Backbone Support Organisations

In the Collective Impact framework, backbone support organisations, such as Beyond the Bell, play a crucial role in facilitating and coordinating collaborative efforts among various stakeholders to address complex social issues. The backbone support organisation serves as the backbone or infrastructure for the collective effort, providing essential support and coordination to ensure the success of the initiative. To achieve this Beyond the Bell as a backbone support organisation undertakes:

1. **Coordination and Facilitation:** facilitate communication and collaboration among diverse stakeholders, and coordinate activities and initiatives to ensure alignment with the common agenda and goals. Beyond the Bell acts as a first point of contact for schools and other education settings wanting to access and collaborate with the community sector, with Beyond the Bell coordinating such efforts so stakeholders can concentrate on undertaking any developed interventions or initiatives.
2. **Data Collection and Analysis:** gather and analyse data to assess the impact of the initiative and make informed decisions, whilst monitoring progress and outcomes to determine the effectiveness of the collective efforts. Beyond the Bell undertakes evaluation of supported programs, and shares data between all relevant stakeholders so that continued review of initiatives is supported by evidence.
3. **Resource Mobilisation:** identify and secure funding and resources needed for the initiative and coordinate resource allocation and distribution among participating organisations. One of the key functions of Beyond the Bell is to assist stakeholders in navigating the complex systems of funding, whilst utilising their skills in undertaking funding and grant applications on behalf of collaborative initiatives, distributing funds to stakeholders and undertaking acquittals and reporting.
4. **Continuous Learning and Adaptation:** facilitate a culture of continuous learning and improvement among stakeholders whilst collecting and disseminating best practices, lessons learned, and insights to enhance the effectiveness of the initiative. Whilst both the education sector and community sector have skills and knowledge in common, there is much that both sectors hold alone that is of benefit to the other. Beyond the bell and backbone support organisations facilitate the sharing of knowledge and learnings, enriching all stakeholders whilst assisting those stakeholders to adapt interventions based on this shared learning.

5. **Policy and Advocacy:** advocate for supportive policies and systemic changes that can contribute to the success of the initiative and engage with policymakers and other influential stakeholders to create an enabling environment, such as advocating the effectiveness of collective impact through mechanisms such as this inquiry.

6. **Evaluation and Measurement:** Establish a system for evaluating the impact and outcomes of the collective efforts and uses evaluation findings to make data-driven decisions and adjust strategies as needed. Evaluation can be complex, with stakeholders often having their own individual evaluation needs. Beyond the Bell and backbone support organisations support stakeholders to develop evaluation and measurement mechanisms that fulfil all stakeholders needs whilst ensuring that there is an ongoing culture of adaption based on evaluation within stakeholders.

7. **Conflict Resolution:** address conflicts and challenges that may arise among stakeholders and facilitate dialogue and problem-solving to maintain a positive and collaborative working environment. As facilitators, backbone support organisations such as Beyond the Bell minimise the risk of communication issues by ensuring stakeholders adhere to the principals of collective impact and collaboration, whist balancing the various needs and modalities of stakeholders.

Benefits of Collective Impact

Collective impact provides a myriad of benefits for those working within the model, due largely to its place-based approach to problem solving, the mutually supportive environment it fosters, increased levels of vigilance amongst participating stakeholders, and the effectiveness of developed initiates and interventions and finally through its efficiency and cost effectiveness.

1. **Place-based:** The Collective Impact Model's emphasis on being place-based is a key advantage, allowing tailored solutions to address the unique needs and dynamics of a specific community. Australia, and Victoria, is a large and diverse place, with significant differences surrounding the education experience, needs and culture between metro and regional areas, with further differences found within the regions themselves. Singularly developed and top-down approaches, for example those developed by Government departments, attempt to find a solution that fits all communities, with this act of compromise creating a 'one size fits all' approaches instead of 'tailored to fit' approach. This traditional 'one size fits all' approach is often ineffective or needing significant adaptation to be used in a specific community leading to resource wastage or worse; intervention failure. Significant evidence exists regarding the effectiveness of place-based collective impact, with jurisdictions such as the United States, Canada and the European Union recognising the power of these approaches, placing them at the centre of community intervention development. Given the diversity of our communities in Victoria, this is one of the core benefits of collective action. Within education settings this means ensuring that initiatives and interventions are grounded within the local context. Whilst many schools and educational settings face varying challenges, the distinct lived experiences between regional schools and those in other settings can lead to significant differences in educational approaches and outcomes.

2. **Mutually Supportive:** Stakeholders bring diverse expertise and perspectives to the table, with all stakeholders mutually supportive of not only the interventions and initiatives being developed, but also to each other. Mutual support enables stakeholders to access each other's knowledge, skills, and experiences, resulting in a more comprehensive and well-informed approach to addressing needs. This exchange is mutually beneficial for all

stakeholders, as stakeholders share knowledge and skills, inadvertently creating a reciprocal enhancement of individual capacities, generating a positive ripple effect that strengthens their respective organisations. The participation in collective impact thus inadvertently generates capacity building, further reinforcing the effectiveness of each stakeholder's own initiatives. For education providers this provides a fully supported and easy mechanism to share best practice, ideas, and support ultimately enhancing the overall education quality and level of innovation in the sector.

3. **Effectiveness:** Collective Impact utilises the collective power of diverse stakeholders, including government bodies, non-profits, businesses, schools, and community members. By bringing together varied perspectives, resources, and expertise, the model creates interventions that are tailored, targeted, thorough, fully supported and responding to actual need. For education providers this means creating interventions that are comprehensive, address actual needs, and are place-based, resulting in sustainable interventions that enhance student learning outcomes and wellbeing.

4. **Vigilant:** One of the key benefits of collective impact is the increased vigilance amongst partner organisations; partners, through being supported to undertake critical evaluation and analysis of current issues and opportunities become more vigilant and effective at spotting such. This increased vigilance not only uncovers areas of concern and opportunity that may have previously been overlooked, but also through the power of collective vigilance shines lights on intersecting areas that would have remained dark if not for the illumination of multiple diverse insights and experiences. Within schools, this vigilance results in the early identification of emerging problems, with the mechanisms of collective impact able to be quickly deployed to solve the problem before it emerges or to ensure a robust and immediate response as it emerges.

5. **Adaptive:** Adapting to change is a crucial element of effective problem-solving. The collaborative nature of Collective Impact brings together diverse stakeholders, enriching the problem-solving process and enhancing the collective ability to navigate and respond to evolving conditions. Continuous communication and information sharing fosters a feedback loop that enables timely adjustments in strategies, resource allocation, and approaches. This adaptability ensures that Collective Impact initiatives can effectively address challenges, seize opportunities, and remain attuned to the dynamic nature of the environment they work in. The adaptive nature of collective impact in education ensures that strategies and programs can quickly adjust to changing educational landscapes or student needs.

6. **Efficient and Cost Effective:** Collective impact involves a collaborative, multi-stakeholder approach that addresses issues comprehensively. By tackling the root causes of problems, governments can avoid the need for repeated interventions and achieve more sustainable outcomes. Traditional models often focus on addressing immediate symptoms of a problem. In contrast, collective impact emphasises addressing the underlying systemic issues and finding long-term solutions, leading to a more sustainable, efficient and cost-effective approach free from the cycle of reactive interventions. Collective Impact also supports the pooling of resources from various sectors, organisations, and government agencies. This results in more efficient resource allocation, whilst also reducing the risk of duplication across services and interventions. There are numerous community services and supports available, however when the organisations delivering these services work in isolation there is a risk of multiple organisations duplicating the same services despite working towards the same goal. Collective Impact prevents the duplication of such services, ultimately ensuring resource expenditure is not duplicated and therefore wasted.

Recommendations

1. **Schools to formulate and execute community collaboration and cooperation frameworks, fostering enhanced community engagement.**

   Traditionally, schools operate as somewhat insular entities, often functioning independently from each other, working solely with the Department of Education. This isolation can foster a competitive and closed environment, hindering open collaboration and effective communication with external entities, including other schools. Such a competitive stance not only restricts the sharing of innovative solutions, skills, knowledge, and best practices but also leads to a significant duplication of efforts. Furthermore, each school, with its unique approach to collaboration, presents distinct challenges for community sector engagement, requiring tailored strategies for effective collaboration. This variability underscores the need for a more unified and open approach to educational collaboration, which can be achieved through the development and implementation of a consistent community collaboration and cooperation framework for schools, ultimately promoting the sharing of resources and expertise for the collective betterment of the education system.

2. **Policymakers, key decision-makers, and leaders within schools and the Department of Education undergo training in community collaboration skills and the Collective Impact Model, ensuring a strategic and unified approach to educational initiatives.**

   Whilst schools are extremely knowledgeable when it comes to education, they often encounter a gap in collaborative skills and knowledge. Many schools, policymakers, and government departments tend to concentrate solely on their specific areas of operation, lacking awareness or proficiency in the powerful potential of collaboration. To bridge this gap, training programs are essential. Such training can foster a shared understanding of collaboration principles, making the process more seamless and effective. By equipping educational professionals with these skills, collaboration becomes not just possible but also more efficient and productive, enhancing the overall educational landscape.

3. **To optimise engagement with the community sector, policymakers, key decision-makers, and leaders within schools and the Department of Education should receive training encompassing a comprehensive understanding of the community sector, its underlying models, and potential support avenues available for schools and students.**

   Schools often lack the expertise to address the complex social issues faced by young people. While they are adept in educational aspects, recognising and managing wider social challenges can be outside their traditional remit. The community sector, rich in knowledge, skills, and supports, could be a valuable resource for schools. However, schools' narrow focus on education means they often overlook these community resources. This gap leads to schools creating in-house supports that might duplicate what already exists in the community sector. Training in different models of engagement used by the community sector can bridge this gap. Such training would not only highlight shared values and methods of working with young people but also foster solidarity and reinforce collaboration between schools and community organisations.

4. **Ensure the development of future interventions and initiatives through a place-based approach, tailoring strategies to the unique needs and characteristics of specific communities for more impactful outcomes.**

   Top-down or government-led approaches in education often adopt a 'one size fits all' strategy, failing to account for the diverse needs of metropolitan and regional educational settings. Place-based solutions, on the other hand, are tailored to local needs, fostering community ownership and empowerment. This leads to more sustainable outcomes. Schools and communities possess the necessary skills and knowledge to address complex social issues, and a bottom-up, place-based approach effectively harnesses these resources. Furthermore, strong connections between schools and the community sector can provide valuable role modelling and community links for students, guiding them in accessing support beyond their educational journey.

5. **Facilitate accessibility to comprehensive and localised school data for community organisations collaborating with the education sector, fostering transparency and data-driven decision-making for more effective collaboration.**

   The secretive government culture around data, which is held by the Department of Education, particularly data relating to public schools, presents a significant risk. As schools are public entities, government bodies should make their data publicly available. Yet, the lack of transparency from government in sharing this data conceals the real state of education in communities, rendering emerging issues invisible and potentially creating gaps in student support. Open data sharing is crucial; it enables communities to identify and address challenges alongside schools and government bodies. However, if school data continues to be made inaccessible by government bodies, this opportunity for collaborative improvement is lost, which is especially concerning given the impact of education on young people's futures. The governments culture of secrecy around regional and specific school data must end. Given that the government is responsible for overseeing the work being done with young people, coupled with the vulnerability of young people alongside the critical importance of education within our communities, the lack of transparency from government bodies regarding their data is inappropriate and unacceptable.

6. **Advocate for the support and funding of collective impact backbone support organisations, recognising their pivotal role in orchestrating and sustaining collaborative efforts within the education sector.**

   Collective Impact backbone support organisations serve as a crucial link between schools and the community sector. They possess the necessary skills to facilitate collaboration and develop interventions, allowing schools to focus on their primary educational roles. Recognising that schools are often time-poor, these organisations play a vital role in managing workloads and adapting to school time constraints, ensuring effective implementation of interventions. This support is instrumental in enhancing the efficiency and effectiveness of educational initiatives.