

Linking Schools and Early Years (LSEY)

Research Snapshot

Snapshot one

Background

Linking Schools and Early Years (LSEY) is a place-based community partnership approach that enables communities to work together to provide a continuum of learning and support throughout children's early years and into school. Early education and care services (ECEC), schools, child and family community services, and local and state government are working together to improve outcomes for children and their families.

Traditionally, concepts of school readiness put emphasis on a child's skills. More recent thinking recognises that "school readiness...reflects the environments in which children find themselves" (Kagan & Rigby, 2003) — their families, early childhood services, schools, health and community services, and broader communities.

Now approaching the end of its sixth and final year (2007–12), the LSEY pilot has been responding to research that shows that barriers vulnerable children face at the start of school could be overcome by stronger links and partnerships between schools, early years services, families and the community (CCCH, 2006).

Aims and goals

All children arrive at school with knowledge and experiences that come from growing up in families, neighbourhoods, services and communities. When children start school able to take advantage of all the learning opportunities, they can get the best start possible.

LSEY communities are working to ensure:

1. Children and families transition smoothly between early years services and schools.
2. Early years services and schools actively connect with families.
3. Schools are responsive to the individual learning needs of all children.

The LSEY approach

LSEY's community partnership approach enables communities to work together to rethink the way their local early childhood system supports children and families, and to plan and implement locally relevant actions that can create more coordinated supports.

This approach means that communities can implement actions and processes that work for their community.

The LSEY approach follows an action research model. Information from ongoing evaluation and review informs community planning to ensure responsive processes and regular reflection on achievements.

What has LSEY found?

The LSEY external evaluation has found some promising practice change across the pilot communities. The findings highlighted below are from data collected in 2008 and 2010, with a specific focus on the partnership approach to implementation.

Key evaluation findings (SPRC, 2010) include:

Opportunities to collaborate strengthen relationships and the capacity to plan and implement local actions.

LSEY increases the capacity of early education and care services, schools and child/family services to work together.

Multidisciplinary partnership working is achievable

Where local relationships are strong, partnerships mature, gain momentum and develop towards sustainability.

The effectiveness of community action is influenced by the strength of local relationships.

What you do is influenced by how you do it

Multidisciplinary joint planning creates a shared, community-led vision for change.

Partnerships and networks have contributed to positive practice change:

- ↑ 45% increase in schools running joint planning and training.
- ↑ 51% increase in ECEC services participating in joint planning and training.
- ↑ 20% increase in ECEC services and schools sharing information.
- ↑ 31% increase in ECEC and schools communicating with community services about families.

Practice change in LSEY communities

Networking and relationships: Services and schools recognise that time for networking is important and needs to be core business.

Information sharing: Ongoing formal and informal opportunities for services and schools to meet have facilitated information sharing about local programs, services and approaches and children/families (with consent).

Joint planning: Services and schools are planning together for community action, service system change and program alignment.

Local leadership: Activities are led by services and schools; this has built local capacity and ownership.

Key ingredients of the LSEY approach

Community driven: Strong relationships enable community partnerships to develop. Community partnerships plan, implement and evaluate local actions and share understanding about the rationale for change.

Place-based and evidence-based: Community partnerships use local data such as statistics and family consultations. They also draw on research and examples of best practice to inform planning.

Collaborative action: Community partnerships and networks build local capacity, and identify local leaders through collaborative action. Over time, community ownership, leadership and facilitation supports networking and collaborative action to develop into sustained practice.

Contributing activities

The strength of local relationships influences the effectiveness of partnerships and networks. Key activities focus on establishing a shared understanding of each other's practice and mutual respect for each other's role.

Peer swaps: When early years and prep educators spent time in each other's environments, it helped them to work together to establish educator networks.

Links worker: A short-term Links worker created the initial momentum and impetus for partnership and practitioner networks to develop.

Joint professional development and planning: Opportunities for services and schools to meet around professional development and program/service planning facilitated information sharing and capacity for consistent and coordinated community approaches.

Implications:

Policy, research and communities

- Local educators and practitioners need to have strong cross-sectoral relationships to support more effective use and coordination of community resources and knowledge.
- Family services need dedicated time to develop relationships and work together to enable more coordinated services for children and families, schools, and early education and care services.
- There are key practice principles that need to be observed for effective place-based community partnership approaches to be established.
- Community partnerships are well placed to lead local service system change and develop more enabling and locally responsive governance structures.
- Further research is required to understand how the place-based partnership approaches can be replicable and scaled-up effectively.

About LSEY snapshots

LSEY research snapshots aim to share findings from LSEY's approach and activities. Findings are based on the experiences of three Victorian communities: Corio-Norlane in the City of Greater Geelong, Footscray in the City of Maribyrnong and Hastings in the Mornington Peninsula Shire.

The LSEY pilot has a cross-sectional external evaluation being conducted by the Social Policy Research Centre at the University of New South Wales. Data was collected in 2008, 2010 and 2012. These research snapshots explore the 2008–2010 data. The 2012 data will be available in November 2012.

This time-limited series of snapshots will run from 2012 into early 2013 to communicate evaluation findings and highlight examples of good practice from six years of community implementation:

The series will explore:

1. The LSEY approach
2. Supporting smooth transitions
3. Engaging families
4. Responsive schools
5. Sustainability
6. The final findings.

For more information about the LSEY project see:

www.rch.org.au/lsey

References

Kagan, S.L. and Rigby, D.E. (2003). *Improving the Readiness of Children for School: Recommendations for State Policy*. Washington, DC: Centre for the Study of Social Policy. http://www.cssp.org/uploadFiles/improving_readiness.pdf

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