Jesuit Social Services
Building a Just Society

Submission to inquiry into the factors driving educational attainment

June 2026

We acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of all the lands on which Jesuit Social Services operates and pay respect to their Elders past and present. We express our gratitude for their love and care of people, community, land and all life.

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Introduction

Jesuit Social Services welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the House Standing Committee on Education's inquiry into factors driving educational attainment. We acknowledge the inquiry's focus on the differences between boys and girls, but also welcome inclusion in the Terms of Reference of other factors which drive differential engagement, participation, and outcomes. Our experience and broader research indicate that gender and socioeconomic status (SES) cannot be looked at in isolation - there is a distinct interplay between the two. While low SES is a primary driver of educational inequality, boys appear uniquely vulnerable to the negative impacts of socioeconomic disadvantage on educational outcomes[1], and often externalise these challenges in behaviours that the mainstream education system is poorly equipped to manage.[2]

Our central argument is that the mainstream education system often lacks the capacity, resourcing and integration with other systems to the meet the needs of individuals and cohorts facing long-term disadvantage, showing signs of school disengagement, and ultimately falling behind in educational attainment. We offer solutions, grounded in our experience, to increase school engagement and tailor educational settings and experiences (including VET) to achieve positive outcomes for cohorts experiencing complex challenges.

Should it be of value, we would welcome the opportunity to meet with the Committee to discuss our submission and/or give evidence at a hearing.

About us

Jesuit Social Services is a social change organisation working to build a just society where all people can live to their full potential. For almost 50 years we have been working with some of the most disadvantaged and marginalised members of our communities.

We began in 1977 supporting boys and young men in contact with the criminal justice system and have expanded our services over time to include delivery of programs in other areas including mental health and wellbeing, settlement and community building, housing, education, employment and training, climate and ecological justice and gender justice.

We are a national organisation with a significant footprint in Victoria, New South Wales and the Northern Territory. We work where the need is greatest and where we have the capacity, experience and skills to make the most difference.

Our work in schools and education

Many of the participants we work with experience educational disadvantage: among the 10,575 participants in our programs in 2024-25, nearly half (49%) of those aged 18 and over had only completed school to year 10. To support our participants to live safe, healthy and fulfilling lives, education and school-based based programs have increasingly become a core part of our work. Among these programs are a specialist secondary school for young people in contact with the justice system (the Ignatius Learning Centre); and a

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[1] Nguyen, H., Chapman, B., Le, H., Royer, H., Dearden, L., & Mitrou, F. (2026). *Socioeconomic status and gender gaps in educational outcomes across the life course: New distributional evidence*, Life Course Centre Working Paper Series, 2026-06. Institute for Social Science Research, The University of Queensland.

[2] Kathleen Burrow Research Institute (2025) *Echoes of Disparity: Issues Brief on Boys' Education in Australia,* Catholic Schools NSW.

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Registered Training Organisation (RTO) specialising in the delivery of practical, vocational courses for disadvantaged learners (Jesuit Community College).

Ultimately, we believe a universal public education system should be able to support all learners to reach their potential. Yet for a range of historic and structural reasons, supporting engagement and improving educational outcomes for some cohorts will require specialist offerings. The initiatives we deliver have emerged in response to needs identified through our research or existing programs, or where communities, schools or education authorities have sought our assistance. Some of this work is linked to our ongoing work with young people involved in the criminal justice system, recognising that education is a critical protective factor against justice system involvement, and that schools are an important setting for early intervention to address issues that may lead to offending. Given that boys make up the clear majority of young people with justice system contact,[3] our work recognises that efforts to prevent offending, break cycles of criminal behaviour, and support young people to flourish in education, must be gender-responsive.

Evaluations of our programs and initiatives have shown promising outcomes in terms of engaging young people with a range of complex needs and supporting them on pathways back into education, and in building the knowledge and capacity of school communities and workforces to address the barriers some young people face to living safe, healthy and fulfilling lives.

Inequity in educational attainment

Education is a primary setting in which to set young people up to flourish and contribute. It is also a key means to address a range of other social determinants so that young people can stay on that path. Key policy frameworks underpinning Australian school education emphasise both excellence and equity.[4]

Yet our experience shows that mainstream education systems, and current funding models, are not succeeding in meeting the needs of students with the most complex needs. This view is reinforced by multiple Commonwealth-commissioned reviews of school education, in addition to numerous state-based reviews, over the past 15 years. These reviews[5] have painted a picture of unequal educational attainment, showing:

- An overall stagnation or decline in a range of key educational outcomes, including literacy, numeracy, school attendance and Year 12 completion.
- A growing equity gap in learning outcomes for particular groups of young people, along with the entrenching of inequality. At the aggregate level, the educational outcomes of First Nations students, those from low socioeconomic backgrounds, students living in non-metropolitan areas, and those with a disability are below those of their peers.

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[3] Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2025) *Youth detention population in Australia,* Australian Government [Weblink]

[4] For example, United Convention on the Rights of the Child, The Mparntwe Declaration, Closing the Gap.

[5] For example: Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (2011) *Review of funding for schooling: Final Report.* Australian Government; Department of Education and Training (2018) *Through growth to achievement: Report of the review to achieve educational excellence in Australian schools.* Australian Government.

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The most recent national review (2023) also highlighted an increase in poor mental health and wellbeing among young Australians as having a significant impact on student learning. In addition, there has been an increase in the number and proportion of Australian students identified as having a disability, with 22.5% of school students receiving an educational adjustment due to their disability in 2022. School attendance has been declining since 2015, with fewer than half of students attending school 90% of the time in 2022.[6]

What we're doing isn't working, and we see this clearly through the experiences of participants in many of our programs. In a recent report, Molina, Tham and Hoang analyse 17 years of NAPLAN data and find strong and widening disparities in student outcomes are a reflection of system level features (including an inequitable school funding model) that influence schools' capacity to meet student needs.[7] Yet analysis drawing on NAPLAN data does not account for students not attending or engaging with school at all, suggesting an even greater gap.

School funding arrangements

School funding has been a dominant policy and political issue since David Gonski AC first determined how much funding schools need to deliver high-quality education.[8] Under current Commonwealth-State/Territory agreements (the Better and Fairer Schools Agreement 2025-2034 and associated bilateral agreements), it will not be until 2034 that all Government schools across Australia are funded in line with the Schooling Resource Standard (SRS). Until this is achieved, it will be challenging for schools and systems to make a significant impact on the equity gap - particularly those supporting high proportions of students in equity cohorts.

Specifically, the Victorian Government's decision to delay raising the state's school funding to 75% of the Schooling Resource Standard until 2031 effectively cut $2.4 billion from what was previously committed to government schools. This was the subject of a recent Parliamentary Inquiry which heard that these delays mean students may miss out on timely interventions; disadvantage may be entrenched; students may miss out on health and wellbeing supports; and students with disability may receive fewer necessary supports.[9] Such decisions are not neutral - in Victoria, the choice to continue school underfunding has occurred alongside increasingly punitive youth crime laws. This is a structural hypocrisy, given that educational disengagement and poor learning outcomes are shown to be risk factors for anti-social behaviour and involvement in the justice system.[10]

A measure in the 2026-27 Commonwealth budget to increase compliance to address 'inappropriate allocation' of disability loading in schools aims to save $463 million over four years. While this measure is framed around safeguarding government investment in the

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[6] Department of Education (2023) *Improving Outcomes for All: Australian Government Summary Report of the Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System,* Australian Government.
[7] Molina, A., Tham M., Hoang, C. H. (2026) *Years apart: Australia's growing educational inequality.* Mitchell Institute, Victoria University.
[8] DEWR, op cit.
[9] Legislative Council Legal and Social Issues Committee (2026) *Public School Funding*, Parliament of Victoria.
[10] See, for example, Homel, R et al (1999) *Pathways to prevention: Developmental and early intervention approaches to crime in Australia*, National Crime Prevention, Attorney General's Department: Canberra; Hayward, G., Stephenson, M. and Blyth M., (2013). "Chapter 6: Exploring effective educational interventions for young people who offend" in Burnett R. and C., eds., *What Works in Probation and Youth Justice: Developing Evidence-Based Practice*. 2nd edition. Willan, pp 88-108.

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students with a disability loading, it does not appear to account for ongoing under-recognition of disability and unmet need for disability support (noting in the same budget the government is seeking to slow NDIS cost growth). The budget announcement lacks detail on how governments will determine whether or not students are receiving appropriate support in the classroom.

Recommendation 1: *The Commonwealth should work with states and territories through the Better and Fairer Schools Agreement framework to accelerate funding equity ahead of the 2034 Schooling Resource Standard (SRS) targets. This should include tying federal-state bilateral funding agreements to mandatory equity measures, ensuring immediate, targeted resourcing is directed to schools servicing communities with high concentrations of disadvantage.*

Recommendation 2: *Any future federal adjustments or compliance audits relating to equity loadings—such as the student disability loading—must prioritise needs-based classroom adjustments and student retention over administrative cost-saving or arbitrary reduction targets.*

Educational attainment and broader social and economic disadvantage

For more than 25 years Jesuit Social Services has collaborated with researchers to publish a series of reports known as *Dropping off the Edge (DOTE),* which demonstrate the complex, persistent and deeply localised nature of disadvantage in Australia.

The most recent DOTE report published in 2021[11] shows that disadvantage is concentrated in a small number of locations in each state and territory across Australia. For example, 13% of locations in NSW accounted for 55% of the most disadvantaged positions across all indicators that were analysed – including social distress (low income, digital exclusion and overcrowding), health, community safety, economic wellbeing, education, lifetime disadvantage and environmental factors. These communities experience a complex web of disadvantage that makes it challenging to improve life opportunities.

The 2021 report included several indicators related to education, including school attendance, literacy and numeracy, early school leaving and adults not in education, employment or training. Mapping these indicators provides a clear picture of educational disadvantage, which is largely concentrated in certain rural, regional and outer metropolitan areas, and shows a strong link between lower education and higher disadvantage.

The similarities in the indicators most strongly associated with disadvantage across jurisdictions warrants consideration by this committee: in each state and territory, early school leaving and a lack of post-school qualifications are strongly associated with a range of other vulnerabilities including higher rates of crime and family violence, no internet access and poor air quality. For example, there is broader research highlighting the need for recognition of environmental and climate factors in driving unequal educational attainment outcomes[12], particularly for communities who have experienced/are at risk of experiencing heat stress or climate disasters.

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[11] Tanton, R,. Dare, L., Miranti, R., Vidyattama, Y., Yule, A. and McCabe, M (2021) *Dropping off the Edge 2021: Persistent and Multilayered Disadvantage in Australia*, Jesuit Social Services: Melbourne.
[12] UNICEF Australia (2025) *The economic and social impact of disasters on children and young people.* Deloitte Access Economics, Sydney [Weblink]

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Acknowledging that SRS is aimed at ensuring school funding is equitable and responsive to student need, efforts to address differential educational attainment in Australia cannot ignore multi-layered and persistent disadvantage, evidenced by consistent identification of locations as disadvantaged across multiple DOTE reports.[13] This data suggests the contributing issues are far broader than what can be tackled at the school level. For these communities, a concerted, whole-of-government effort is required to tackle the factors driving educational engagement and attainment.

Recommendation 3: *The Commonwealth, state and territory governments should expand national school evaluation frameworks to explicitly measure multi-layered, localised disadvantage (such as geographic exclusion, digital poverty, and climate risk). Funding guidelines should be updated to recognise that schools in low socioeconomic areas require dedicated, co-located service infrastructure to handle complex challenges that cannot be resolved school resourcing alone.*

Approaches to addressing school disengagement

Research confirms a strong relationship between school attendance and educational outcomes. More days of school absenteeism is associated with increased impact on academic performance.[14] A study drawing on the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children found that higher levels of school non-attendance were associated with lower levels of numeracy, especially in early primary school years.[15]

Through our work we know that children's disengagement from education, low educational attainment and challenging behaviours at school can also be early manifestations of underlying challenges related to mental health, disability, neurodiversity or safety in the home environment. The link between educational disengagement, poor learning outcomes, and contact with the criminal justice system is also well established.[16] This pathway can be gendered - because boys experiencing socioeconomic stress are more likely to externalise stress as 'acting out', disruptive behaviour or conflict. Their trauma is often misread by schools as a compliance issue, rather than an indicator of underlying disadvantage. In our experience, this results in a higher incidence of disciplinary actions (such as suspensions and expulsions), accelerating their disengagement from education. Yet the potential of programs which can identify students' needs early and provide targeted support in order to prevent poor outcomes in education and other areas of life is not being realised.

We observe that school disengagement in the middle years (ages 6 to 14) - and particularly during the transition from primary to secondary school - is a strong early indicator of later harm, including criminal justice system involvement. While schools are well positioned to identify concerns early, they often lack the capacity, specialist skills or system pathways to respond effectively. When responses to early educational disengagement or lack of

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[13] The next iteration of DOTE is expected to be published in early 2027.

[14] Goodsell B, Lawrence D, Ainley J, Sawyer M, Zubrick SR & Maratos J (2017). *Child and adolescent mental health and educational outcomes. An analysis of educational outcomes from Young Minds Matter: the second Australian Child and Adolescent Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing*. Perth: University of Western Australia. [Weblink]

[15] Daraganova G, Mullan K & Edwards B (2014). *Attendance in primary school: factors and consequences*. Canberra: Department of Social Services.

[16] Flynn, C. and Gor, K. (2024) Living with a parent in prison: Learning from young people, Monash University, Melbourne, Australia. [Weblink]

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attainment do occur, they often occur late or are focused on compliance rather than supporting healing, connection and capacity building.

Navigator

There are existing programs working with disengaged students. The Navigator program in Victoria - which Jesuit Social Services helped develop and has delivered since its inception in 2016 - supports disengaged students aged 12 to 17 (with 10 and 11 year olds also supported in selected areas) to re-engage with an education or training pathway. Participants in this program experience high levels of disadvantage and complexity, including high rates of mental ill health (88%), neurodiversity (51%), diagnosed disability (40%), child protection involvement (50%), experience of family violence (45%) and single parent families (46%).[17] Navigator operates in and around schools through assertive outreach, trauma-informed and family-inclusive practice, culturally safe engagement and sustained collaboration with school wellbeing teams and Department of Education staff to stabilise attendance and re-establish learning pathways.

There is no publicly available Department of Education data on the effectiveness of Navigator. In 2025, of the young people participating in the Navigator program delivered by Jesuit Social Services in the Hume-Merri-bek area, 62% had a 'positive outcome'.[18] This figure should be understood in the context of the high levels of disadvantage and complexity experienced by the participant cohort. That is - the eligibility threshold of Navigator is high. It is considered a program of last resort when other school-based interventions have failed. To be eligible, young people must have attended less than 30% of school in the previous term and, in our experience, they are usually attending far less often or not at all. While programs such as this play an important role, we believe opportunities to intervene earlier - at the first signs of student disengagement - should also be explored.

Engage and Re-Engage

Restorative practice[19] is a proven method for curtailing disengagement from school as well as reducing involvement with the justice system.[20] Jesuit Social Services delivers a range of restorative programs, including youth justice group conferencing and capability-building for schools to use restorative practice.

In 2018 and 2019, we partnered with the Victorian Department of Education to pilot the Engage program, a whole-of school approach which showed promise in its ability to reduce the harm caused by disruptive and/or negative behaviours in schools through the application of restorative approaches. While quantitative outcome data is limited due to the size and duration of the pilot, and it is difficult to separately identify the impact of Engage from other complementary programs, one of the participating schools experienced the following improvements compared to the previous year:

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[17] Jesuit Social Services internal data, 2025.
[18] The Department of Education combines two outcome types - *Sustained Education Re-Engagement (SER)* which is attending more than 70% of the time, *and Exit other engagement achieved (EOA,* which is increased attendance but not at the 70% mark – as positive outcomes.
[19] Restorative practice is an approach to 'setting relations right'. It seeks to address existing conflicts and teaches an approach to collaborative problem solving that supports young people builds self-esteem and therefore reduces the likelihood of disengagement with education.
[20] Victorian Department of Education & Training (2020). *Evaluation of Engage: Final report*. PhillipsKPA.

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- external suspensions declined from 207 to 56
- external suspension days declined from 255 to 96.5
- internal suspensions declined from 36 to nine.[21]

Based on the promise of this program, we are now piloting a similar program, Re-Engage, with funding from the Victorian Legal Services Board. Re-Engage is operating in six schools in Melbourne's north to build the capability of school staff to use restorative approaches to manage conflict. We see significant potential for application of restorative practice in schools with significant levels of disengagement (as reflected in incident, suspension and expulsion data).

Because they adopt a whole-of-school approach, restorative approaches can work with young people at an earlier point than programs like Navigator - when they are showing initial signs of conflict, violence or disengagement. A common outcome of restorative programs is that young people develop a shared sense of ownership in setting relations right, allowing them to move from a position of isolation and guilt to one of empowerment in taking responsibility for their actions. A secondary outcome within the school community is a significant decrease in incidents of concern over time.

Recommendation 4: *The Commonwealth, states and territories should invest in building a national evidence base for early intervention school engagement programs by funding long-term trials and evaluations of whole-of-school restorative practice models. These models should be gender-responsive - specifically addressing the tendency for boys to externalise trauma via disruptive behaviours - ensuring schools are better equipped to adopt therapeutic and inclusive responses over suspensions or expulsions.*

Addressing educational disadvantage for specific cohorts

While ideally all young people would maintain engagement in mainstream school settings, there is a need for alternative options to address the barriers experienced by specific cohorts. Special Assistance Schools and Flexible Learning Options play a critical role serving young people whose needs are not being met by mainstream schools - as do models which embed and strengthen the link between school and non-school services (acknowledging that schools alone cannot meet young people's needs). We see an opportunity to expand these models, both to cater to primary school age groups (most Flexible Learning Options are specifically designed for students aged 12 and over); and to cater to cohorts requiring highly tailored approaches. This may include young people who struggle with educational engagement or attainment due to neurodiversity, disability, mental ill-health, family violence or trauma - or those in contact with the criminal justice system, such as our Ignatius Learning Centre highlighted below.

Ignatius Learning Centre

Established in 2021, the Ignatius Learning Centre (ILC) is a specialist secondary school in Melbourne for boys aged 15 to 17 who are in contact with the criminal justice system. It currently has two campuses: an original campus in Richmond and a newly established campus in Sunshine. The ILC is the only community-based specialist school in Victoria working with young people involved in the criminal justice system, and offers a safe, holistic and therapeutic learning environment for a cohort with complex needs,

[21] Victorian Department of Education & Training, op cit.

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including histories of trauma, learning and developmental challenges, significant behavioural complexity, and who often come from culturally and racially marginalised backgrounds.

Key features of the ILC model include:

- flexible curriculum, with a mix of onsite classes and outreach, including classes in community locations and at court
- small class sizes
- an enhanced engagement and support model that works closely with individual students and their families, with regular interactions and outreach to the community
- transport, breakfast and lunch
- a safe, holistic and therapeutic learning environment based on Jesuit approaches to learning and drawing on restorative practice.

Of the 43 students enrolled across the two campuses, all are subject to a court order, and 70% or more have experienced one or more periods of incarceration in their lifetime. In general, their school attendance has been inconsistent: ILC students in 2025 had attended an average of 5.1 schools prior to enrolment, and 76% of students self-reported they had 'rarely' or 'never' attended school in the six months prior to commencing at the ILC. Literacy and numeracy levels of students were far below that of their peers: the average reading year level of students who participated in testing in 2025 was 10-12 years; and the numerical information average age was 10 years.

The fact that the ILC specifically serves boys is a reflection of need, and of the gender-SES interplay. These students represent what can happen when compounding effects of socioeconomic disadvantage, trauma and externalised behavioural responses meet a mainstream education system ill-equipped to meet their needs. The ILC works relationally, acknowledging and responding to the unique challenges these boys have experienced - ranging from early trauma and family violence to peer and social media influences and the pressures of life in custody. Many have learned, for example, to resort to violence to get their message across. ILC staff describe using deliberate, restorative approaches to help students open up, take responsibility for their actions and 'add positive tools to their toolkit' when dealing with social pressure or conflict.

Findings from a 2025 evaluation strongly support the ILC model and approach. The school has demonstrated a strong ability to educate and support boys with criminal justice system involvement; and the majority of students reported meaningful personal growth, with 75% or more experiencing improvements across key areas of wellbeing and engagement.

- Evidence indicates strong benefits of consistent, long-term support from reliable adults, alongside the opportunity to retain connections with friends.
- Short and long term data suggest the ILC has historically and continues to play a meaningful role in diverting young people away from the justice system.
- There is evidence of long-term cessation from justice system involvement. Among former students (1-2 years post-ILC), none had any current charges or had spent any time in custody since leaving the ILC.
- Educational attainment among the 2025 student cohort was modest; however, all interviewees (former students) demonstrated meaningful educational or vocational progress.

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In 2026 the ILC achieved a gold standard, 100% outcome in the Australian Government Department of Education's Nationally Consistent Collection of Data on School Students with Disability audit. We believe this is the product of five years of deliberate, principled, and legally grounded work on behalf of some of the most complex and marginalised young people in Victoria. Yet growing numbers of young people in custody and on community orders, and high levels of educational disadvantage among these groups, are driving increased need for flexible learning options, which the ILC is currently unable to meet - particularly in Melbourne's western and south-eastern suburbs.

Homework Club

In line with our focus on addressing educational disadvantage, for over 20 years we have run the Homework Club**,** an out-of-school-hours, early intervention learning support program for children of refugee or migrant backgrounds living on or around the Flemington public housing estate in Melbourne. This complements our broader work offering settlement support to migrant and refugee communities.

Homework Club supports participants who may be experiencing multiple barriers to engagement with education, including disruption or dislocation, language and literacy barriers, and parents who face barriers to engaging with the Australian education system. Volunteer tutors support students to remain engaged with education, develop positive attitudes to learning, overcome barriers to educational attainment, and build their literacy and numeracy skills.

In 2024-25 there were 907 attendances at Homework Club. Participants were aged between 5 and 15, and the two main language groups were Somali and Arabic. Students and parents consistently report that the program provides meaningful support with learning and improves students' overall wellbeing. For example, a 2025 feedback survey showed that 78% of students and 90% of parents are very satisfied with the Homework Club; and 93% of parents believed their child was a lot more excited about school as a result of participating.

Homework Club receives no state or federal government funding, and is made possible through a mix of local council and philanthropic grants and the dedication of volunteer tutors.

Recommendation 5: *To address unmet need and reduce reliance on philanthropic funding, the Commonwealth Department of Education should establish a dedicated capital, establishment, and operational grant facility for Special Assistance Schools, Flexible Learning Options and initiatives that strengthen the connection between school and non-school services. Funding priority should be given to highly specialised models that service cohorts with unique needs, particularly in under-serviced metropolitan growth corridors and regional hubs.*

Recommendation 6: *Acknowledging that educational disengagement frequently commences and accelerates before secondary school age, the Commonwealth should partner with states and territories to further explore this issue, scoping potential responses to educational disengagement for vulnerable students under the age of 12.*

VET participation and completion

Students facing disadvantage, including those with disrupted education histories, contact with the justice system, disabilities or experiences of trauma, face significant structural and

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systemic barriers to entering further education or training. Despite strong interest in meaningful employment, these students are often unaware of, or disconnected from, training opportunities that meet their needs.

Our experience shows that key barriers to employment opportunities for disadvantaged jobseekers include limited access to culturally safe, trauma-informed Vocational Education and Training (VET) pathways; lack of wraparound supports to help young people sustain engagement in education and training; and entrenched stigma around VET compared to university pathways—particularly in mainstream schools. There is a need to offer positive learning experiences to increase the likelihood that education and training will lead to further engagement and ultimately to employment.

Jesuit Community College

Through Jesuit Community College, Jesuit Social Services delivers pathways to further education and training for disadvantaged jobseekers. This includes a range of practical, vocational courses to help prepare participants for work and further study, and to help them to achieve their career goals. A key focus is our delivery of foundation level courses to help participants build literacy, numeracy and employability skills that will lead to realistic employment opportunities. We offer both on-site and place-based training in locations that are familiar and easily accessible to participants.

Students at Jesuit Community College generally face significant disadvantage and multiple and intersecting needs. For example:

- half of the College's students did not complete secondary schooling
- a third (33%) of accredited course students finished schooling at Year 10 or below, and 9% did not attend school beyond Year 8
- less than 20% in either category were in full-time or part-time work
- disability is reported by around 30% of all participants.

Jesuit Community College attendance and course completion rates remain very high when compared to the national and state averages for accredited VET qualifications. According to the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER), the average 4-year completion rate for nationally recognised qualifications in Victoria is roughly 45% to 49%.[22] At 60%–77% completion, the College is performing well above this state benchmark. There is less formal national benchmarking for non-accredited training, but the College's rates of 82%–95% are exceptionally high. The College's outcomes, as measured through VET statistics and Australian Quality Training Framework surveys are also consistently strong – above 95% on most markers. This suggests strong student engagement, and that the course lengths are well-aligned with student goals.

These results are enabled by a unique model which includes:

- highly tailored courses to engage and support those disengaged from training and employment
- delivery of training in the community, through venues such as libraries and community centres: unlike most TAFEs and other training providers, the College goes to where learners are

[22] NCVER 2025, VET qualification completion rates 2024, NCVER, Adelaide.

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- provision of wraparound and intensive supports for learners, drawing on our wider experience working with people with complex needs and barriers to inclusion
- waived fees so learners study for free.

Meeting the needs of disadvantaged VET students

The College's funding model consists primarily of Victorian government funding through Adult, Community and Further Education (ACFE) and Skills First, some cross-subsidy from Jesuit Social Services and limited fee-for-service funding from partner organisations. Yet despite filling a clear gap in support for learners experiencing barriers to education and training, this model is becoming increasingly unsustainable. Government funding has not kept pace with the higher costs of supporting disadvantaged learners: base Victorian ACFE hourly subsidies have declined in real terms since 2023; and cuts to funded Skills First places have dropped by 78% (from 1,400 in 2021 to 300 in subsequent years).

While the latest National Skills Agreement has sought to strengthen the public TAFE system, its implementation at the state level has inadvertently squeezed out high-performing not-for-profit community RTOs. In Victoria, this has influenced the reduction of subsidised places available to private and community-based RTOs through the Skills First program, ensuring a larger proportion of students and funding flows back into the public TAFE system. The overall number of government-funded training providers in Victoria dropped by 7.2% between 2020 and 2024.[23]

Large TAFE campuses, while vital, are not universal solutions. For learners dealing with long-term disadvantage, large institutional settings can feel overwhelming and lack the specialised support to prevent early attrition.

A 2025 study by the National Centre for Vocational Research and Education found that students who studied foundational skills alongside their VET programs were more likely to complete that training (by up to 1.8-percentage-points) and more likely to gain employment (by up to 5.6-percentage-points) than similar students who did not enrol in foundation skills training. Their overall research suggests that addressing foundational skills early, either before or alongside other VET programs, helps students to succeed by better preparing them for learning and for the workforce, leading to improved completion rates and job outcomes.[24] Despite this, foundational learning is not consistently embedded or sufficiently funded across the system.

Failing to fund community-based foundational pathways creates substantial efficiency losses within the broader VET system. Investing in early foundational learning and community RTOs could not only support a greater number of disadvantaged students into further education and ultimately employment, but could safeguard governments' investment in Free TAFE.

Recommendation 7: *Leverage the National Skills Agreement to incentivise states and territories to systematically embed and fund foundational literacy, numeracy and digital skills. This funding must explicitly recognise that addressing the need for these skills prior*

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[23] Report on Government Services (2026) *Vocational Education and Training*, Productivity Commission, 10 February [Weblink].
[24] Hughes, A, Zhang, Z & Griffin, T (2025) *Laying the foundations: How foundation skills shape VET student outcomes,* NCVER, Adelaide.

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to or alongside accredited VET courses is required to increase course completion rates among disadvantaged students.

Recommendation 8: *Introduce a dedicated equity stream under the National Skills Agreement, co-funded by the Commonwealth and states/territories, specifically for not-for-profit and community RTOs. This stream should fund the higher delivery costs of flexible, place-based training combined with wraparound learner supports, acknowledging the importance of such models in achieving outcomes for learners not served by the institutional TAFE model.*

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