

Evaluation of Oakwood School Summary



**Oakwood
School**

Learning · Respect · Empowerment



“I love this school, it is perfect for me.
I like my classmates and teachers.
I am a changed person every day and
I am improving. I am becoming more
confident in myself and am starting
to challenge myself more.”

Student





Introduction

Thank you for your interest in this report of the evaluation of the Oakwood School.

The evaluation conducted by Lirata Consulting, was commissioned by school council to provide an independent, objective view of the work and success of Oakwood School and was timed to lead into the Department of Education and Training strategic review process which was conducted during the second half of 2018.

The full report informed the school's evaluation of the goals and targets of the existing Strategic Plan and the development of the school's new Strategic Plan for 2018–2022.

I am thrilled that the evaluation identified 'clear evidence' of the effectiveness of Oakwood School in the four key outcome areas of: re-engagement with education; achievement in learning, including literacy, numeracy, social development and other areas; pathways to the future; and student wellbeing.

Furthermore the evaluation highlighted six areas of exemplary practice:

- The thoughtful and thorough implementation of trauma informed practice and its integration with all areas of the school's work.
- The active and structured case management approach which facilitates networks of support for students.
- The commitment to fostering high quality relationships between staff, students, parents/carers and external professionals.
- The structured and personalised student intake and induction process which establishes safety, trusting relationships, and clear expectations from first contact.
- The sophisticated curriculum and range of evidence-based teaching and learning practices which effectively support personalised learning.
- The wide-ranging processes for staff professional learning and for organisational reflection and learning, which enable continuous improvement.

In summary, the evaluation found that 'Oakwood School has evolved into a deeply reflective and dynamic school with a sophisticated educational model, focused vision, and respectful, trusting relationships at its core' and that 'Oakwood School is a leader and innovator in its field and sets a benchmark for other schools and education programs to emulate.' Findings of which, all stakeholders connected with Oakwood School should be justifiably proud.

I would like to thank our students, parents, community partners and staff for their involvement with the process of this evaluation and their support for the school and ideas for our future development. I would also like to thank the researchers from Lirata for their professionalism, expertise and care in engaging with all sectors of our school community and ensuring that the evaluation was positive and affirming for all those involved.

I trust you get as much out of reading this report as Oakwood School did in its production.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "David Roycroft". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

David Roycroft
Principal

About Oakwood School

Oakwood School is a multi-campus government school for students who have disengaged from school or for whom a mainstream school environment is deemed inappropriate to meet their needs. The school's overarching purpose is to re-engage young people in learning and set them on a positive pathway to their future.



Established 2011: Oakwood School was established in 2011 as a regional initiative of the Department of Education (DET).



Learning, Respect, and Empowerment: The school has a distinctive approach summed up by its intention of 'Learning, respect and empowerment'.



10 sites across Melbourne: Oakwood School now operates at ten sites across Melbourne's South-East and the Mornington Peninsula.



Positive, Respectful Relationships: The school has a strong focus on positive, respectful relationships and on the creation of opportunities for students to experience and build on success.



502 Students Enrolled: At September 2019 the school had a total of 502 students enrolled.



Personalised Learning: The school's way of working is deeply influenced by trauma informed practice and involves a developmentally responsive, personalised student learning and pathway plan which builds strongly on students' interests.

About the evaluation

Oakwood School commissioned Lirata Consulting to undertake an evaluation of the effectiveness and achievements of the school between 2011 and 2017. The evaluation was intended to gauge the effectiveness of the school's approach, to contribute to the school's ongoing process of reflective practice and internal review, to identify opportunities for further improvement and to communicate noteworthy aspects of the school's work to a wider audience.

The evaluation was guided by six key questions:

1. Who are the young people who have enrolled in Oakwood School?

2. What impacts has Oakwood School had on the lives and trajectories of students?

3. How does Oakwood School achieve the impacts that it achieves?

4. What impacts has Oakwood School had across its campuses and in its partnerships with stakeholders?

5. What aspects of Oakwood School's approach represent exemplary practice?

6. How could Oakwood School continue to strengthen its work for the future?

The methodology incorporated extensive data collection and analysis involving document and literature review; surveys completed by 102 students, 34 parents and 41 external stakeholders; interviews with 12 students and 15 staff; focus groups with staff (7 sessions), parents (6 sessions) and school council (1 session); site visits to 6 Oakwood School locations; and analysis of existing school-based data sets.

Oakwood School's students

Oakwood School has been successful in creating educational opportunities for young people who experience high levels of vulnerability and disadvantage.

90%

of students are between 13 and 16 years of age when they first enrol at Oakwood School.

96%

have experienced a period of disengagement from school prior to enrolment at Oakwood School, with a median of seven months of disengagement and a maximum in this dataset of seven and a half years out of school.

Compared to mainstream schools, Oakwood School has a high proportion of indigenous students and students in out of home or kinship care, demonstrating success in engaging young people from these backgrounds.



Oakwood School students experience a range of personal and life challenges ranging from mental health issues to family issues, difficulties in social relationships, learning difficulties, physical health issues, problematic substance use and housing issues.



49%

of enrolling students cited mental health issues.

29%

cited learning difficulties as a reason for previous disengagement from education.

11%

of Oakwood School students have been deemed eligible for PSD funding, indicating that they experience one or more of physical disability, visual impairment, severe behaviour disorder, hearing impairment, intellectual disability, Autism Spectrum Disorder, or severe language disorder with critical educational needs, with true rates of these conditions among Oakwood School students estimated to be considerably higher.

34%

reported experiencing or being involved in bullying or harassment as a reason for previous educational disengagement. For most of these young people, the breakdown of previous schooling has contributed to a loss of faith in the education system, in themselves and in their future.

Profile of students

Age at enrolment

As a school for disengaged youth, Oakwood School is targeted towards students aged 10-18 years. The majority (60%) of students enrolling at Oakwood School for the first time have been 14-15 years of age, with a range of 9 to 18 years.

Most students were 14-15 years old when they enrolled

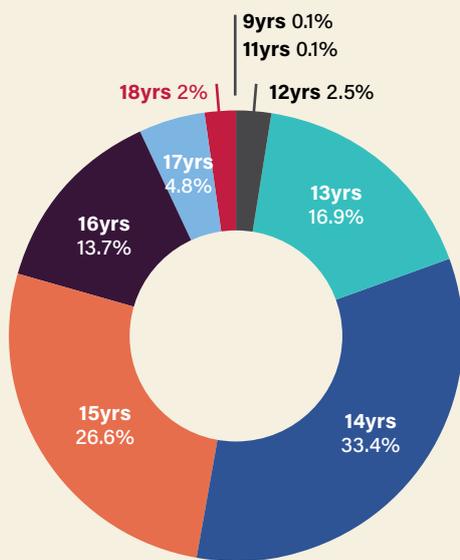


Figure 1: Age of Oakwood school students at first enrolment (all enrolments)

Residential status

Figure 2 provides an overview of the residential status of Oakwood School students at enrolment. A significant proportion of students were reported to be not living with their parent/guardian (15%) with the majority of this cohort (86%) living in out of home or kinship care.

3 in 20 students were not living with their parent/guardian at enrolment

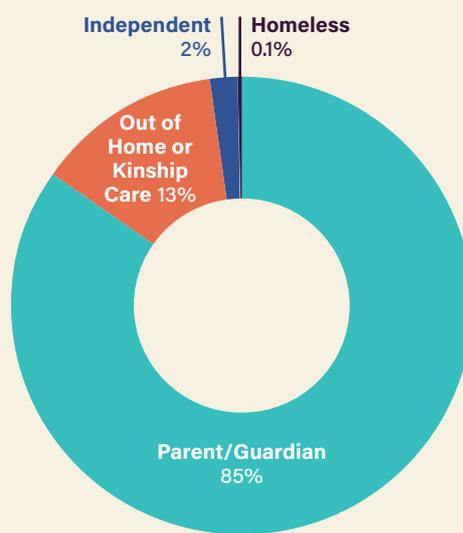


Figure 2: Residential status of Oakwood school students at enrolment (all enrolments)



Experiences of disengagement

According to the Oakwood School Charter, students seeking enrolment at Oakwood School can generally be described as coming from one of the following situations:

- Not currently enrolled in school or at risk of exclusion from school.
- Not attending and at significant risk of disengaging from school in the following year.
- Not succeeding at school, for reasons other than a disability or significant health factor.
- Demonstrating patterns of chronic disengagement with little likelihood of maintaining a connection to a learning program in school, or successfully transitioning to employment.

A small minority of students enrol at Oakwood School following an immediate transfer from their previous school. However, as Figure 3 shows, almost all students (96%) had some period of disengagement from school prior to enrolment at Oakwood School. The majority had been disengaged for a significant period, with a median of seven months of disengagement and a maximum in this dataset of seven and a half years out of school.

At enrolment, each student or their parent/guardian was asked to indicate the reasons for their disengagement from mainstream schooling using a checklist of pre-defined reasons. Multiple reasons could be selected by the student or parent/guardian. Disengagement is found to be attributable to a single cause in only 30% of cases, with nearly half of all respondents (44%) indicating the presence of 2-3 reasons for disengagement, and 5% of students reporting 6 or more reasons.

Figure 4 illustrates the specific reasons stated for disengagement. Mental health issues were the most prevalent reason stated, with nearly half of all students reporting this as a cause. This was corroborated during interviews with students who reported that their anxiety often led to school refusal. Anxiety was reported to be caused by a range of factors including existing mental health conditions, the pressure of assessment, and struggling to cope with the social aspects of schooling.

With teacher or school breakdown listed as the second most prevalent reason for disengagement, some students reported that they found the size of their previous school intimidating. Secondary school was often described as less 'personal' than primary school which sometimes led to difficulties with teachers. Others found that the size and pressure of schools was overwhelming and could lead to conflict.

"I always got into fights at mainstream, [getting into] arguments with kids and teachers every day. I was a nuisance. Here, I'm calm and focused, I just want to learn."

"In the same year my Dad died I fell out with my mum and started to wag school. Home life was really hard. The school said, 'You can leave, or we'll expel you' so I left."

Almost all students had some form of disengagement prior to enrolment at Oakwood School

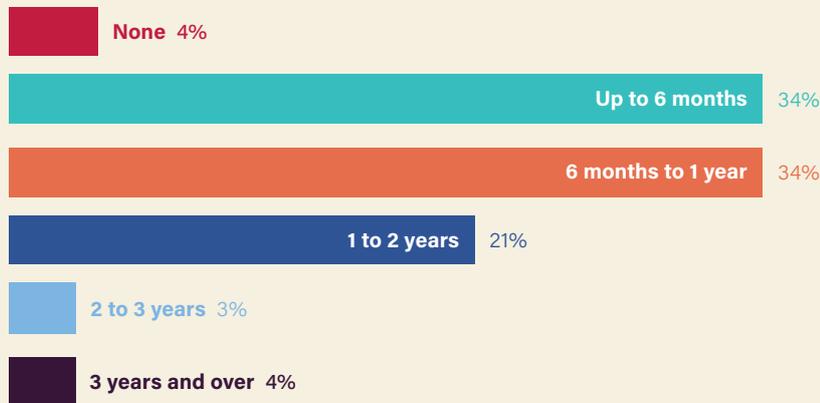


Figure 3: Duration of disengagement of Oakwood school students at enrolment (all enrolments)

Mental health issues were the most prevalent reason for disengagement among enrolling students

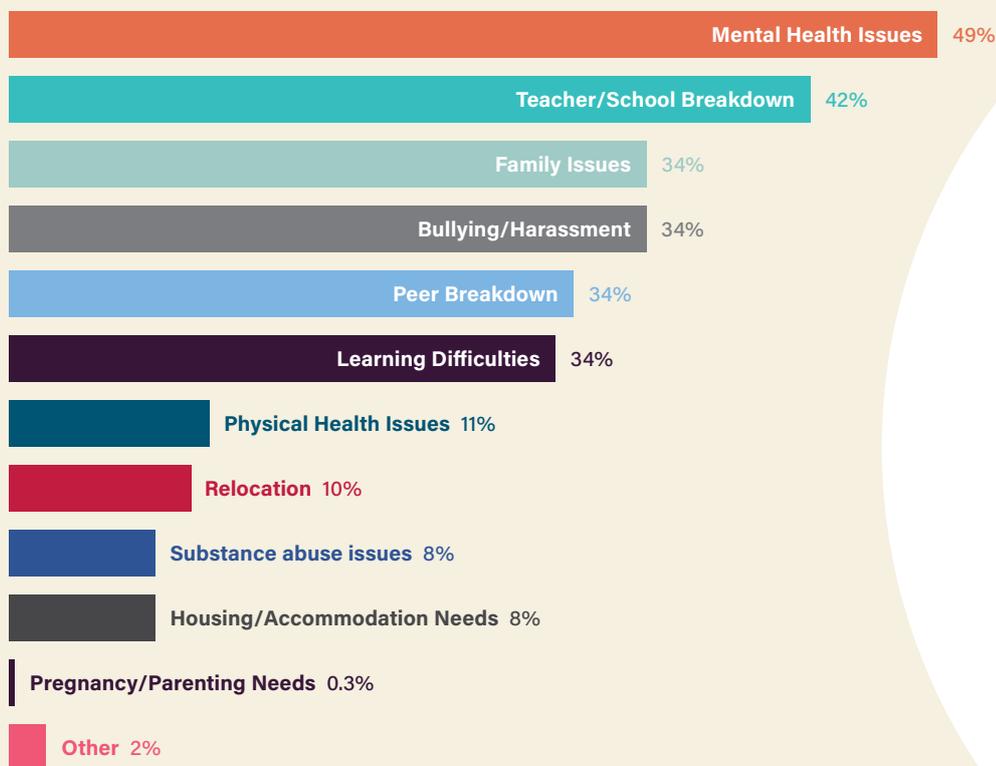


Figure 4: Reasons for disengagement of Oakwood school students from mainstream education (all enrolments)

Level of effectiveness of Oakwood School

The evaluation identified four key outcome areas to which the school's work contributes: re-engagement with education; achievement in learning, including literacy, numeracy, social development and other areas; pathways to the future; and student wellbeing. There is clear evidence that the school is effective in each of these areas.

Re-engagement with education

Oakwood School has consistently enrolled young people who have been disengaged from school and in many cases has been able to maintain their engagement through to positive exits into other opportunities. While school attendance remains challenging for some students due to their life circumstances, the school's targeting of attendance expectations to student capabilities has enabled most students to successfully attend school. Data indicates that the quality of student connection with the school and engagement in learning is very high.

Achievement in learning

There is evidence of substantial student achievement in literacy and numeracy. Across a range of standardised and non-standardised assessment measures, between 50% and 77% of students recorded improvement in literacy and numeracy over a 12 to 15 month timeframe. In a significant number of cases, the level of improvement is well beyond what would be expected in the timeframe observed. There is also evidence of improvements in social development, communication and problem solving, and in other areas of learning including Art and Physical Education (PE).

Pathways to the future

Oakwood School has played an important role for many students in enabling them to prepare for and access further opportunities. Oakwood School incorporates pathways as a core element of its curriculum and facilitates access to a range of learning opportunities including VCAL, VET, VCE via Distance Education and courses which the school offers or buys in. The school facilitates pathways to work and actively assists students to return to mainstream schooling or to access TAFE or University courses where relevant. Excluding students with unknown exit destinations, 77% of students leaving Oakwood School are moving into further education or employment.

Student wellbeing

Oakwood School has played a consistently positive role in improving student wellbeing. The school's safe, supportive and respectful environment, its active case management approach and the opportunities it provides for young people to experience success have in many cases led to a remarkable turnaround in young people's self-esteem, confidence, optimism and engagement with the world.



Oakwood School has also had broader positive outcomes for the families of students. Its work contributes directly and substantively to achieving Education State targets for the significantly disadvantaged cohort of student with which it works.

There are many factors which affect young people's wellbeing and their ability to engage in learning. Not all students will be able to succeed to the same extent, and there is scope to continue improving Oakwood School's already strong models in each of the above areas. However, the overall pattern of positive outcomes for young people is clear across Oakwood School's work.



Student pathways data

The school dataset includes exit dates and exit destinations for students. Exit destinations are recorded when students initially exit Oakwood School, and again at 3 months, 6 months and 12 months post-exit. This analysis considers the initial exit data for each student who had exited by the end of September 2017.

Figure 5 shows that 595 students have exited Oakwood School as at September 2017. Exit destinations are unknown for a significant number of students (17%). Excluding students with unknown destinations, the majority of students (70%) exited to either training, school or an education program, while a further 7% exited to employment. Only a minority (14%) exited to unemployment.



A high proportion of students initial exit destinations are either training or school/education



Figure 5: Oakwood School Students – Initial Exit Destinations

Oakwood School's approach

Oakwood School's effectiveness is the result of the development and implementation over time of a sophisticated educational model. This model is characterised by an interlocking set of design decisions in relation to structures, tools and processes. These elements work together in a cohesive framework which establishes the school's learning environment and the teaching, learning and support strategies that enable success.

Oakwood School's educational model is based upon a suite of conceptual frameworks and organisational approaches which provide the foundations for the entire school's work.

These foundational elements are trauma informed practice; a strong focus on learning, and a philosophical orientation which holds high expectations of success for all students; consistent development of respectful and positive relationships and partnerships; an active case management approach; a commitment to ongoing, in-depth professional and organisational learning; robust frameworks for professional care and support; and effective governance, capable leadership, strong teamwork and a positive culture.

Oakwood School has deliberately and methodically explored the implications of these foundational elements and has integrated them into its structures, tools and processes for student engagement, learning and wellbeing. This has led to the development of a calm and orderly learning environment with predictable routines, the development of tailored curriculum,

learning continuums and assessments, and a highly personalised and flexible learning approach based on student-driven individual learning plans and focused on students' goals and interests. Teaching primarily occurs one-on-one and utilises a range of evidence based pedagogical practices. The school thoughtfully uses a structured student intake and induction process and student led conferences. Staff explicitly model and teach positive behaviours, problem solving, social and communication skills. The school ensures it has the right mix of expertise within its staff and partnerships with external organisations to support student wellbeing and pathways.

Oakwood School's effectiveness is due to the integrated and coherent manner in which it has developed and implemented its educational model, the robust foundations on which the model rests, and its continuous focus on enabling students to experience and build on success.



“Uncompromising vision.
Great technical as well as
human leadership.” *Teacher*



Areas of exemplary practice

The evaluation highlighted six notable areas of exemplary practice within Oakwood School's work:

- The thoughtful and thorough implementation of trauma informed practice and its integration with all areas of the school's work.
- The active and structured case management approach which facilitates networks of support for students.
- The commitment to fostering high quality relationships between staff, students, parents/carers and external professionals.
- The structured and personalised student intake and induction process which establishes safety, trusting relationships and clear expectations from first contact.
- The sophisticated curriculum and range of evidence-based teaching and learning practices which effectively support personalised learning.
- The wide-ranging processes for staff professional learning and for organisational reflection and learning, which enable continuous improvement.

These impressive features of Oakwood School's approach are the foundations for its effectiveness in re-engaging students, assisting them to learn, improving their wellbeing and placing them on positive pathways to the future. Oakwood School's implementation of these elements is noteworthy for its sophistication, its comprehensiveness and the level of integration and cohesion across the school.

Oakwood School as an organisation

Oakwood School has grown since its inception in 2011 and is now a reasonably complex organisation operating across ten sites and a substantial geographic area.

This pattern of development has brought with it a set of challenges in relation to communication, coordination and relationships across sites. While in general the school has been able to maintain an appropriate balance between consistency and flexibility across sites, there are still pressures in this area that require ongoing attention. The substantial difference in approach between the general Oakwood School model and that in place at Caulfield Park Community campus is an area of tension for the school, and action is in place to address this issue.

The school has many organisational strengths which have enabled it to sustain its focus and to operate to a high standard. It has a clear, shared purpose and values; a high calibre of operational leadership and effective governance arrangements; a committed and skilled workforce with strong processes in place for recruitment, induction, professional care and support; a positive organisational culture; appropriate levels of resourcing; and fit-for-purpose policies and corporate systems. Each of these elements has been deliberately designed and refined over time as the school has learned from its experience.



Areas for further development

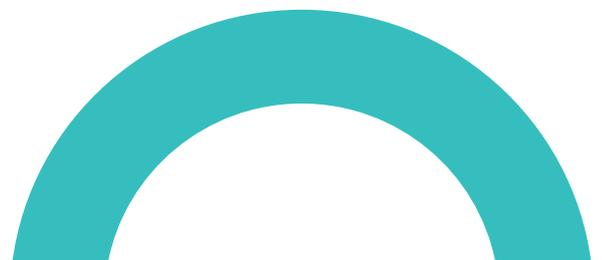
Oakwood School could continue to strengthen its work and effectiveness through:

Continuing to build the school's approach to managing relationships across sites, including balancing the need for flexibility and consistency of the educational model, and further facilitating processes for communication and sharing of knowledge and resources across the school.

- Continuing to refine the school's tools and practices for teaching of literacy and numeracy.
- Further developing the pathways model and the range of educational and development opportunities for students, and exploring a better articulated response to students who may be at risk of disengaging from Oakwood School.
- Continuing to build the already strong culture of reflective practice and the range of professional learning opportunities available to staff.
- Continuing to develop mechanisms for parent inclusion and connection.

- Improving data collection and reporting, for example in relation to student attendance and outcomes.
- Developing clearer plans and processes for leadership and governance succession, and for managing potential growth into the future.
- Further developing approaches for managing strategic risks and for communicating the school's approach and the value of its work to external audiences.

While it is unlikely to be possible to simply 'transplant' Oakwood School's model to other settings, there is value in the school further exploring approaches and opportunities to share its learnings with other education providers and with government.



“Oakwood has shown us light at the end of the tunnel and created new hope, and seeing my daughter having goals in life again words cannot describe how that has made me feel.” *Parent*

Oakwood School's unique contribution

Over the past seven years, Oakwood School has evolved into a deeply reflective and dynamic school with a sophisticated educational model, focused vision, and respectful, trusting relationships at its core. The school's approach leads to meaningful, purposeful and authentic learning which genuinely re-engages vulnerable young people in education and provides positive pathways to the future.

Oakwood School occupies a unique position. Its flexible educational model and the focus on young people who are disengaged from school, positions it outside the mainstream education system. Its sophisticated practice in personalised literacy and numeracy learning, coupled with very flexible pathway options distinguishes it from many 'alternative' education programs and community schools.

This distinctive model enables the school to play a highly valuable role in turning around the lives of the young people with whom it works.

Oakwood School is a leader and innovator in its field and sets a benchmark for other schools and education programs to emulate. The school's deep commitment to organisational learning and ongoing improvement position it for even greater effectiveness in future.



Distinctive Elements

Oakwood School's intention statement is 'Learning, respect and empowerment', and the school's way of working is strongly shaped by trauma-informed practice. Distinctive elements of the school's approach which reflect these principles include:

Building a safe, supportive, friendly, and orderly environment

Creating the environment with a focus on these values and qualities is deliberate, ongoing and embedded in Oakwood School practices. The small classes (up to ten students per teacher) and quiet, orderly learning environment have been informed by research and best practice in understanding and working with young people whose lives have been affected by trauma. The safe, supportive and caring environment enables teachers to establish trust and develop positive, supportive relationships to maximise learning opportunities and allow students to experience success.

Focus on building positive relationships

Oakwood School has a focus on building safe, trusting and positive relationships between students and staff, and with parents and community partners. Staff have developed a deep understanding of the impact of trauma on their students' lives, their learning and behaviour. Underpinning the curriculum is an awareness of the neurobiology of complex trauma, the importance of developing strong respectful relationships, and of modelling self-regulation.

Slow induction

The teacher/student learning relationship is developed during a deliberately slow period of induction based upon a trauma-informed paradigm. During this time, the student and teacher work one-on-one to build their relationship and the young person's understanding of the school values and routine.

During induction, the teacher begins to understand the student's learning, social and emotional needs. Teachers use diagnostic assessments to generate baseline data, and at the end of the induction process the student and teacher will have determined learning goals, choosing specific literacy, numeracy, positive behaviour, pathways and project tasks tailored to their individual needs and ability. These goals and tasks are documented in personalised learning maps which are written together by students and teachers and updated fortnightly. Learning maps give an overview of the student's current educational direction and are pivotal documents for formative and summative feedback.

Integrated pathways support

Career and pathways exploration, planning and support is integrated from the initial student intake interview onwards. Staff at Oakwood School support and encourage students to meet their educational goals and continue their re-engagement with learning by beginning a VCAL program or transitioning to appropriate further options such as Technical and Further Education (TAFE) programs, Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE) by distance education, or returning to a mainstream school.

Oakwood School has different educational options catering for individual students and their capacity to engage in different types of programs, ensuring the provision of a continuum of flexible options for their student cohort.





Excellence in teaching and learning

Policies, practices and professional learning are all focused upon building excellence in teaching and learning. Oakwood School is committed to empowering students to develop responsibility and ownership of their own learning as it helps to build confidence and foster a positive attachment to the school. This is reflected in the joint creation of learning maps, and in the utilisation of student-led conferences once per semester where the student is empowered to reflect upon their own progress.

Oakwood School teachers are actively engaged in developing classroom practice to ensure their pedagogy and curriculum engages all students at their academic entry level. To ensure that the curriculum is stimulating and challenging, teachers respond to a range of learning styles and needs through a learning approach based on integrating student interests, goals and choices with development of literacy and numeracy through a structured curriculum. Regular conferencing monitors student engagement.

Maintaining an outstanding education for all students also requires the school to support a high level of professional learning for all staff. Staff participate in professional learning on a daily basis through briefings, student wellbeing and teaching and learning meetings, team and individual coaching, mentoring and modelling, consultation, and presentations from guest speakers within the Performance and Development accreditation guidelines. The school also uses secondary consultations, for example with headspace, to build their expertise in the area of student mental health.

Holistic support through partnerships

Youth Service providers, community agencies and schools identify and refer young people who are disengaged from education to Oakwood School in Noble Park, Caulfield, Frankston, or the Flexible Learning Network in Hastings, Rosebud, Pakenham or Mornington.

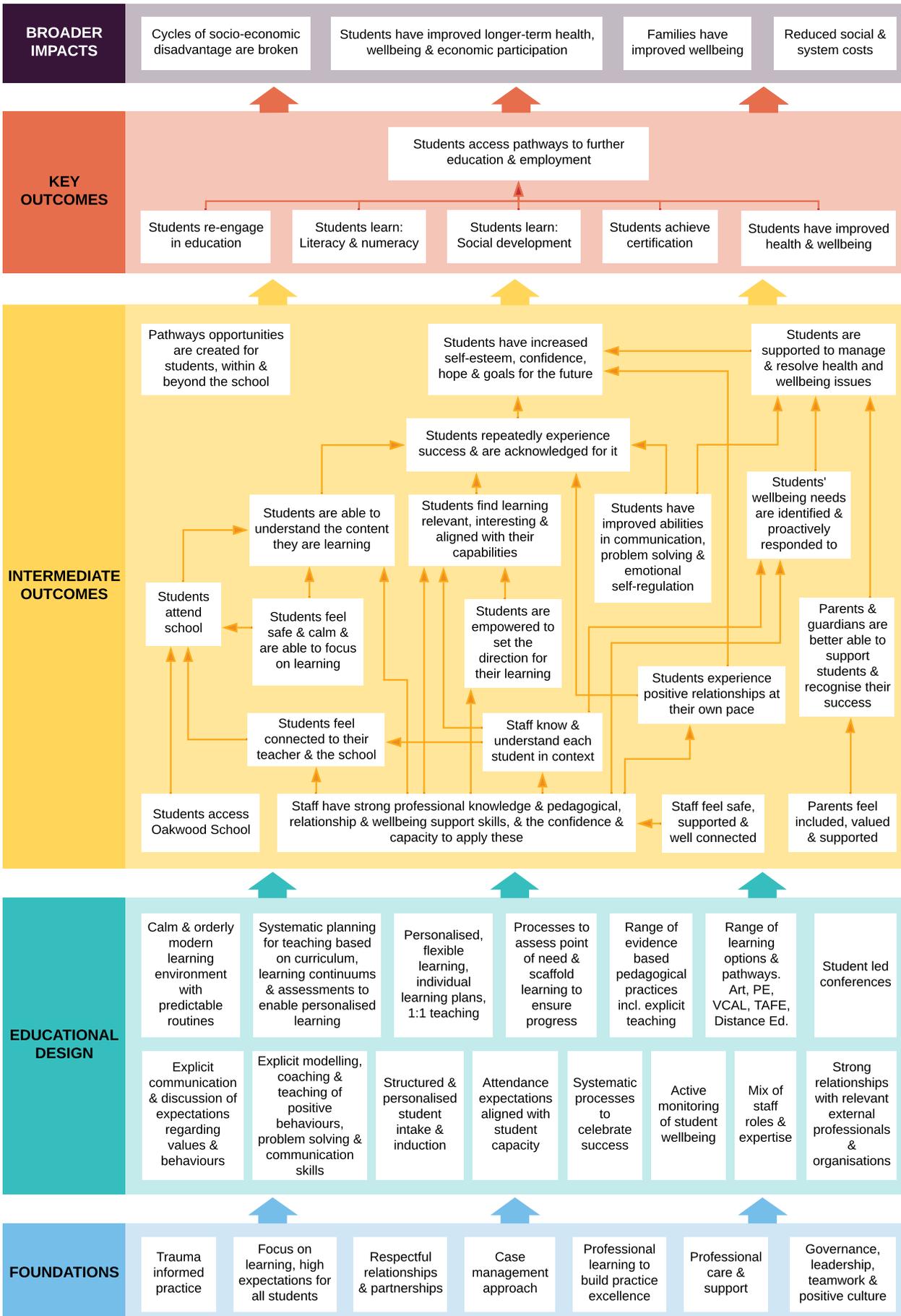
The intake process is a co-ordinated case managed approach with agencies and service providers contributing information to an integrated service delivery model which assists in the development of learning and social goals for the young person.

Professionals' meetings, Student Support Group meetings and care team meetings are held to ensure that students are fully supported by the school and the other agencies involved. Working in an integrative and collaborative model with other agencies and service providers means that students have access to an array of services to further support their re-engagement with learning.

Focus on success and celebrating learning

Students who attend Oakwood School have experienced failure in relation to their schooling, often repeatedly over many years. In multiple ways Oakwood School is designed to enable students to experience success and build on those successes. The school is flexible in considering the needs of each student and what will allow them to succeed. This might mean, for example, that one student attends induction for four weeks, while another continues for eight weeks. Teachers notice and appreciate students for their efforts and specific achievements, building confidence and a base for further achievements.

Oakwood School logic model



MELBOURNE



Oakwood School Campuses

1. Oakwood School, Noble Park Campus

1 Camellia Ave, Noble Park North VIC 3174
oakwood.sch.noble.park@edumail.vic.gov.au
Phone (03) 9703 7400

2. Oakwood School, Caulfield Park Community Campus

319 Balaclava Road, Caulfield North VIC 3161
Phone (03) 9563 5644

3. Oakwood School, Frankston Campus

9 Ross Smith Avenue, Frankston VIC 3199
Phone (03) 8796 0200

4. Oakwood School, Career Pathways Centre Frankston

Ross Smith Avenue, Frankston VIC 3199
Phone (03) 8796 0200

5. Oakwood School, VCAL Chelsea Campus

Longbeach Place, 15 Chelsea Road,
Chelsea VIC 3196 Phone (03) 8796 0234

Oakwood School Community Venues

6. Seawinds Community Hub

11A Allambi Ave, Capel Sound VIC 3940

7. Shed 11 Hastings

11 Marine Parade, Hastings VIC 3915

8. 'The Corner' Mornington

91 Wilsons Road, Mornington VIC 3931

9. Pakenham

5-7 Main Street Pakenham VIC 3180

For all general enquiries call (03) 9703 7400.



Oakwood School

1 Camellia Avenue

Noble Park North VIC 3174

Telephone: (03) 9703 7400

oakwoodschool.vic.edu.au

