

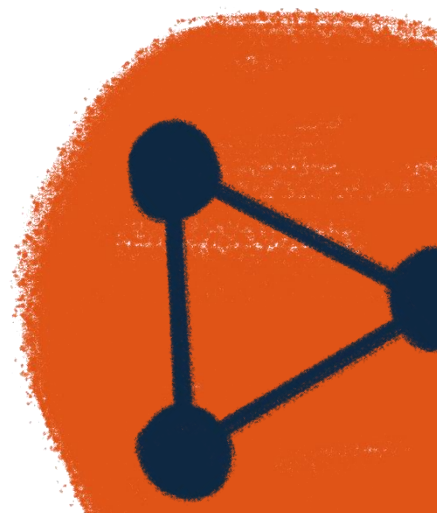
MERLE Program – Midterm Evaluation Report

South East Community Links

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MERLE Mid-term Evaluation Report

Executive Summary

The MERLE program is an intensive, two-year intervention that aims to support 60 young people from multicultural backgrounds at risk of school disengagement and youth justice involvement to gain the necessary life skills to reach their full potential. The MERLE program, being delivered by the South East Community Links (SECL) and funded by Department of Home Affairs, commenced in August 2022 and is due for completion in July 2024.

This mid-term evaluation used aimed to examine the extent to which MERLE had achieved progressed towards its outcomes, identify critical success factors and opportunities for improvement through:

- A mixed methods approach, drawing from data collected for the period August 2022 – 30 June 2023.
- Overview of all MERLE participants (69), their backgrounds, presenting issues and MERLE support provided
- Outcomes achieved - Participants who have been involved in the program for more than six months (22 participants). It was expected that 6 months participation would be likely to be sufficient for participants outcomes to be seen.

Summary of key findings

Overall

The MERLE program is well on track to achieve its objective. The MERLE program engaged 69 participants between the ages of 12-23, 65 were male and 4 were female, with 62 participants from a CALD background. Participants presented with diverse needs including poor school attendance and engaging in high-risk behaviour. Participants in the MERLE Program, who have been engaged for 6 months or more, have already shown significant progress towards expected outcomes across three of its four outcome domains, with some participants also experiencing positive outcomes in improving post-school readiness (outcome domain 4), an outcome which would be expected to take longer to be experienced by participants.

Critical success factors key to the outcomes delivered were identified as:

- The MERLE delivery model – school based and beyond, diverse individualised and group activities led by highly skilled strengths-based practitioners.
- The MERLE program, due to being part of the SECL, is able to increase access to services, programs and other community organisations of participants and their families.

Next steps to improve the MERLE program involve further consolidate and develop mature the MERLE model to position it to scale up, streamline and systematise the approach.

A. What difference has the Program made to date? Progress towards outcomes?

Overview – Key mid-term outcomes

In scope: 22 Participants engaged in the MERLE program for 6 months or more

15 – 18 yrs

Male

Majority complex, multiple issues

High CALD backgrounds

Outcome domain	Key findings
<p>Outcome 1:</p> <p>Improved intra-personal wellbeing</p> <p>Youth show improved personal insight, interpersonal skills, and confidence, relationship with relationships with</p>	<p>Overall, most participants of the MERLE program in-scope for this report experienced improvements in intra-personal wellbeing (19/22).</p> <p>The most common intrapersonal related outcomes achieved by participants included improved personal insights and goal setting (17); confidence, wellbeing and reduced engagement in high-risk behaviours (15); and developing a positive relationship with a trusted adult (13) and to a lesser degree outcomes related to improved knowledge of, trust and use of services, and improved self-care behaviours (8).</p>

trusted adults and services.	Of particular note was the importance placed on the trusted adult relationship developed between the MERLE practitioner and the participants. The strength of these relationships, supported by one-on-one support tailored to the individual participants needs, was seen as integral to the outcomes experienced.
<p>Outcome 2:</p> <p>Social wellbeing</p> <p>Youth show more positive relationships and engagement with others – family, peers, teachers and school, recreational and community involvement.</p>	<p>Overall, most participants of the MERLE program experienced improvements in social wellbeing (17/22).</p> <p>More specifically, data indicated participants experienced improvements in positive peer relationships (16), behaviour or interactions in the school environment (13), and engagement in community or recreational activities (12).</p> <p>MERLE practitioners, having built a strong trusted relationship with participants, were able to utilize the resources provided by SECL and their external service partnerships, to provide recreational opportunities for participants such as the gym, sporting events and camp. These activities were new to participants and broadened their social networks, engaged them within the community and reduced ‘down time’ which can sometimes lead to high-risk behaviours.</p>
<p>Outcome 3:</p> <p>Improved educational outcomes</p> <p>Improved education attendance, engagement, experience and performance.</p>	<p>Overall, many participants experienced improved educational outcomes particularly in improved attendance, more positive peer engagement and more active engagement (15/22).</p> <p>Specifically, the data indicated that most participants (15/22) in-scope for this analysis increased their school attendance. For some this was particularly significant, shifting from not attending at all for a significant time to attending consistently, along with noticeable shifts in behaviour and engagement with school activities.</p>
<p>Outcome 4: Post-school readiness</p> <p>Improved life skills and readiness for post-secondary education, training or transitional programs, optimism for the future.</p>	<p>Overall, improvements in post-school readiness were evident for many participants in-scope for this mid-term review (15/22).</p> <p>Data indicated that participants experienced positive shifts in knowledge and ability to navigate independence (11), improved sense of wellbeing and optimism for the future (11), and pathways established into further education and/or employment (5).</p> <p>Participants frequently spoke about their improved optimism and hope for the future, indicating the role that the MERLE practitioners had played in building their hope and aspirations. For example, participants reported that:</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>At the beginning I felt hopeless, now I see hope in my future. (participant)</i></p>

B. What worked well and was critical to the program’s achievements?

Key Success Factors

1. The MERLE delivery model - school based and beyond, diverse individualised and group activities led by highly skilled strengths-based practitioners.

A key success factors was the delivery model used by the MERLE project team, located within the school but extending past it, building trust and rapport, and meeting the young people where they are. The MERLE practitioners were described by students and teachers as taking on a ‘big brother’, critical friend and advocate role. They provided flexible individual support and structured group activities which involve both MERLE and non-MERLE students. These contributed to strengthening MERLE participants’ peer networks and provided an ‘active’ wait list to support students not able to be included in the MERLE program due to resource limitations.

2. The MERLE program, due to being part of SECL, is able to increase access to services, programs and other community organisations of participants and their families.

MERLE practitioners were said to ‘act as a bridge to the community and other services’ for participants and families. An advantage of working in a multidisciplinary organisation, such as SECL, that itself delivers a range of programs and activities, as well as having partnerships with additional organisations, is that it opens up a range of opportunities for participants. This includes providing internal referrals to SECL programs for housing, emergency relief or the L2P program, or providing links to other community organizations such as RECLink for gym access.

MERLE also had the availability of brokerage funding which acted to facilitate recreational involvement in community programs.

3. Strong relationships between the MERLE project team and school staff enabled the MERLE program to be delivered more effectively and efficiently

MERLE practitioners noted that the program works best when they have built a strong relationship with school staff. This included regular informal conversations to provide brief updates on participants, which supports building of trust between staff and practitioners.

C. What have we learnt, what could be changed or improved?

Key lessons and opportunities for improvement

- 1. Differences Variability across the schools in their use of the MERLE program** - Data indicated that the implementation of the MERLE program was varied across schools, with different schools referring participants for different levels of complexity and need, demonstrating a differing understanding of the MERLE program. While this is a benefit of the program, particularly in the early stages of the program as it has assisted the practitioners to meet the needs of both participants and schools, consideration could be given to further maturing the program model to further develop the program model, operational guidelines and school partnership agreements to increase program efficiencies, consolidate relationships, build on program benefits and support replication and scaling up of the model within the schools and to other schools .

Recommendation – Consider further develop operational program guidelines and partnership agreement model to increase program efficiencies, build on program benefits and support replication and scaling up of the model within the schools and to other schools.

- 2. Composition of MERLE participants, in relation to complexity and diversity, given limited resources could be considered to build sustainability and maximise value to diverse young people.** - It was noted that high numbers of complex clients require intensive support from MERLE practitioners, exhausting capacity and resulting in lower participant numbers. Consideration could be given to composition of the participants in relation to their complexity to ensure manageable caseloads, and enacting an ‘active hold’ structured group program across all schools to maximum reach and impact, sustainability of the program and the wellbeing of the workers.
- 3. Future scaling and expansion should also consider gender diversity among MERLE practitioners.** Currently both MERLE practitioners are male, which is advantageous for schools where there is a gap in gender staffing ratios, providing disadvantaged young men with a male role model and trusted adult figure. However, at-risk young women are also at risk of school disengagement and youth justice involvement but may not be comfortable working closely with a male practitioner. Ensuring there is a female practitioner on the team would ensure disadvantaged young women have equitable opportunities to access support from the MERLE program.

Recommendation – Consider assessing the best participant composition for the program given its resources, to support effectiveness, participants diversity and worker wellbeing

MERLE Mid-term Evaluation Report

Introduction

The MERLE project is an intensive, two-year intervention that aimed to support 60 young people from multicultural backgrounds at risk of school disengagement and youth justice involvement to gain the necessary life skills to reach their full potential. The MERLE project which is being delivered by the South East Community Links (SECL) and is funded by Department of Home Affairs, commenced in August 2022 and is due for completion in July 2024.

In December 2022, SECL commissioned the Outcomes, Practice and Evidence Network (OPEN), part of the Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare (the Centre), to support the evaluation activities of the program and the preparation of a mid-term and final evaluation report of the MERLE program to examine outcomes achieved, the strengths of the program model and opportunities for improvement.

The objective of the mid-term evaluation was to assess progress towards outcomes, identify critical success factors and opportunities for improvement, drawing from data collected from August 2022 – 30 June 2023.

Overview of the MERLE program

Based on international best practice, MERLE (Mentor, Empower, Reflect, Learn and Earn) is an intensive, two-year early intervention program.

Objective - To work in partnership with schools, local government, specialist services and police, to provide disadvantaged youth from mainly refugee and migrant background living in Melbourne's South Eastern Suburbs intensive wrap around support to reduce school refusal, anti-social behaviours, substance abuse, crime and gang involvement and unemployment. It aims to deliver improved community safety and strengthen participants' social and emotional well-being, education, community engagement and employment for a positive future.

Rationale - Youth from migrant and refugee backgrounds in Melbourne's South Eastern suburbs are at greater risk of disengagement from education, family and community, and poor social, educational and employment outcomes. They are more likely to have poor mental health, increased anti-social behaviours and/or criminal activity, education attainment and ultimately unemployment.

Delivery model - MERLE provides 60 participants who have been identified as at risk of school disengagement, anti-social peer relationships and youth justice involvement with intensive support in the school context and beyond for up to 2 years through:

- Mentor - Providing 1:1 case management and mentoring,
- Empower - Facilitating service knowledge, referral and connections
- Reflect - Facilitating social and recreational opportunities and community involvement
- Learn - Strengthening relationships and learning in school context
- Earn - Building life and work readiness skills and potential employment opportunities.

Expected outcomes:

1. Improved intra-personal well-being - Youth show improved personal insight, interpersonal skills, and confidence, relationship with relationships with trusted adults and services
2. Social wellbeing - Youth show more positive relationships and engagement with others - family, peers, teachers and school, recreational and community involvement
3. Educational outcomes - Improved education attendance, engagement, experience and performance
4. Post-secondary readiness - Improved life skills and readiness for post-secondary education, training or transitional programs, optimism for the future

(See Appendix 1 - MERLE Project logic and definition of outcome domains)

Evaluation purpose and method

This report provides the key findings of the mid-term evaluation of the MERLE Program

Evaluation Questions:

The mid-term evaluation answered the following questions:

- A. Who are MERLE participants and what has been delivered as part of the program?
- B. What difference has the Program made to date? What progress has been made towards expected outcomes?
 1. Improved intra-personal well-being
 2. Social wellbeing
 3. Educational outcomes
 4. Post-secondary readiness
- C. What worked well and was critical to the program's achievements?
- D. What have we learnt, what could be changed or improved?

Methodology

The evaluation used a mixed methods approach drawing on qualitative and quantitative data. All data was coded, thematically analysed and triangulated to identify consistent themes against key evaluation questions.

For the mid-term review, a deeper dive was undertaken on those participants who have been engaged in the MERLE Program for a minimum of 6 months (commenced with MERLE prior to January 2023). This cohort would reasonably be expected to have been in the program long enough to have experienced some of the program's anticipated outcomes.

Data Summary

Data source	What were we looking to understand?
Client Management System data (n = 69)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Participants demographic features and presenting issues• Activities delivered
Interviews with partner schools	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Program structure and delivery• Outcomes• Outcomes
Interviews with MERLE Project team	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Program structure and delivery• Outcomes observed
OPEN Outcomes Measurement Survey Tool (OMT) and Supplementary questions – (in-scope sample n=22)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Survey – State of wellbeing across outcome areas and reflection on change in pre – current state

Some challenges were experienced with data collection, most notably difficulty with survey tool (OMT) completion by participants to gain further insights into the broader benefits delivered by the program. This is not unexpected for this cohort. Despite this, the views expressed by the participants who did complete the survey tool were consistent with data collected from the other stakeholders and points to similar types of positive effects experienced by some of the participants. Over time, the broader effects of the program are likely to be more fully felt, so future evaluation work of the program should strengthen our insights into its broader benefits and the factors for the participants that influence these.

Key findings

A. Who are MERLE participants and what has been delivered as part of the program?

MERLE has delivered expected activities fulfilling participation targets and engaging participants with diverse multicultural backgrounds and presenting issues as planned. Between August 2022 and 1 July 2023 the program has delivered 489 sessions to 69 participants. Sessions included one-on-one support (309), structured workshops involving specialist guest presenters (73) and outreach school holiday activities and camps (77).

Who are MERLE participants and what are their demographic features and presenting issues?

Demographic features and presenting issues for MERLE participants

At 30 June 2023, there were 69 participants engaged in the MERLE program (the program).

- Participants are aged between 12 and 23 years, with the average being 15 years of age
- 65 are male and 4 are female
- Three participants identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander
- 62 participants were from a Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) background. There were 18 different countries of birth listed, with Afghanistan being the most common (21), followed by Australia (21), Sudan (5), Samoa (4) and Pakistan (3).

The reasons provided for referral for participants were commonly disengagement from education and training, experience with bullying and poor social relationships and issues related to wellbeing and poor physical and mental health. Less common reasons for referral included issues related to drugs and alcohol, child protection and legal matters.

What was delivered by the MERLE program?

Between August 2022 and 1 July 2023, MERLE practitioners delivered a total of 489 sessions to the 69 MERLE participants.

Referrals and delivery of activities was mainly based within one of the five partner schools,

- Hampton Park Secondary College
- Noble Park Secondary College
- Lyndhurst Secondary College
- Dandenong High School
- Narre Warren P-12

In addition, MERLE practitioners also receive six referrals through a formalised partnership with Victoria Police and Youth Support and Advocacy Service's (YSAS) Embedded Youth Outreach Program (EYOP), Foundation House, and Cultural Engagement Program Statewide Children and Families Branch (DFFH), with these participants not required to be in a partner school. (Participants referred through this pathway attend Keysborough college, Fountain Gate College and 3 are not enrolled in a school).

MERLE activities

The activities delivered through the MERLE program included one-on-one sessions, structured group workshops, outreach support in participants homes, or to link participants with services and community and recreational opportunities and delivery of school holiday activities and camps. Schools described varied ways in which the program is structured within each school.

The MERLE practitioners use an agile approach to delivery, seeking to build rapport with participants where they feel most comfortable. Across the schools, MERLE practitioners may adjust the composition of the program

increasing or decreasing informal engagement time (often while playing basketball), more formal one-on-one sessions, outreach support and school holiday activities according to the readiness, rapport and needs of the students. As a result, the program is structured and positioned in differing ways across the schools.

Session type

<p style="text-align: center;">One-on-One</p> <p style="text-align: center;">309 sessions</p> <p>On site, in school grounds, in wellbeing offices, sporting grounds</p> <p>Young people stated they enjoyed these the most, got the most out of these sessions</p>	<p>MERLE practitioners are allocated 1-2 days per week on site at their respective partner schools</p> <p>MERLE practitioners provide flexible support to participants to meet their various needs, during school hours and school term periods, and after hours and on school holidays. These sessions are predominantly delivered during class and break times, in dedicated private spaces or outside sports areas.</p> <p>MERLE practitioners also have the flexibility to meet participants in the SECL office, community setting (e.g. café), recreational setting (sports centre) or the participants' family homes.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">Structured Group workshops</p> <p style="text-align: center;">73 sessions</p> <p>With partners (Nutritionist, Legal Service)</p> <p>Active hold, supports young people not engaged when MERLE practitioners at capacity</p>	<p>Delivery of a series of 8 structured workshops to three schools, each series lasting 8 weeks. Workshops included team games and visits from specialist services such as a legal service and a nutritionist who delivered content on sleep, self-care and nutrition.</p> <p>The structured group workshops have served as an opportunity for the MERLE practitioner to provide 'light touch' or 'active hold' support for 20 additional participants providing benefit to them when there was otherwise no other capacity for the MERLE practitioner to provide support. School staff also provide oversight during these activities which creates an opportunity to build rapport with participants in a non-classroom setting and strengthen their relationships with the MERLE practitioners.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">Outreach, school holiday activities and camp</p> <p style="text-align: center;">77 sessions</p> <p>RECLink, community, family homes</p> <p>Provides links to community, positive social outlets, ongoing connection</p> <p>Broadens social connections</p>	<p>MERLE practitioners provided support to participants wherever they needed it, whether this was in the family home, community setting for example a restaurant, sporting events or local gym or community activities, building access and confidence. These opportunities have been shared by MERLE participants with their peers. This was described as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Like it's like putting the power back on them the control back on them and it makes them feel good.</i> • <i>They feel better mentally and physically and are occupied so staying out of trouble.</i> <p>The MERLE program delivered a camp bringing together MERLE participants from across the 5 schools. It was held in Phillip Island and included sports and nutrition workshops, bike riding, team building activities, peer engagement. The camp was described as '<i>really powerful</i>', assisting to break down barriers between participants and sent a message to them the '<i>it's ok to be friends with kids from other schools</i>'.</p> <p>School interviewees noted that out-of-school activities during holidays or through the camp was of high value as it supports the MERLE practitioners to maintain contact and rapport with participants and strengthens the trust and consistency for participants over the school breaks.</p>

Were expected participants reached?

The MERLE project has engaged 69 disengaged participants, aged between 12 and 20, with the majority coming from multicultural backgrounds. An additional 20 participants were on an "active hold waitlist", engaged via group workshops. The participants come from varied multicultural backgrounds, 62 participants identified as coming from a CALD background, with 18 different countries of birth.

Who does MERLE work best for?

MERLE practitioners commented both complex and less complex participants benefit from the MERLE program. MERLE Practitioners suggested that participants who are known to police or the youth justice system and displaying signs of antisocial behaviour benefit most from the program. However, some school staff identified positive benefits for younger age groups as they are not yet as entrenched in the peer networks that enable high-risk behaviours. The younger group of participants were likely to gain significant benefits from involvement in the structured workshop program, which requires less individualised and intensive support. It was observed that due to the limitations of existing resources it would be valuable to consider establishing defined limits on the number of more complex participants in the MERLE program, given the intensity of support required, and the potential of providing significant value to those with less complex needs with lower time demands. These demands were described:

More complex students take huge input. You may have 7 or 8, which frequently involves having to talk to each 2-3 times per week – along with court appearances, parental liaison, getting a positive environment around them, along with supporting their appointments. This was my whole week

Who was MERLE not as effective with?

When asked who had shown the least benefit/improvement from the program, all interviewees noted that at times, the participant might be too entrenched in behaviours and peer groups for the MERLE program to have impact. Staff noted that often they are unaware of the issues students are struggling with until they are well entrenched and so it is 'too late'. Additionally other factors such as homelessness and family violence can impact on the practitioner's ability to meet with young person off site, with young people likely to start to position peer networks as family, when disconnected by these circumstances from their own.

B. What difference has the Program made to date? Progress towards outcomes?

For the mid-term review, a deeper dive was undertaken to assess the outcomes observed by MERLE participants who engaged with the program prior to January 2023 equating to over 6 months involvement. It could be expected that these participants have been in the program long enough to have started to experience outcomes. For the purposes of this report, these participants are called 'In-scope'.

Demographic features and reasons for referral for *in-scope* participants (n=22)

Similar to the whole MERLE cohort, in-scope participants were:

- Between 15 – 18 years old, (average age 13 years of age) – slightly younger than the whole cohort
- All male
- Including two participants who were Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander
- 18 participants were from a CALD background. Countries of birth were most commonly Australia (8) and Afghanistan (7).
- Most were complex clients, with 17 participants having multiple presenting issues (3 – 8 reasons for referral) and ten having statutory services involved, with 6 of those having multiple (2+) statutory services involved. These included Vic police, child protection and youth justice.

In-scope participants had the following reasons for referral (n=22):

Reduced engagement/attendance at school (18)

Behaviour negatively changed (12)

Limited involvement in outside social/rec activities (11)

Limited support from trusted adults (9)

High risk behaviours/isolated from peers/requested support (9)

17 participants had multiple (3+) reasons for referral.

10 participants had statutory services involved, 6 had multiple services involved:
9 VicPol
4 Child Protection
3 Youth justice

(Outcome Measurement Tool - OMT)

Outcome 1: Improved intra-personal wellbeing

Overall, most participants of the MERLE program in-scope for this report experienced improvements in intra-personal wellbeing (19/22). The most common intrapersonal related outcomes achieved by participants included improved personal insights and goal setting (17); confidence, wellbeing and reduced engagement in high-risk behaviours (15); and developing positive relationships with trusted adult (13) and to a lesser degree outcomes related to improved knowledge of, trust and use of services, and improved self-care behaviours (8).

Intra-personal skills and well-being

Participants reported improved confidence, improved physical health and sleep routines, improved understanding about actions leading to consequences and decision making:

- *Not in trouble now and attending school. I am thinking about my future and understand getting in trouble can make things harder for me.*
- *Increased my confidence and knowledge about taking care of myself and staying out of trouble so it does not impact my future.*

School staff interviewed noted they observed participants' confidence improving and holding each other to account:

- *So in the group program, I've definitely seen a lot of the young boys come out of their shells or sort of hold each other accountable for a lot of different things, which we hadn't seen before.*

Of note was the importance placed on the trusted adult relationship developed between the MERLE practitioner and the participants. The strength of these relationships was built through the one-on-one support, and was seen by both participants and school staff as integral to the program's success and outcomes experienced. MERLE practitioners used an informal, strengths based approach to encourage, motivate, educate and instil self-belief in participants. It was observed by the MERLE practitioners that the importance of their role as a trusted adult, in some instances, may result from the absence of other male roles models to provide guidance in the participants lives. Comments included:

- *Trusting [MERLE practitioner] wants to help me and show me how to stay out of trouble & do more positive activities like camp and white card for my future (Participant)*
- *One-on-one work because I can talk to [MERLE practitioner] about what is going on and he helps me feel better about things and how to handle times I am struggling in class (Participant)*
- *And he was able to engage that young person through that and be that adult that you know, cared about that young person's needs and their interests. And then that young person was like, okay, like, [MERLE practitioner] said something and he followed through and he made it happen, and this adult is actually in my corner. (School staff)*

Service confidence and help seeking behaviours

As a consequence of the trusted relationship with the MERLE practitioner, participants experienced an increase of knowledge and use of services. MERLE practitioners built the young person's awareness of services available, provided referrals and contact information to empower the young person to action the referrals. In addition to this, participants could then provide these details to their friends who may also require support, demonstrating the 'ripple effect' of the MERLE program.

- *I was in trouble and did not know what to do or where to go. I would have kept getting in trouble if I did not start talking to [MERLE practitioner]. (Participant)*
- *Support from [MERLE practitioner] - always telling me to stay out of trouble to help my future. Booking in white card and helping find work and TAFE course for my future (Participant)*
- *Helping with court hearing (Participant)*

Outcome 2: Improved social wellbeing

Overall, most participants of the MERLE program experienced improvements in social wellbeing (17/22).

More specifically, data indicated participants experienced improvements in positive peer relationships (16), improved behaviour or interactions in the school environment (13), and increased engagement in community and recreational activities (12).

Positive relationships with family friends and the school

Participants were observed to have positive shifts in peer relationships and more positive interactions in the school environment. For example:

- *Now I am attending school, improved behaviour, doing gym, hanging with friends & better relationship with mum (Participant)*
- *Choosing good friends outside of school, not having late nights (Participant)*
- *Student wouldn't really talk to other students. And when I've gone into the [structure] group workshop that's been run by MERLE, he sits with other peers, he does talk to them. He engages in the activities that have been run. Yep, so definitely has formed some good connections in there. (School staff)*

Recreational and community participation

MERLE practitioners, having built a strong trusted relationship with participants, were able to utilize the resources provided by SECL and their external service partnerships, to provide recreational opportunities for participants such as the gym, sporting events and camp. These activities were new to participants and engaged them in positive activities in the community, broadened their social networks, improved peer relationships and reduced 'down time' which can sometimes lead to high-risk behaviours.

As an example, participants stated:

- *...back to going to gym and speaking with my friends more,*
- *my school attendance has improved and I have been more involved in the community.*
- *Now I go to school and gym and spend time with my friends and brothers.*

Outcome 3: Improved educational outcomes

Overall, many participants experienced improved educational outcomes particularly in improved attendance, more positive peer engagement and more active engagement (15/22). For some this was particularly significant, shifting from not attending at all for a significant time to attending consistently, along with noticeable shifts in behaviour and engagement with school activities.

Attendance and greater engagement with school work

Participants were observed to have positive shifts in school attendance and engagement in school work has improved. For example, many participants made comments such as:

- *Started coming to school again...don't get in trouble that much now.*
- *More confident and staying out of trouble. My school attendance has improved and I have been more involved in the community.*
- *I'm now engaged back at school full time, my health is a lot better, not feeling as tired as I used to. Back to doing 5 days of school a week, in 2022, I didn't go to school at all.*

Some indication of confidence in class and stronger peer relationships

Interviews indicated improvements in classroom confidence and peer relationships

- *I think I have better confidence and started being comfortable in most of my classes. (participant)*
- *The students we are talking about, weren't really connected to anybody. Some of them were, but they weren't connected to people at the school, and they were disconnecting. So I suppose it's given them a connection. So that's quite a shift. (School staff)*
- *They're engaging with their work, and they're being more successful at their work and, and being at school. (School staff)*

While there were no reported improvements in educational attainment or completion at this point, this is likely to take longer to become evident. It could be reasonably expected that participants who have been disengaged from school for a period of time will take time to improve attendance, and only then be able to catch up on missed time and learnings, before their grades and attainment show improvement. It will be of interest to assess educational attainment and completion more fully in the Final MERLE evaluation.

Outcome 4: Post-school readiness

Overall, improvements in post-school readiness were evident for many participants in-scope for this mid-term review (15/22). Despite expectations that improvements in this outcome area may not be experienced within these early stages of the program, data indicated that participants experienced positive shifts in knowledge and ability to navigate independence (11), improved sense of wellbeing and optimism for the future (11), and pathways established into further education and/or employment (5).

Optimism for the future

Participants frequently spoke about their improved optimism and hope for the future resulting from working with the MERLE practitioners. For example, participants reported:

- *I stopped getting in trouble because it can ruin my future and make my family unhappy.*
- *At the beginning I felt hopeless, now I see hope in my future.*

Pathways into further education and ability to navigate services

Additionally, participants stated they are implementing the advice and guidance provided by the MERLE practitioners into practical steps to support their future. School staff also indicated positive shifts in post-school readiness for some participants, supported through internal referrals to other SECL programs.

- *[I have] completed my white card, completed a resume, attended interviews & information sessions (participant)*
- *...Now I stay home and focus on being good and starting work so I can save for my car and have a better future (participant)*
- *Okay, well, I've like identified they need a job, will they need help with their housing situation. And so SECL, he's been able to go, or bring in the person that works with housing support, or help them build a resume, get employment, and hopefully reduce some of that unstructured time. (School staff)*

These are significant outcomes, given the relatively limited amount of time these participants have been involved in the MERLE program. This demonstrates the level of understanding the MERLE practitioners have of their participants and their ability to be agile and creative, to meet the participants' needs to achieve tangible, practical and achievable outcomes.

C. What worked well and was critical to the program's achievements?

Overall, the MERLE program's delivery model was reported as key to its success. Key elements include:

- Embedding the program within a school setting, but reaching far beyond the school into participant's homes, service needs and recreational and employment activities.
- The practice approach and skills of the MERLE practitioners, with students and teachers describing the practitioners as taking on a 'big brother', critical friend and advocate role was particularly important.
- The flexibility of the program and the provision of structured workshops which provided social learning environment for MERLE and non- MERLE students.
- The opportunities provided by MERLE location within SECL for referral into other SECL programs or to programs run by other organisations within SECL's network.

MERLE program delivery model

The MERLE delivery model - school based and beyond, diverse individualised and group activities led by highly skilled strengths-based practitioners.

A key success factor was the delivery model used by the MERLE project team, located within the school but extending past it, building trust and rapport, and meeting the young people where they are. The MERLE practitioners were described by students and teachers as taking on a 'big brother', critical friend and advocate role. The approach was seen as adaptable and flexible in relation to approach and delivery location, meeting participants where they are, in readiness and through their activities and interests.

With freedom to move around school grounds and use sport facilities, MERLE practitioners engage participants in an informal setting where they feel most comfortable. Movement incorporated into sessions was experienced as beneficial for participants. Participants (10/13) indicated that these one-on-one adaptable sessions had the most value to them. MERLE practitioners were also able to extend past the school boundaries, working after hours and meeting families in their home, accompanying participants to external appointments and court hearings, and shaping the program to meet the needs of both participants and schools.

The trust developed through this adaptive approach was identified by MERLE practitioners and school staff as positioning them to be able to take a direct, 'no bullshit' attitude towards participants. Practitioners held participants accountable for their actions in a way that is not intimidating or authoritative. School staff noted that this no-nonsense approach added to the connection between practitioners and participants, ensuring that participants feel heard and understood. For example:

- *Keeps it kind of real, and there's no kind of fluff about it. It's like, if they're doing the wrong thing, he kind of calls them out for that, and just holds them accountable. And sort of speaks to the consequences of some behaviours. So that's been I think refreshing for them.*
- *He just has a way about him, ...there's no underlying meaning as to why he's trying support them. It's just the support for support, and they're kind of seeing that for what it is, and there's no sort of agenda behind it.*

In addition to the MERLE practitioner's flexible approach to engaging with a participant, it has helped that MERLE practitioners are both male. This was noted as important in developing rapport with CALD young men. School staff noted that often they have limited male staff members to support CALD young male students. This may also explain the high numbers of male participants in the cohort group, demonstrating the need for male practitioners to support schools in addressing high risk behaviours of some male students.

- On referral trends, one school interviewee noted: *it was around how to engage our young males with a CALD background.*
- *[MERLE practitioner] who is a male and working with other well known males within the school, we've definitely seen an increase in students accessing the wellbeing team.*

At several schools MERLE practitioners provided structured group sessions. The program including content developed and facilitated in-house, as well as sessions facilitated by external partners. As part of the duty of care requirements for the schools, a school staff member was required to be present during these sessions, and as an added benefit they bore witness to the changes the participants were experiencing. This also provides an opportunity for school staff to better understand the MERLE program and expected outcomes, build rapport with the MERLE practitioner with participants. Additionally, the group workshops act as an 'active hold' or 'light touch' support offering for young people not otherwise actively engaged in the MERLE program, due to the practitioners' limited capacity.

Delivery of the MERLE program by South East Community Links

A key feature of the MERLE program's success is that it is delivered in schools by an external organisation (SECL), which provides added delivery flexibility, brokerage funds and additional connections to community services.

As MERLE practitioners are employees from an agency external to the school, they are able to extend far outside the school context to provide support. This enables them to ensure confidentiality and gain a unique insight into participants' needs and how to support them most effectively. This can include home visits and insights about the participants that they would not want known at school. It can include opportunities to attend activities outside school hours and school terms. For example,

- *because he is attached to SECL, he runs at school during the school holidays, the kids connect with him in multiple ways. So they will attend maybe like a school holiday activity, and then they'll see him at school. Or*

they'll recognise him at school and then that relationship forms. And he definitely seems less threatening, you know, they recognise him as part of the school, but someone in the community as well. So I think that's actually a big connection.

This positioning also allows MERLE practitioners to 'act as a bridge to the community and other services' for participants and families. SECL can provide participants and their families access to a range of programs and activities, such as housing, emergency relief or the L2P program, and can provide links to other community organizations such as RECLink for gym access. The availability within MERLE of brokerage funds is also valuable in enabling MERLE to support participants access to recreational activities such as RECLink for gym or other sporting events. Practitioners noted that often financial burden on families reduces ability to access these activities.

- *Getting free rein and being led by the participants in relation to what they think will be of interest to them. For example free gym access – this increases our level of importance and respect in the eyes of the participants. Expect going forward these outcomes will expand which includes improved school engagement and work engagement.*
- *Participants projecting their experiences and hope onto their own peers and sharing the benefits. For example, being able to join the gym and then their friends decide they want to join as well. Ripple effects – fostering pro social peer relationships and reduced anti-social behaviours*

Strong partnership relationships

Strong relationships between the MERLE project team and school staff enabled the MERLE program to be delivered more effectively. This includes regular informal conversations to provide brief updates on participants, which supports building of trust between staff and practitioners. It might be expected that the strong rapport and relationships between MERLE practitioners and school staff provides a 'ripple effect', promoting and fostering stronger relationships between staff and students, as students observe the MERLE practitioners role modelling positive relationships.

Practitioners noted that the better the communication with school staff, the sooner a young person is referred to the program and they are often better suited to the program. It may also support the school's understanding of the program, and the MERLE practitioner's role. When school staff have a better understanding of the role of the practitioner, purpose of the program and expected outcomes, the program's effectiveness and efficiency is maximised.

D. What have we learnt and what are opportunities for improvement?

Drawing from the critical success factors identified above, consideration could be given to further develop **systematise and structure a consistent model of practice in a way that can be tailored for individual participants and school sites but have consistent elements across sites to leverage from the findings of this report.** Additionally, consideration could be given to assessing the most optimal composition of the MERLE participants in relation to level of complexity. This would support a manageable case load for practitioners and maximum outcomes from the program.

Differences Variability across the schools in their use of the MERLE program

Data indicated that the implementation of the MERLE program was varied across schools, with different schools referring participants for different levels of complexity and need, demonstrating a differing understanding of the MERLE program. While this is a benefit of the program, particularly in the early stages of the program as it has assisted the practitioners to meet the needs of both participants and schools, consideration could be given to further develop their operational guidelines and partnership agreement model with schools to increase program efficiencies, strengthen relationships and maximise program benefits.

This would also support MERLE practitioners in their day-to-day work. Clear guidance and timelines would streamline referral, intake and case management processes, data collection and ongoing monitoring for

continuous improvement, and exit planning and follow up. This will also build a consistent approach to the implementation of the MERLE program and ensure efficiencies of scale and transferability of learning into improvement in practice.

Additionally, formalised agreements would also support induction of new partner schools, setting up a strong foundation for implementation and delivery. This could include clear referral reasons, agreements for 'days on site', clear outline of confidentiality and mandatory reporting and access to the necessary data to monitor outcomes for the students. It could also include formalised lines of communication within the school and ensure expectations of school staff are met, which would support the relationship between practitioners and staff, and have a flow on effect between school staff and participants.

Guidelines for the program also support strong risk management practices, to ensure the sustainability and longevity of the MERLE program beyond the knowledge of the current practitioners.

This process could also explore the program oversight and leadership requirements which will be needed for strengthened program management, partnership consolidation and scaling up the model. With the intensive demands of service provision, MERLE practitioners would not be in a position to undertake these responsibilities. Currently, MERLE practitioners work in isolation with minimal team meetings to debrief and develop the program and minimal available capacity to support program administration functions. This is likely to continue as the program matures further. It would be valuable for the MERLE program to include a team leader function with capacity to support MERLE practitioners with program administration, build external community partnerships, debrief with practitioners and promote and strengthen program management and measurement.

Recommendation – Consider further developing MERLE operational program guidelines and MERLE – school partnership agreement processes and explore oversight and leadership functions for the program.

MERLE participant composition to maximise outcomes given resource limitations

Composition of MERLE participants, in relation to complexity and diversity, given limited resources could be considered to build sustainability and maximise value to diverse young people.

It was noted that high numbers of complex clients require intensive support from MERLE practitioners, exhausting capacity and resulting in lower participant numbers. Observations were also made, that MERLE practitioners are often 'pulled in different directions' which adds stress to an already complex working environment. Consideration could be given to composition of the participants in relation to their complexity to ensure manageable caseloads, maximum impact, sustainability of the program and the wellbeing of the workers.

Currently group workshops act as an 'active hold' or 'light touch' support offering for young people not otherwise actively engaged in the MERLE program, due to the practitioners' limited capacity. Consideration could be given to implementing this approach across all schools to balance caseloads and demand for the program.

Future scaling and expansion should also consider gender diversity among MERLE practitioners. Currently both MERLE practitioners are male, which is advantageous for schools where there is a gap in gender staffing ratios, providing disadvantaged young men with a male role model and trusted adult figure. However, at-risk young women are also at risk of school disengagement and youth justice involvement but may not be comfortable working closely with a male practitioner. Ensuring there is a female practitioner on the team would ensure disadvantaged young women have equitable opportunities to access support from the MERLE program.

Is ensure disadvantaged young women have equitable opportunities to access support from the MERLE program.

Recommendation – Consider assessing the best participant composition for the program given its resources, to support effectiveness, participants diversity and worker wellbeing

Conclusion and next steps

The MERLE program has made good progress towards delivering outcomes for culturally diverse young people in Melbourne's South Eastern suburbs who are at risk of disengaging from education, and youth justice involvement.

Participants of the MERLE program experienced positive shifts across all outcome areas: intra-personal wellbeing, social wellbeing, education outcomes and post-school readiness. Most significantly, the strengths based, informal support MERLE practitioners delivered to young people provided a trusted adult for young people who otherwise may not have a positive adult role model to guide them through adolescence. The MERLE practitioners used the agile nature of the program to engage, build trust and rapport to shift their mindsets and consider the cause/effect relationship between risky behaviours and implications for their future. Practitioners act as a confidant to walk alongside young people, wherever they are on their journey, tailoring their interventions to meet the young person's needs.

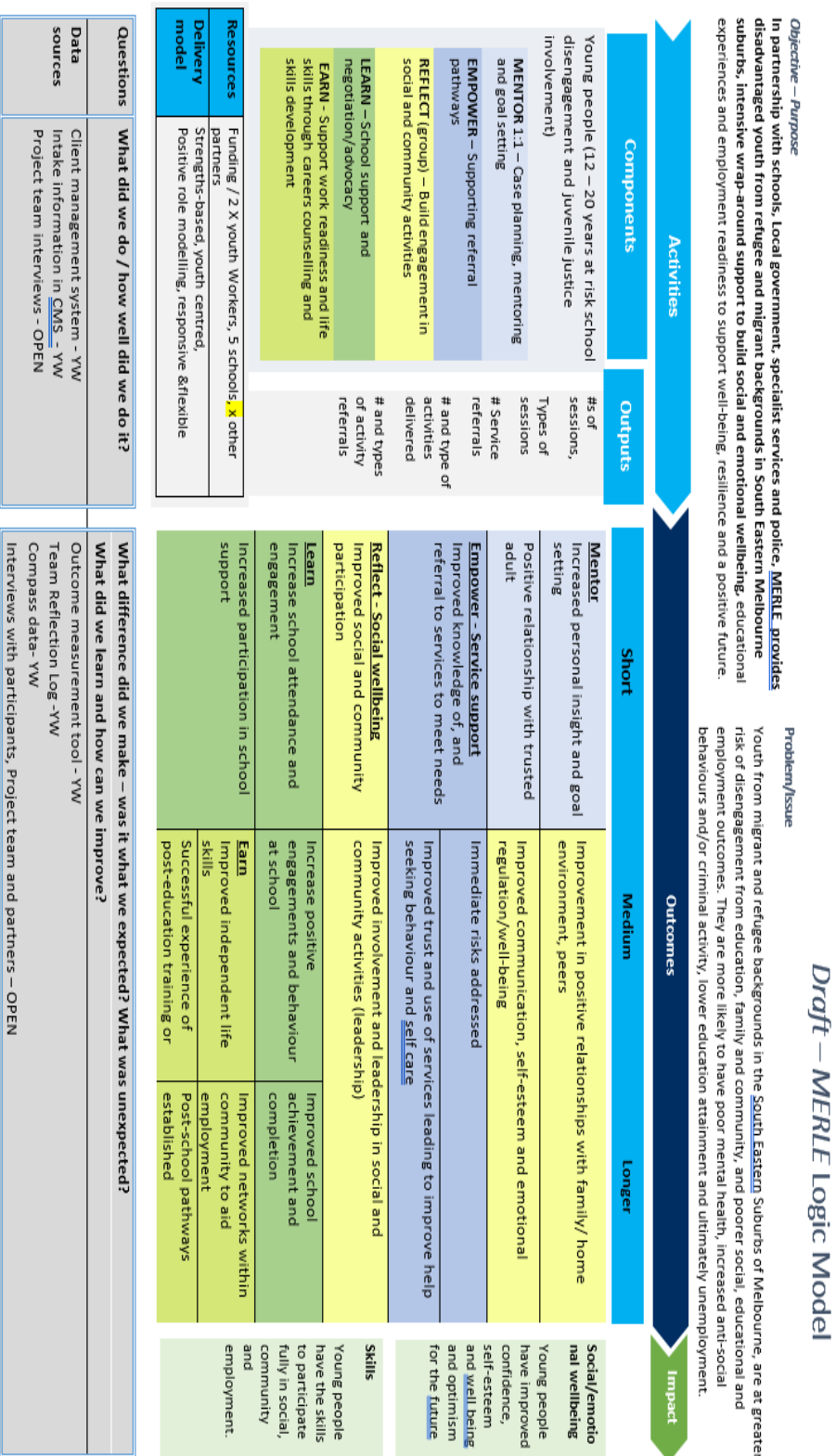
MERLE practitioners leveraged their connections within South East Community Links and external community partnerships to offer additional social and recreational opportunities for MERLE participants, providing broadened social networks and increased positive peer relationships. The program's flexibility allowed practitioners to meet participants in their local community and family home, supporting the practitioners to build relationships with the participants' families and promote positive relationships between participants and their family members.

Delivery of the program across five partner schools provided a foundation to engage with young people at risk of, or already, disengaging from school. The MERLE program supported significant improvements in participants' attendance and engagement at school, with most in-scope participants seeing a positive shift. Finally, the MERLE program is already showing that it supports participants with their post-school readiness. Many participants saw positive shifts in this outcome area, with the MERLE practitioners supporting them to obtain white cards, resumes, and pathways to TAFE and employment opportunities. Most significantly, participants' aspirations and hope for the future increased, demonstrating the self-belief instilled in them as a result of their participation in the MERLE program.

The MERLE program, in its early stages, has demonstrated effectiveness in its delivery model and is showing promising results. Ongoing continuous improvement will support the MERLE project team to consolidate the program delivery model and practice approach, which will ensure consistent delivery across sites and position MERLE to scale up effectively and efficiently to deliver greater benefit to more young people at risk within the South Eastern suburbs.

Appendix

Appendix 1 – Program logic



Appendix 2 - Expected outcomes - definitions

Outcome Domain	Shown through -
1. Improved intra-personal well-being - Youth show improved health, wellbeing and engagement with services for support when needed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased personal insight and goal setting –immediate risks addressed • More positive relationships with trusted adults • Improved communications, self-esteem and emotional regulation/well-being
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improved self-care behaviours • Improved knowledge of, trust and use of services – help - seeking behaviours
2. Social wellbeing – Youth show more positive relationships and engagement with others – family, peers, teachers, recreational and community involvement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improvement in positive relationships with family and/or home environment • Improvement in positive peer relationships – reduced anti-social peer relationships • Improvement positive interactions within the school environment, • Improved recreational and community participation and depth of engagement (leadership)
3. Educational outcomes - Improved education engagement, experience and performance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase school attendance and engagement (reduced disruptions/ increased positive involvement) • Increased participation in school support programs and activities – homework clubs <i>others</i> • Improved school achievement (grades) • Improved education attainment (completion)
4. Post-secondary readiness – Improved life skills and readiness for post-secondary education, training or transitional programs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improved knowledge and ability to navigate independence – communication, self-regulation, financial skills, self-care, post-secondary education and employment readiness • Readiness for and pathways established into further education and/or employment • Improved ability to engage with services and others in community to identify education/employment or other opportunities • YP have improved sense of wellbeing, and optimism in the future