A PROJECT BY The Centre

Outcomes Practice Evidence Network
Child and Family Services

MERLE Program Executive Summary

Prepared for:

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MERLE Evaluation Report Executive Summary

The MERLE program is an intensive, two-year intervention that aims to support 60 young people from multicultural backgrounds who are at risk of school disengagement and youth justice involvement to gain the necessary life skills to reach their full potential. The MERLE program works in partnership with schools, local government, specialist services and police to support disadvantaged youth, mainly from refugee and migrant backgrounds, living in Melbourne's south-eastern suburbs. The program provides intensive wrap-around support to improve community safety and strengthen participants' social and emotional wellbeing, education, community engagement and employment for a positive future. The MERLE program, delivered by South East Community Links (SECL) and funded by the Department of Home Affairs, commenced in August 2022 and is due for completion in mid-2024.

This evaluation examined the extent to which MERLE achieved its intended outcomes and identified critical success factors and opportunities for improvement through a mixed methods approach (see Table 1 for data sources). The approach drew from qualitative and quantitative data that were coded, thematically analysed and triangulated to identify consistent themes against key evaluation questions.

Table 1: Data sources used in MERLE evaluation

Data source	What were we looking to understand?
Client Management System data (n=83)	Participants' demographic features and presenting issues Activities delivered
Interviews with partner schools (n=4)	Program structure and delivery Outcomes observed
Surveys with partner schools (n=5)	Program structure and delivery Outcomes observed
Interviews with MERLE program team	Program structure and delivery Outcomes observed
OPEN Outcomes Measurement Survey Tool (OMT) (in-scope sample n=43)	Participants' state-of-wellbeing outcome areas and reflections on change from program commencement to completion across two points in time (early in program and later in program). Includes Personal Wellbeing Index – School Children (PWI-SC) and open-ended questions

1. Summary of key findings

1. Who are MERLE participants and what has been delivered as part of the program? Where expected participants reached?

MERLE delivered expected activities, exceeding participation targets and engaging participants with diverse multicultural backgrounds and presenting issues as planned.

1a. Demographic features and presenting issues of participants

Between August 2022 and March 2024, the program supported a total of **164 young people, with 83 participants fully engaged and 81 on an active-hold waitlist**[1]. Participants ranged in age from 12 to 23, with an average age of 15.

Figure 1: Demographics of MERLE participants (Source: CMS)

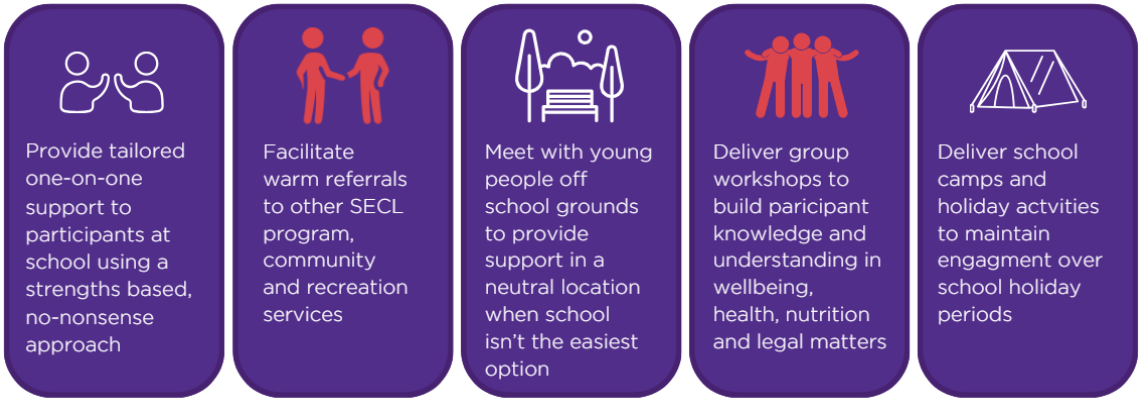
Participants were referred for multiple and varied reasons, with 66% having four or more concurrent issues. The most common presenting issues for participants were concerns around wellbeing (95%), relationships (78%), education and training (76%), employment (55%) and social isolation (55%).

Overall, the program effectively reached and supported its target demographic, providing tailored and flexible support to address a range of complex issues faced by young people, predominantly multicultural young people who were at risk of school disengagement and youth justice involvement.

1b. What was delivered by the MERLE program?

From August 2022 to March 2024, practitioners delivered **1133 sessions to 83 participants, primarily within five partner schools.** The program used a multi-modal delivery model including the following components:

[1] Participants engaged on an active-hold waitlist are supported by MERLE practitioners informally during group workshops, however, are not provided additional one-on-one intervention due to case-load capacity limitations.



2. What difference has the program made to date? Progress towards outcomes

Participants in the MERLE program who have been engaged for six months or more (n=43) have shown significant progress towards expected outcomes across the four outcome domains. Improvements were observed across all outcome domains, in particular in participant's confidence, emotional regulation and personal insights, prosocial behaviours and positive peer and family connections, school attendance and behaviour at school, future employment pathways and optimism for the future.

Overview – Key outcomes (In scope: 43 Participants – MERLE engagement for 6 months or more)			
12–23 years	Male	Majority complex, multiple issues	85% from CALD backgrounds

Outcome domain	**Key findings**
Overall wellbeing 	**Overall, most participants (n= 43 in scope) experienced significant improvements in overall wellbeing and across each outcome domain due to the program:** • 95% reported feeling 'better' or 'much better' as a result of the program • 88 % experienced improved 'intra-personal wellbeing,' • 84% experienced improved 'social wellbeing', • 84% improved 'educational outcomes' and • 58 % improved 'post-school readiness' The Personal Wellbeing Index – School Children (PWI-SC) scores for the group showed an increase from a mean of 65.1 (SD=0.7) to 84.4 (SD=1.0), equating to an increase of 19.3 points (SD=1.1).

	This represents higher wellbeing level than the normative range for young people in Australia, which typically falls between 73.4 and 76.4 points. *"[I] Feel so much better, this program has been amazing and helped changed my life – I'm so thankful (participant)*
Outcome 1: **Improved intra-personal wellbeing** 	**Overall, 88% of participants of the MERLE program experienced improvements in intra-personal wellbeing.** • 88% reported improved confidence, wellbeing and emotional regulation • 86% reported improved personal insights and goal setting • 81% reported improved positive relationship with a trusted adult • 74% reported improved self-care behaviours, and improved trust and use of services The Personal Wellbeing Index – School Children (PWI-SC) scores for the group showed an increase from a mean of 65.68 (SD=0.7) to 84.83 (SD=1), equating to an improvement of 19.15 points (SD=1.04). *"Being able to speak to someone who listens and understands is really important. Not everyone can speak to teachers and parents." (participant)*
Outcome 2: **Social wellbeing** 	**Overall, 84% of participants of the MERLE program experienced improvements in social wellbeing.** • 84% experienced improvements in positive peer relationships • 81% experienced improved positive relationships with family and/or home environment • 79% experienced improved behaviour or interactions in the school environment • 72% increased their engagement in community and recreational activities • 70% experienced a greater sense of belonging and optimism. The Personal Wellbeing Index – School Children (PWI-SC) scores for the group showed an increase from a mean of 67.78 (SD=0.66) to 85.82 (SD=0.88), equating to an improvement of 19.04 points (SD=1.05). *"[I had] police charges, fighting in gangs, not looking after my health, expelled from schools, kicked out of home. Now I'm at home and have good relationship with my family, I'm working part time and doing [alternative education classes] and going to gym and looking after my health. I don't associate with gangs or those people anymore." (participant)*
Outcome 3:	**Overall, 84% of participants experienced 'improved educational outcomes' particularly in attendance, more active engagement and more positive peer relationships.**

Improved educational outcomes 	• 84% experienced improvements in their school attendance. • 67% increased participation in school support programs. • 47% demonstrated improved school achievement • 30% experienced improved education attainment The Personal Wellbeing Index – School Children (PWI-SC) scores for the group showed an increase from a mean of 52 (SD=0.93) to 72 (SD=1.25), equating to an improvement of 20 points (SD=1.74). *"The MERLE Program has helped me during school and out of school hours. I probably would have dropped out of school if not for my MERLE worker." (participant)*
Outcome 4: **Post-school readiness** 	**Overall, 58% of participants saw improvements in post-school readiness.** • 58% experienced positive shifts in readiness for and pathways established into further education and/or employment. Participants who were at the age where they are legally able to obtain employment, 81% of participants were reported as experiencing improvements. • 56% experienced improvements in their knowledge and ability to navigate independence. Of the work-age cohort participants, 78% saw improvements. • 51% experienced an improved sense of wellbeing and optimism for the future. Of the work-aged participants, 67% saw improvements. • 47% established pathways into further education and/or employment. Of the work-aged participants, 63% saw improvements. The Personal Wellbeing Index – School Children (PWI-SC) scores for the group showed an increase from a mean of 63.11 (SD=0.72) to 83.11 (SD=0.73), equating to an improvement of 20 points (SD=1.00). *"[I had] poor attendance at school, negative living environments and concerned about my future. Now I have an apprenticeship, go to gym regularly, have met new friends who have a positive mindset and feel great about my future." (participant)*

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

a. MERLE Practitioners practice approach and skill

The approach of MERLE practitioners was seen as key to the program's success. Their approach was seen as adaptive, and flexible in range of engagement strategies, activities and delivery location.

A key success factor was the delivery model used by the MERLE program 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.

b. 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.

Being employed by an agency external to the school, MERLE practitioners have the flexibility to offer support beyond the school environment. This allows them to maintain confidentiality and gain valuable insights into participants' needs, enabling more effective support. This support can extend to home visits and uncovering insights about participants that they may not wish to disclose at school. Additionally, it provides opportunities to attend activities outside of school hours and terms.

c. Strong partnership relationships

Strong relationships between the MERLE program team and school staff enabled the MERLE program to be delivered more effectively and efficiently, ensuring strong understanding of the program in the school and therefore appropriate referrals and program use by the schools.

This includes regular informal dialogues aimed at providing brief updates on participants, facilitating the development of trust between staff and MERLE practitioners. It is anticipated that the strong rapport and relationships between practitioners and school staff can have a cascading effect, building stronger connections between staff and students as students observe positive relationship modelling by their practitioners. MERLE Practitioners observed that strong communication with school staff leads to earlier referrals of young people to the program, often resulting in better alignment with the program's objectives. Additionally, improved communication aids the school's understanding of the program's purpose and the practitioner's role, thereby improving the program's effectiveness and efficiency.

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

a. Variability in how the program was implemented across the schools

Data showed that the MERLE program's implementation varied across schools, indicating differences in understanding of roles, responsibilities and expected outcomes for participants. This was in part due to the program being a pilot, which requires flexibility and innovation in regard to implementation. Additionally, flexibility was crucial given the different and complex systems in each individual school. Each school has slightly different ways of operating, including their leadership and communication structures, as such the MERLE practitioners worked in an agile way to best fit within those systems and structures.

Recommendation: Explore consolidating operational program guidelines, refining school partnership agreement processes, and investigating oversight and leadership roles for the MERLE program.

b. MERLE program and participant composition to maximise outcomes given resource limitations

It was observed that a high number of complex clients require extensive support from MERLE practitioners, stretching capacity and reducing participant numbers. **Identifying the right**

composition of participants, in relation to levels of complexity can ensure more manageable caseloads, program sustainability, and worker wellbeing.

Future scaling efforts should also consider gender diversity among practitioners. While male practitioners benefit schools with staff gender imbalances, it is likely that this also reduced the participation of at-risk young women in the program, who may feel uncomfortable with male workers. Introducing female practitioners to the program would ensure equitable support for disadvantaged young women.

Recommendation: Consider program structure in terms of delivery method, gender composition of the MERLE practitioner team, case load composition, client complexity and diversity within resource constraints to improve sustainability and maximise benefits for diverse youth participants.

Conclusion and Next Steps

The MERLE program has achieved significant progress in addressing the needs of culturally diverse youth in Melbourne's south-eastern suburbs who face risks of disengagement from education and involvement in youth justice issues. MERLE program participants experienced positive changes across all outcome domains including intra-personal and social wellbeing, educational outcomes and post-school readiness.

The MERLE program has shown effectiveness in its delivery model, with promising results. Continuous improvement efforts will allow the MERLE program team to consolidate operational guidelines, refine school partnership processes, and streamline program delivery methods within resource constraints. This will ensure consistent outcomes across sites and facilitate effective scaling to benefit more at-risk young men and women in Melbourne's south-eastern suburbs. Continued intervention and data collection with participants, following program completion, would be able to determine longer term outcomes and their sustainability.