



**The**  
**Albury**  
Project

**A Community of  
Schools and  
Services  
Approach**

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**The Albury Project brings together a community of schools and services to deliver early intervention responses for young people that reduce disadvantage and supports them to thrive.**



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## INTRODUCTION

The Albury Project is an early intervention model aimed at proactively identifying young people who may be at risk and providing systematic and coordinated responses to their unique needs. Underpinned by a Community of Schools and Services (COSS) approach, the Albury Project is driven by a partnership between Yes Unlimited (lead agency), headspace Albury-Wodonga, Albury City Council, Child Youth Mental Health Service (CYMHS), Department of Communities and Justice, Upstream Australia and the three Albury public high schools James Fallon, Murray, and Albury. Officially launched in 2018, the Albury Project has significantly enhanced the way schools and services work together, has achieved tangible outcomes for many individuals and, at population level early outcome indicators paint a promising picture of the real impact it is having.

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Embodying genuine early intervention, the COSS approach pulls schools and services together in an integrated manner, proactively identifying young people requiring support, before risk factors escalate. In simple terms we go and find young people before they show up to our services in crisis. There are three key mechanisms to achieve this:



### Population Screening

All students (years 7-12) of participating schools complete the Australian Index of Adolescent Development (AIAD), screening young people for early indicators known to correlate with social and educational disadvantage. Drawing on the data collected through the AIAD, young people are tiered into three categories of risk/need, which then determines the level of support received through the Albury Project Team.



### Systematized Collaboration

Participating schools and services become a single team, formally committing to responding to the young people identified through the AIAD without the complex service navigation and 'bouncing' that often characterises informal arrangements. This involves interagency agreements, an overarching governance group, structured operational staff meetings and clearly articulated responsibilities for each stakeholder.



### Data and Outcomes Focus

The model is driven by a constant feedback loop of data and outcomes collected through the AIAD. Not only does this data allow student need to be tracked and responded to as it changes, it also enables informed, higher-level adjustments of the service system response.





## THE JOURNEY FOR ALBURY

The Albury Project was established following a community forum, where Associate Professor David Mackenzie presented the compelling achievements of the Geelong Project, utilising a COSS model. While there was no funding on the table at this stage, the Albury community mobilised, formally raising the Albury Project flag. What we lacked in resourcing, we made up for in our collective discontent with a system that was responding too late, and our commitment to doing things differently. Five years on, the model has become a critical part of Albury's service infrastructure, achieving some significant developmental milestones:

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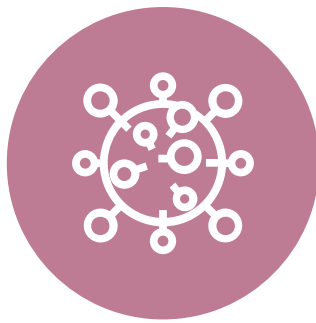
## SECURING PILOT FUNDING

In 2019 Yes Unlimited was delighted to receive funding through the Department of Communities and Justice under the Universal Screening and Supports program to pilot the Albury Project over four years.



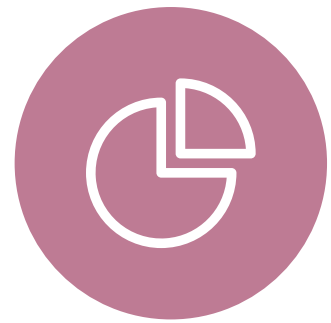
### Embedding a Structure

Overarching governance structures, partnerships and a formal Memorandum of Understanding have been developed, implemented, and sustained. The partner high schools delegated 'Project Champions' and allocated internal resourcing to ensure the model's success. Yes Unlimited restructured internally to align our existing youth services under a single Position Description, allowing us to utilise the COSS framework as scaffolding for our broader responses to young people, such as the Hive Youth Resource Centre and our youth Specialist Homelessness Service.



### Maintaining Momentum through COVID-19

Using a range of creative measures, we sustained the work throughout the pandemic, using online drop-in spaces, virtual or phone-based case management, online Kahoot competitions, and Netflix Watch Parties. This was a challenging time to be piloting a new approach, but momentum was maintained, and we were able to pick things back up once restrictions were eased.



### Data and Evaluation

A total of 9531 AIAD surveys have been completed over the last four years, with students from the three public high schools. We have also participated in two external evaluation processes which are due to be released towards the end of 2023.

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## OUTCOMES AND ACHIEVEMENTS

The AIAD survey trends over four years present a promising quantitative indication of what's being achieved for young people through the Albury Project. These are early indications of what is long-term work, and while it's not the full picture, at a population level, it's pointing in the right direction:



Earlier evaluation data between 2019 and 2021 shows that for young people identified as at-risk of homelessness in any year, after receiving support through the Albury Project, about half were no longer at-risk 12 months later.

**“(As schools) we have always wanted and needed to collaborate with external services but in the past, this has never been achieved sustainably and effectively in practice. Different departments just focus on their own issues, even if these issues are connected on some level. The Albury Project is the bridge that we needed to be able to work across departments, and between schools and agencies. The COSS Model means that we are doing this in a consistent methodological way. It is the oil that makes the cogs work better.”**

Principals Darryl Ward, Jennifer Parrett, and Norman Meader  
Parity Magazine: June 2022 V35 I4

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Other outcomes that are more difficult to quantify but are equally indicative of the model's success in action include:

### **Systems Change**

Schools and services are fundamentally working together in a different way. Collaboration is often touted as the solution to complex systemic work, but this is only possible with a clear alignment of purpose, a commitment of resourcing from all stakeholders and embedded mechanisms that facilitate collective efforts. Albury Project Partners are in continuous communication, pooling resources, planning strategically as a unit, and have developed a rich understanding of each other's context.

### **Shared measurement**

The annual AIAD surveys provide a platform for examining the effectiveness of the collective work, making sense of demand and the needs of young people and provides a common lens for critical analysis. The power of longitudinal wellbeing data, tracking a cohort of students over four years, presents many opportunities for learning and directing future work that will only be fully realised as we continue to progress the model.

### **Getting in Early**

Many of the young people identified through the AIAD were not on the radar of the school or service providers as needing extra support. When we begin working with young people at this point, the issues are often simpler, family is still involved, progress is faster and we minimise the developmental impacts of a more significant crisis.

### **The 'School-Based Team'**

A practical innovation made up of school welfare staff and service practitioners in each school, who meet regularly to co-design responses to young people that are coordinated, and purposeful, while enabling us to manage the demand vs resourcing challenges collectively.

### **Coordinating Resources**

Resources are being used more purposefully in a largely fragmented and overwhelmed service system. Student Support Officers (SSO) in schools have become a critical link to a network of external services. Both acute (CYMHS), and non-acute (headspace) mental health services are positioned to streamline access to the 'right supports, at the right time' and more broadly young people are presented with options from an entire system rather than what any service can offer in isolation.

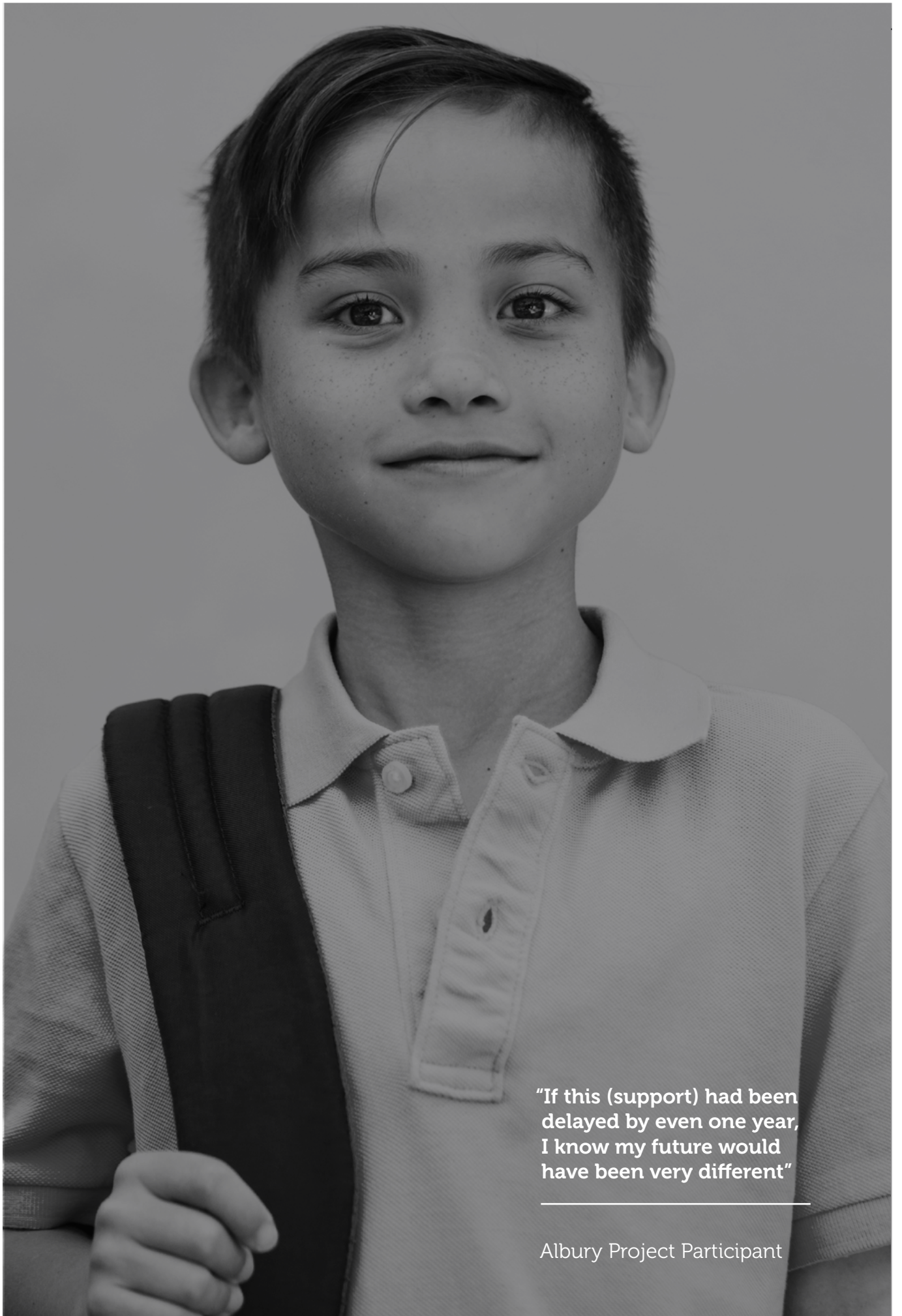
### **Co-designed Service Responses**

Examples are wide and varied, including access to specialized therapy, classroom flexibility or other in-school supports, school holiday programs to maintain engagement during breaks, therapeutic group work, community-based mentoring, family counselling, talent development through music and art, access to medical care, driving lessons or practical items like a new pair of glasses or a uniform for employment. While these interventions are not unique on their own, the co-design process tailors them to individual circumstances, delivers them consistently, and maximizes existing resources.

### **Building Trauma-informed Systems**

This is an emerging priority identified by the partners, recognising that many of our systems are inherently 'organised' by trauma, rather than proactively addressing the dynamics of it. Traumatized systems replicate the behaviour of traumatized people, making them reactive, hypervigilant, and self-protective, and we have recognised the need to buffer our systems from trauma's corrosive impacts. Partners have participated in specialised training, and we imagine this will be an important body of work moving forward.





**"If this (support) had been  
delayed by even one year,  
I know my future would  
have been very different"**

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Albury Project Participant



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## CASE STUDIES

### Lucas, 16 years old.

Lucas was identified through the AIAD survey as being at risk of homelessness. This was due to family and relationship breakdown, couch surfing, and more recently a declining attendance at school. Lucas is a quiet person and generally a good student, and as such, the school had not identified any obvious risk factors prior to the survey uncovering this. Further exploration by the Albury Project School-Based Team identified that Lucas was also having issues with his eyesight which was impacting his ability to engage in class, and his family was struggling financially due to a recent job loss, all of which was taking a toll on his mental health. The School-Based Team met and co-designed the following plan for support:

- Yes Unlimited appointed Lucas a case manager to coordinate a range of supports and provided Single Session Family counselling to work through the conflict and family dynamics that were happening at home.
- headspace delivered a targeted wellbeing plan, developing strategies with Lucas to manage the stressors of home, school and life, and provided psychoeducation.
- Financial support was accessed to pay for a new pair of glasses.
- The school connected Lucas with the SSO, checking in regularly on how he was travelling at school and modifying classroom requirements to allow for the flexibility he needed to work through things.

Without the structure of the Albury Project, it is highly likely that Lucas's situation would have remained 'hidden' until it reached crisis point and resulted in a complete disengagement from school, or a referral to the local youth refuge, after which a sluggish and fragmented systems response would have been activated. Lucas was initially rated as 'high risk' (Tier 3) through the AIAD survey, requiring intensive support, and one year on was downgraded to 'low risk' (Tier 1). Support has since closed after Lucas graduated Year 12, gained full time employment and reports feeling positive about his life and future.

### Sophie, 14 years old.

An Aboriginal student, who was flagged within a School-Based Team meeting due to regular nonattendance at school. An assessment with Albury Project staff revealed that Sophie 'hated' school as she felt like she had no friends, had limited positive connections within school or the community and that there were some complex family dynamics present. The School-Based Team met and co-designed the following plan for support:

- Sophie was allocated to the Albury Project's Aboriginal Early Intervention Specialist who connected her with specific cultural supports and encouraged her family to be involved in the support plan.
- Sophie was linked with Yes Unlimited's Hive Youth Resource Centre and began attending afternoon drop in spaces regularly.
- Sophie quickly asserted herself as a bit of leader at the Hive and was encouraged to join the Yes Change Makers, a youth leadership program, where she grew her self-confidence and made some new friends.
- headspace resourcing was used to provide Kids in Kontrol a therapeutic group program in the school, focused on building resilience and connections. Sophie always showed up to school on the days the program was scheduled.
- A wellbeing plan was developed with her school Year Level Coordinator with strategies to manage nonattendance and behavior.

While Sophie still has many challenges, her school attendance has dramatically improved, she has a good circle of friends, several adults in her life who she identifies as safe, and she now says school is going 'ok'.

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## WHAT'S NEXT

We believe the Albury Project provides a promising example of what can be achieved when communities organise to deliver locally-driven systems reform. The place-based nature of the approach does not lend itself to cookie-cutter replications in other communities, however the COSS model, the learning we have undertaken, and systemic change agenda is both scalable and transferable. Systems change is hard, complex, and slow. While there have been many challenges and there remains much work to be done, the payoff is that we are finally getting upstream on issues like homelessness, school disengagement and mental health. The work ahead of us includes:

### **Additional Mental Health Supports**

The AIAD data has consistently shown that many students are experiencing high levels of distress and early indications of emerging mental health issues, beyond the capacity of existing resources. We are in a prime position to address this earlier, with the right resourcing.

### **Trauma-Informed Systems**


Early intervention requires non-reactive, considered, and forward-thinking systems and we can only do this when we are able to effectively process and hold space for the emotional impacts of the work. While it's easy to grasp 'trauma' at an individual level, examining its toll structurally necessitates a more sophisticated approach, which we are beginning to conceptualise in the context of the COSS model.

### **Opportunities for Exploration**

The scaffolding provided by the COSS model presents us with a range of opportunities for expansion, such as earlier work in primary schools and the transition to high school, expansion into outlying regional schools, targeting other issues, and widening the partnerships involved in the project.

### **Securing Funding**

The USS Pilot funding provided through the Department of Communities and Justice concludes in December 2023, and we are yet to receive any assurances of its continuation. This presents several immediate challenges in terms of retaining specialised staff, maintaining the engagement of partners, the momentum of future planning, and the lack of certainty we can provide young people receiving support. To say a discontinuation of funding would be a disappointment to the Albury community, is an understatement.



Many people have put their heart and soul into the work, not to mention the in-kind contributions of resourcing, funding, and time, which we would estimate to be at least double that of the existing funding. This investment has come freely and willingly, and our commitment is only growing as we see the outcomes for young people unfold. The type of early intervention delivered through the Albury Project isn't a nice add-on or supplement, it is critical, and must continue if we are to genuinely make in-roads on youth disadvantage.

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# The **Albury** Project

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