

Education Benalla Program

Evaluation of Program Delivery in 2012

Executive Summary

Report #3 March 2013

prepared by Dr. Helen Stokes and Dr. Malcolm Turnbull
Youth Research Centre, MGSE, University of Melbourne

Introduction

The Benalla district in north east Victoria has been identified as “highly disadvantaged” by such instruments as the ABS SEIFA Index, the Jesuit Social Services Analysis of Postcodes and the Australian Early Development Index (AEDI). The 2009 AEDI snapshot concluded that the already large number of disadvantaged families in Benalla was increasing and that three generations of unemployment was resulting in lack of aspirations on the part of students and devaluation of education by parents and grandparents. The 2012 AEDI paints a worsening picture with a significant change in the level of child developmental vulnerability in the Benalla community across every measured domain: Physical Health and Wellbeing, Social Competence, Emotional Maturity, Language & Cognitive Skills (school based), Communication Skills and General Knowledge. The proportion of children considered developmentally vulnerable on one or more domain is now over 31%, and the proportion of children vulnerable on two or more domains has doubled from 10% in 2009 to 20.8% in 2012.

Tomorrow:Today Foundation’s ‘Education Benalla Program’ (EBP) responds to concerns that social disadvantage is impacting adversely on educational attainment in the district. It takes an innovative, whole-of-community approach that subscribes strongly to the beliefs that (a) formal schooling is only one component of the educational environment in any district, (b) sustainability of the project will depend on its being embedded in the community as a way of working, and (c) cross-sectoral partnerships (schools, community groups, government agencies, etc) are crucial to achieving desired outcomes. Three long-term aims are –

- Significant and sustained improvement in Year 12 completion rates,
- Significant and sustained improvement in transitioning to tertiary education
- Significant and sustained improvement in completing a tertiary degree/diploma or apprenticeship.

The EBP consists of four objectives to achieve the long-term aims. These are-

- All Benalla children start school ready to learn;
- Improvement in Literacy and Numeracy levels;
- Improved levels of student wellbeing
- Raised educational expectations by family and community

The EBP commenced implementation in 2010, with roll out of sub-programs overseen by a Program Management Committee comprising three Tomorrow:Today Foundation Directors, a regional representative of the Victorian Department of Education & Early Childhood Development, and representatives of the Ian Potter Foundation and R.E.Ross Trust. The Program has been designed in two, five year phases, and the Youth Research Centre, Melbourne Graduate School of Education at

the University of Melbourne was commissioned to design and implement the evaluation of Phase 1 of the EBP. The final Phase 1 evaluation report is due in June 2015.

The success of the EBP in facilitating the program aims outlined above will be measured over the course of Phase 1 of the Program. Evaluation consists of parent, student and other stakeholder assessments of the success of the various component sub-programs of the EBP in meeting the project's key objectives; augmented with statistical and numeric data that charts and demonstrates change over time. It is anticipated that major databases including the Australian Early Development Index, Australian Bureau of Statistics, and Victorian Dept. Education & Early Childhood Development will provide persuasive evidence of the impact of EBP, in conjunction with simultaneous initiatives such as Benalla Regeneration, as young people complete educational milestones. Likewise, the evaluators acknowledge the value and importance of ensuring that the lived experience and voice of young people who participate in communal-based programs be captured, and case studies of young peoples' experiences over time will provide longer-term learnings re the effectiveness and durability of EBP interventions.

This third evaluation report documents the evolution of the EBP during 2012.

2012 Evaluation findings

2012 has been a markedly successful year for the Education Benalla Program. The EBP has employed different working arrangements with the objective of achieving activities in the most efficient way and embedding EBP objectives in existing institutional systems. The 2012 year has evidenced what 'whole-of-community' looks like in a delivery sense for the Education Benalla Program. Four delivery modes are in evidence:

- i TTF delivers the activity
- ii Shared delivery of the activity in a partnership with a government or non-government agency or community group
- iii Another organisation delivers the activity. TTF helped shape the activity and provides funds
- iv TTF resources an organisation that is independently delivering an activity

The main partners in delivery of the EBP in 2012 are the local Early Years Network (EYN) the two local secondary schools, Benalla College and FCJ College, Benalla East Primary School, and Benalla Rural City (delivering the state government's ACT initiative):

The Early Years Network comprises representatives of local Primary schools, pre-schools, NESAY, DEECD, Child First, DHS, Scope, the regional Library network, Early Childhood Intervention Services, Maternal & Child Health and Benalla Rural City Community Services, is part of the Central Hume Region's Child Family Services Alliance. It has played a key advisory role in the roll-out of EBP's Early Years Program.

Simultaneously, TTF has partnered Benalla College in delivery of the Hands on Learning, an activity of the Student Wellbeing sub-program. EBP introduced Benalla College to Hands on Learning in 2010 and proposed a funding partnership. (This has included funding the salary of a tradesman to work with the program's teacher.) Partnerships with Benalla College and FCJ College have enabled access by students to the Connect9 mentoring program.

Many agencies, clubs and groups have partnered with TTF in the delivery of activities in 2012; most notably Connect9 and playgroups. These have included: Benalla Aquatic Centre, Benalla Library, Benalla Health (speech therapists, dieticians, dental staff, counsellor), DEECD (Child intervention services, Koori Ed Support Officers, literacy specialists), Child First, Benalla Rural City (Family Services, Maternal & Child Health), Dept. Human Services (child protection), Goulburn-Ovens TAFE, Benalla Gliding Club, and Waminda Community House.

The Advancing Country Towns (ACT) initiative has been delivered through the State Government (Department of Planning and Community Development) working with Benalla Rural City. Advancing Country Towns is being implemented at nine sites across Victoria. Each site has been identified as dealing with complex and entrenched disadvantage. TTF was a non-government representative on the reference group and steering committee for the ACT initiative in Benalla and participated in a significant problem definition benefit analysis process overseen by Treasury aimed at identifying how best to reduce the level of social disadvantage in Benalla. Through this process disengagement from the learning process was identified as the key issue confronting Benalla. Accordingly investment in education, employment and training was prioritised. In March 2012 TTF prepared a report to the ACT Steering Committee to guide investment in early years education. The report recommended, amongst other things, the funding of the UK based PEEP program for parents and young children. In combination with the active involvement of the regional office of Dept. Education & Early Childhood Development (DEECD) in investigating and promoting PEEP as a possible state-government endorsed program, and given TTF's activity in this area, ACT agreed that its resources would be best utilised in complementing the EBP. ACT funding was forthcoming to the Tomorrow:Today Foundation for the commencement of PEEP in Benalla.

A number of actions and projects are functioning in 2012 to impact on one or more of the program objectives -

Objective	Currently being addressed by:
All Benalla children start school ready to learn	Little Giggles Playgroups support to other playgroups PEEP programs support to kindergartens running regular early years programs in the Ministry of Housing area parent training & support survey
Improved Literacy and Numeracy levels	Reading Buddies PEEP programs support to kindergartens individualised funding - enrichment activities for individual students/families
Improved levels of student well-being	Hands on Learning Connect 9 Connect Girls small grants for youth development initiatives individual funding support to students/families youth mental health first aid for volunteers, staff and parents
Raised educational expectations by family and community	"Transitions" activities cross-sector collaborations PEEP Connect9 regular media stories scholarships strengthening the organisational capacity of Waminda Community House

Activity Summary – Early Years

PLAY GROUPS

- In 2012 the Tomorrow Today Foundation has built successfully on its previous outreach and engagement agenda by continuing to offer three Little Giggles play groups a week (to steadily increasing attendances) by direct delivery; 3 playgroups by shared delivery and supported 1 other playgroup.
- Little Giggles direct delivery has grown from 84 children from 54 families in 2011 to 99 children from 69 families in 2012. 37 (55%) met vulnerability criteria.
- Support to other playgroups includes making Cecily Court premises and equipment available for weekly Twins Playgroup sessions; taking the Mother Goose program to rural play groups and to an estimated 100 children at a local Child Care Centre; and financially assisting the establishment of the Tatong playgroup.
- There is glowing endorsement of program delivery and content by parent attendees at “Little Giggles”.
- Generalised increase in confidence, engagement and capacity among play group parents.
- Facilitation of networks and friendships among families.
- Enhancement of early years partnerships within Benalla Rural City (eg. through sharing of premises, committee memberships, etc).
- Growing recognition among parents of the importance of school readiness and of education in general.
- A significant decrease in the number of Benalla children starting school without having previously attended play groups or Kindergarten

PEEP (Parents Early Education Partnership)

PEEP specifically aims to support parents in:

- their relationships with their child
- developing their child’s numeracy and literacy skills
- affirming their role as the child’s first educators
- encouraging development of positive learning dispositions
- their own lifelong learning

In conjunction with Benalla Rural City Community Services and the Advancing Country Towns initiative, TTF has established and implemented the PEEP Parent Education program within the Benalla district. In order to roll out the program in Victoria, the Education Benalla Program Manager and Manager of Community Services at Benalla Rural City completed training in the UK. This facilitated the training of 22 local practitioners by visiting UK trainers. TTF undertook recruitment of PEEP Co-ordinator Cath Warnock and establishment of two PEEP groups a week, to which another was added later in the year (“transition PEEP”) to help parents of vulnerable families prepare for school.

Funding arrangements with Benalla Rural City (via DPCD) were confirmed in mid-2012. The EBP commenced implementation of PEEP in August. 32 children, together with eight siblings, accessed and benefited from PEEP sessions at the TTF’s Cecily Court premises during 2012. Also, PEEP Program training was provided to the co-ordinator of the independent “Little Footprints” playgroup.

READING BUDDIES

Reading Buddies commenced implementation in 2012, delivered as a partnership between TTF and Benalla East PS whereby ten community volunteers (out of twelve trainees) have been

rostered on four days a week to support Reading & Literacy teaching in the Junior school. The volunteers work under the direction of class teachers. The volunteers' time commitments range from one to three morning sessions a week. While each Buddy is paired with a particular student, in practice, the Buddies tend to work with a number of students in the course of any single session. TTF funds the attraction, preliminary training and support of volunteers, and the school funds the literacy training and coordination of the volunteers in the school.

- According to teachers, and based on a pre and post –survey, all child participants have shown gains in confidence and have connected with their respective Reading Buddies.
- In some cases attendance or punctuality have improved
- Follow-up testing (in December 2012) indicated improvements in behaviours in all but one case, improved or sustained (high) levels of engagement in all but one case , and improved writing output in 70% of cases.
- It is anticipated that the program will be expanded with the merging of local schools under the Benalla Regeneration initiative in 2013. Discussions are underway to extend RB outreach to St Joseph's Catholic Primary School.
- Accordingly, in conjunction with the schools, TTF plans to run two training programs for RB volunteers in 2013

OTHER EARLY YEARS ACTIVITIES IN 2012

- A grant of \$4000 to enable Munro Avenue Kindergarten to upgrade its home corner and computer play area
- A grant of \$1400 to assist upgrading Bernard Briggs Kindergarten's sandplay area
- Membership and board membership of the Benalla Toy Library
- **Augmented Early years activity in the Ministry of Housing area.** Recognising that families at the Waminda Estate in West Benalla comprise the primary target of the EBP, the Tuesday morning Little Giggles Play group has been augmented by such activities as the 'Bringing Up Great Kids' parenting program (delivered in partnership with Benalla Rural Health) and (in progress) plans to set up a Thursday afternoon multi-age PEEP program at Waminda Neighbourhood House. In its commitment to reinforce the social impact of the Play groups, social events convened in 2012 by Little Giggles have included a Welcome to Spring Teddy Bear's Picnic, held at Rocket Park (and therefore accessible to Benalla West families).
- Another key development has been EBP acknowledging the importance of strengthening the organisational capacity of Waminda Community House and adapting Program Manager Pat Claridge's workplan to including taking on acting chairperson duties at Waminda Community House for 2012-2013.
- **Establishment of a Parent Education Working Group, comprised of eight agencies and** focused on (a) identifying areas of need and/or service duplication, and (b) expanding and co-ordinating the delivery of programs and activities that will help Benalla parents improve their parenting practice. Preliminary actions of the working group have been:
 - the design and dissemination (in partnership with Benalla EYN) of a **survey for parents of 0-8 year olds** eliciting input on what sort of information might be needed by parents. (168 responses to the survey, collated using Survey Monkey, will be used to inform a series of **Parent Information/training** seminars at which specialists will address infant sleep and eating problems, toilet-training, tantrums, school bullying, and so on).
 - Development of a Map of Agency activity across Benalla, identifying "who's doing what, who do we need to buy in?".

- **Individualised funding** to facilitate enrichment activities for individual students/families. Individualised allocations to young families typically include meeting essential costs for children to stay connected to their peers and school community.

Activity Summary – Middle Years

Connect 9 Mentoring Program

The Mentoring program seeks to

- Provide opportunities for Year 9 students to develop a significant relationship with adults other than parents
 - Provide opportunities for disadvantaged young people to develop their academic, social and interpersonal skills.
 - Increase teenage membership of local clubs and societies
- Connect9 commenced in Term 3 2011, and has subsequently been offered twice, in Terms 2 and 3, 2012. It matches trained community volunteers (mentors) 1:1 with Year 9 students (mentees) for a term of weekly activities, tailored to the interests of the teenager, but with common elements designed to open up the mentee’s thinking, and improve or strengthen connection to the Benalla community and businesses. The maximum intake per term is 15 mentees.
- 42 young people have participated to date in three deliveries of Connect 9 in 2011-2012. (One delivery of the program was ‘single sex’ with specific linkages to the Benalla College Connect Girls initiative – see below). Approximately 60% of these young people were identified as ‘at risk’ of dropping out of school.
 - 16 Connect 9 graduates have since accessed work experience, in some cases independently, in others through mentors.
 - Six of these young people have enrolled in a work readiness program and six have accessed part-time employment.
- Six young people have taken on volunteer leadership roles within the Benalla community since taking part in Connect9.

Hands on Learning

During the development phase of EBP (2008-2010) the Hands on Learning project, based in Frankston Victoria, came to light as a possible approach that would suit Benalla’s situation. A field trip was organised by TTF with Benalla College, and with support and encouragement from the HOL team and funding from TTF, Benalla College Hands on Learning commenced at the start of 2010. EBP funds the salary of one staff member.

Operating two days a week (Wednesday and Friday) in 2012, Benalla HOL has offered practical learning and engagement activities to 20 young people from across the school (Years 7-10), identified as likely to benefit from the program. Selection is by teacher referral and according to HOL Criteria. Some participants have been identified as ‘disengaged’ or ‘at risk’ through non-attendance or suspensions; others have been included for socialisation opportunities. An estimated 70-80% have presented with literacy and numeracy problems. Duration of enrolment varies according to individual need. Some participants have been “returnees” from 2011.

- 63 young people have enrolled in the program over the three year period. (Six of these young people have been prescribed ADHD medication; nine have been described as autistic, possibly autistic, or having a mild intellectual disability.)
- Over the three years, only nine young people have exited the program after 8 weeks or less. (Three young people exited after only one session.)

- Five HOL graduates are currently in Year 12
- Ten HOL graduates are currently in Year 11.
- 14 others have gone on to access either an apprenticeship or part-time work.
- Ten young people are described as having demonstrated *significant improvement in general schooling and attitude* thanks to the program.
- HOL has reportedly made *“a significant difference”* to the school and home life of ten young people.
- Staff report noticeable improvements in the young people’s level of engagement across subjects and in their relationships with staff and peers.
- There is feeling also that the success of the program has impacted on “a big shift in teacher attitudes” across the school.
- Staff report significant improvements in attendance and suspension rates since 2008, both as a result of HOL and other school-wide initiatives.
- In recognition of the success of the HOL program, the school (with EBP support) has introduced an alternative program for Year 9 Girls, Connect Girls, in 2012 (see below)
- TTF has offered FCJ College co-sponsorship of a Hands on Learning program at FCJ, and this offer is being actively considered for commencement in 2013.

CONNECT GIRLS

In 2012 TTF has partnered the Victorian State Government in funding CONNECT GIRLS, an off-shoot/alternative of the HANDS ON LEARNING program that targets and seeks to reduce absenteeism among Year 9 girls at Benalla College. The program, offered two days a week, focuses on health, fitness, personal grooming, career planning and career pathways; it expands and develops on a Hairdressing program originally offered at the school in 2010-11. In 2012 it had 17 participants from Year(s) 9. It is staffed by Sue Oakley, a senior teacher and retired school administrator, and Helen Roscoe, a former hairdresser and “trainer”. Connect Girls has been made possible by a joint application by the school and TTF for a grant under the Local Solutions to Year 12 Retention initiative, combined with funding from TTF.

- Staff report generalised increases in self-confidence as the most noticeable outcome of the program. This is confirmed by in-house survey data (Entry and Exit) that also demonstrates:
 - Overall improvement in aspirations to complete Year 12
 - Overall improvement in knowledge of the Benalla community
 - Some improvement in attendance rates

Other EBP Activities in the Middle Years domain

- **Support for other community initiatives.** In addition to developing and co-funding the sub-programs described above, EBP has been represented in 2012 on numerous government and non-government working groups.
- **Funding Youth Mental Health First Aid Training.** For the second year, TTF provided funding that enabled 15 community members (including Connect 9 volunteers, parents and teachers from Benalla College) to undertake training in this area.
- **Individualised Funding Support to students and families** Throughout the EBP’s history, a corollary of Middle Years sub-programming has been assistance to individual young people (and families) generally taking the form of funding club memberships or sports participation in cases of financial hardship. In a number of instances, TTF has responded to approaches from schools to provide insurance costs that will enable students to take lap-top computers home. Individualised grants have enabled students to attend Year 12 camps, music camps, etc.
- **Personal Tutoring.** TTF has also facilitated and organised tuition opportunities for a number of young people struggling with Maths/English or otherwise disengaged from education.

- **Small grants to support youth development initiatives.** These grants have a group rather than individual focus and, in 2012, included a grant to the Life Youth Church group to enable purchase of multi-media equipment for its popular youth group activities.

Activity Summary - Transitions

In 2012, activity within the Transitions domain has included:

- Two seminars aimed at providing parents with knowledge to help their children make informed decisions about the future. The seminars have partnered TTF with Centrelink, the DEECD, GOTAFE, Centre Community College, etc.
- A Benalla Careers Day attended by all Year 10 students (150)
- Dissemination and analysis of a Parents Aspirations Survey, aimed at providing the basis for longitudinal examination of changes to Benalla parents' educational aspirations, the impact of regionalism on young people's life choices, and so on. Findings from the survey include:
 - 36% of respondents expect or want their child to go on to further education
 - 38% of respondents would like their child to go on to further education but don't know if that would be possible
 - 65% of respondents regarded Benalla's location as an impediment to their child's post-secondary options
 - 60% of respondents indicated the desire for further information about post-school options.
- **Scholarships.** Five scholarships, of \$1,000 each, have been awarded over 2011-12 to Year 12 students to assist with initial expenses at University.
- **Regular media stories.** TTF has been rigorous in promoting its successful outcomes in the local press and related media, placing 2-3 stories a month that (a) demonstrate the value of its programming, and (b) assist in promoting the EBP's overall aim of strengthened and improved educational outcomes in the district. As one interviewee noted, *"There hasn't previously been a consistent approach to recording positives, young people's aspirations"*.

Conclusion

It is readily apparent that 2012 has been a markedly successful year for the Education Benalla Program. There are multiple stories and compelling instances of success in re-engaging young people to education and educational aspiration, of helping young parents negotiate the dilemmas of parenting, of nurturing communal networks, of facilitating improvements in well-being at multiple levels, and of actively tapping into the extensive voluntary resources of a service-oriented regional community.

The extent and growth of activity are impressive in themselves. At a deeper level, they reflect the capacity, skill and commitment of the program staff and board, the enthusiasm of a striking cohort of volunteers and an inclusive and responsive communal culture. Particular reference needs to be made to the value, intensity and impact of the cross-sectoral partnerships that have evolved, or been reinforced, by the Education Benalla Program. It is worth noting that informal feedback across agencies is already reporting a shift in attitude within Benalla as regards educational aspiration (from *'We didn't go to Uni ... I don't see why he/she needs to'*) to growing acknowledgement of the nexus between career fulfilment and educational attainment. Such feedback, together with evidence cited throughout the report and in the accompanying case-studies, suggests strongly that the Education Benalla Program is making impressive progress towards achieving its long-term aims.