

# Education Benalla Program

## Evaluation of Program Delivery (summary)

### Report #2 July – December 2011

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#### 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 Data Snapshot for Benalla indicated, for instance, that:

\*Almost a quarter of children entering primary school were “vulnerable” according to the key domains of Physical Health & Wellbeing, Social Competence, Emotional Maturity, Language & Cognitive Skills and Communication Skills & General Knowledge.

\* Over 10% of these children were “developmentally vulnerable” according to TWO or more of these domains

\* There had been a significant decrease in the number of secondary school graduates going on to University (from 34.5% in 2003 to 13.8% in 2008).

The 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<sup>1</sup>

Tomorrow:Today Foundation’s ‘Education Benalla Program’ (EBP) responds to concerns that social disadvantage is impacting adversely on educational attainment in the district. 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 success of the program in facilitating these broad aims will be measured by comparison and analysis of statistical data over the course of Phase 1 of the EBP. Accordingly, a key task of the current evaluation has been to collate a range of baseline figures.

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<sup>1</sup> Inquiry into the extent and nature of Disadvantage and Inequity in Rural & Regional Victoria. Submission by Benalla Regeneration (2009)

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.

#### Evaluation Findings as at December 2011 –

- TTF has successfully established three playgroups for mothers and 0-2 year olds, with a view to actively involving Benalla's most disadvantaged families in parent/child social groups, and facilitating access to playgroups for ALL Benalla families
- Indications are that there have been advances in children's capacity to interact, take turns, take direction, sit and engage with activities, demonstrate independence, make choices and generalize these skills at home.
- Strong inter-agency linkages and the convenient location of playgroups are noted
- It is anticipated that increase in levels of school readiness among Benalla's infant population will ultimately be reflected in school data, including standardized test results
- It is evident that playgroup attendance has already had a mild impact on some of the mums' own educational aspirations
- Participant responses from Connect9 strongly indicate that the program has been a resounding success at engaging both adult and youth participants and that it has met the EBP aim of providing disadvantaged young people with opportunities to develop their academic, social and interpersonal skills
- Middle years programs are linking young people to the broader Benalla community through utilizing and accessing clubs, societies and activities (Connect9), and through providing maintenance and handyman services (Hands on Learning).
- Connect9 has clearly been strikingly successful at providing opportunities for Year 9 students to develop a significant relationship with adults other than parents

- Connect9 has also provided opportunities for other family members to socialize and enjoy learning experiences with mentees and mentors
- Hands on Learning students reportedly respond positively to the practical and non-traditional nature of the activities and projects, although there is recognition that HoL is not the right option for all. A dramatic overall decrease in suspension rates over the period 2008 – 2011 has been ascribed to a combination of the HoL program and the establishment of a School House system as part of a school wide positive behavior initiative.
- All Hands on Learning and Connect9 teenagers interviewed for the current evaluation report (=7) indicated their desire to go on to Year 12 – contrasting markedly in several cases with their pre involvement desire to drop out as soon as possible. In two cases young people who have exited school early are now taking advantage of tutoring offered by the EBP. One indicates that the Connect9 experience has made her re-think her decision to ‘drop out’ and that she has successfully applied to undertake VCAL at TAFE. Interviews and surveys underline the impact of the initiatives on improving individual young people’s self-confidence, attitudes to school and learning, social skills and general outlook
- Connect9 has worked effectively in 2011 because of the ability of TTF to tap into community networks and partner with multiple groups in facilitating youth connections with various clubs and societies through waiving or reduction of fees for the course of the program, provision of staff time and facilities, catering, etc.
- The first Parents Careers Information evening had a small turnout, although those in attendance represented the target audience, rating themselves as “not at all confident” about helping their child with career advice prior to the meeting. All participants rated the usefulness of the evening very highly

#### *Community Partnerships*

- Design and delivery to date of the EBP has been informed and facilitated by extensive networking, promotion and active utilisation of the TTF Board’s personal connections with local community Government and the philanthropic sector. Individual Board members and staff have brought extensive local connections and histories of community service to the project. They have contributed, in turn, to the Benalla and District Community Task force, a coalition of non-government organisations and government agencies formed to address findings of the Vinson Report
- The main partners in delivery of the EBP to date are the local Early Years Network and the two local secondary schools, Benalla College and FCJ College. The Early Years Network comprises representatives across all agencies, with active involvement of DEECD, the regional Library network, Advancing Country Towns initiative, Waminda Community House, Child First, Early Childhood Intervention Services, and Benalla Rural City Community Services.

### *Barriers to Program Success*

- The extreme fragility of some target families and their circumstances means that engagement may well be a lengthy and complex process. In this regard, engagement of families may be further undermined by transience and uncertainty of living conditions
- Negative images of the Housing estate area have impeded the growth of the playgroup established in the community house (Waminda) in that some families will not attend activities in this area.
- Staff shortages within Benalla Maternal Child Health Services have impeded progress towards (a) implementing training of family outreach workers and connecting them to new mothers and (b) provision of sufficient allied health referral and support services to meet Benalla's needs at the pre-school level
- Connect9 – there is recognition that some mentors have felt under-prepared for dealing with some emotional issues that surfaced during the first delivery of Connect9 and calls on mentors to assist with life and career planning. A Mental Health First Aid component is recognized as required, as is more intensive Career Planning advice as part of the mentor training

It is anticipated that data derived from tracking participants through the four years of Phase 1 of the EBP will provide persuasive findings and conclusions regarding the potential and possibilities of a whole-of-community approach to educational innovation that seeks to counter the negative consequences of intense, intergenerational social disadvantage. Anticipated benefits of the evaluation include the potential significant value of the evaluation findings in (a) documenting the success or otherwise in practice of such an approach and in analyzing its strengths and weaknesses, and (b) in their potential influence on policy makers and contributions to academic discourse and debate in the area.