

The Education Benalla Program

Report # 4 for the Tomorrow: Today Foundation

Evaluation of Program Delivery in 2013 - Précis

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An initiative of the Tomorrow Today Foundation (TTF) that draws on funding from a number of major philanthropic organisations, the Education Benalla Program (EBP) addresses educational issues associated with social disadvantage in the regional Victorian district of Benalla. Planned as a two phase whole-of-community intervention to be funded and delivered over two consecutive five year periods, the EBP was implemented in 2009 and 'rolled out' during 2010-11. The program is currently in its fourth year of operation. The current report documents program developments during 2013.

The EBP is guided by the long-term aim that ***"by 2030, education and training completion rates for Benalla 17-24 year olds will equal or exceed the Victorian average for non-disadvantaged districts"***; and four key objectives that are:

- 1) All Benalla and district children start school ready to learn
- 2) Improved Literacy and Numeracy levels
- 3) Improved Student assessed levels of well-being
- 4) Raised family and community expectations of education

At the time of writing, the Education Benalla Program (EBP) is being articulated through -

- * Delivery, development and consolidation of projects and activities
- * Liaison and advocacy across and with government and non-government organisations and community groups to help align a focus of effort
- * Planning, capacity building and support to community groups and service providers
- * Individual, tailored support to children and families has also featured, as an important adjunct to the EBP.

Project activity is undertaken in four identifiable ways -

- i Tomorrow:Today Foundation (TTF) delivers the activity
- ii TTF shares delivery of the activity in a partnership with a government or non-government agency or community group
- iii TTF helps shape and provides funds for an activity delivered by another organisation
- iv TTF resources an organisation that is independently delivering an activity

<i>Objective / Result area</i>	<i>Currently being addressed by:</i>
All Benalla children start school ready to learn	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Little Giggles Playgroups including introduction of a Saturday “Dads’ playgroup” • support to other playgroups • PEEP programs • support to kindergartens • running regular early years programs in the Ministry of Housing area • assisting development of Early Years Network (Benalla-wide) strategic plan and convening Parent Education Working Group
Improved Literacy and Numeracy levels	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reading Buddies • PEEP programs • support to kindergartens • individualised funding enrichment activities for individual students/families • “Let’s Read Benalla”
Improved levels of student well-being	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hands on Learning • Connect9 • Connect Girls • small grants for youth development initiatives • individual funding support to students/families • youth mental health first aid for volunteers, staff and parents • liaison and resourcing youth service providers to ensure mutually reinforcing activities

<p>Raised educational expectations by family and community</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transitions activities • cross-sector collaborations • PEEP • Connect9 • Hands On Learning • Parent information nights • regular media stories • scholarships • strengthening the organisational capacity of Waminda Community House
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Delivery, Development and Consolidation

Early Years Programs

Little Giggles Playgroups and PEEP (Parents Early Education Partnership)

In 2013, participation in Little Giggles Playgroups was 105 children from 69 families. Participation in PEEP sessions brought together 95 families with 131 children. Both Playgroups and PEEP demonstrated an increase in participant numbers. There was an increased number and range of weekly PEEP sessions - by the end of 2013, four sessions a week catered for babies to 2-3 year olds, and included a multi-age PEEP at the Waller St campus of Benalla P-12 College. Social and learning outcomes are strong with enthusiastic endorsement of program quality by parents. There is a decrease in the number of children starting school without having previously attended playgroups or Kindergarten.

Reading Buddies

Based on the success of the pilot delivery in 2012, Reading Buddies was continued at Avon St Campus of Benalla P-12 College in 2013, and established at St Joseph's Catholic Primary School.

Reading Buddies has resulted in changes in the participating students' reading levels beyond that which would occur without the intervention. The Co-ordinator reports "*an average jump of two levels across the cohort [of 19 students] ... and an average jump of six levels in the Readers*". Significant improvement is confirmed via analysis undertaken by Professor John Hattie of 2012 and 2013 data.

Between them, Avon Street's Readings Buddies have contributed 678 voluntary hours to the school. St. Joseph's Reading Buddies have contributed 207 voluntary hours to the school.

The Early Years suite of activities is popular, well targeted, high quality, and linked through a cross-agency referral process devised by EBP. It is demonstrating high levels of success at developing or strengthening parent/child relationships. Attracting Benalla's most marginalised families continues to challenge.

Student Wellbeing and Transitions Programs

Connect 9 Mentoring Program

Two Connect9 programs were offered in 2013, one in Term 2 (for 10 young people), and the other in Term 3 (9 young people). A decision was made at the end of 2012 that to maintain quality of each weekly experience, the enrolment size would ideally sit at around 10 young people per program. This meant that the combined program size was more manageable (20 mentors and mentees).

Connect9 has consistently provided the young people and their mentors with a range of community connection, learning, socialisation and recreation experiences, including access to various sports clubs, library sessions, TAFE programs and career-development seminars. Program deliveries in 2013 were highly successful. It has demonstrably assisted young people to connect with their community, with demonstrably positive effects such as gaining work experience placements. Tomorrow:Today was invited to have its Connect9 mentoring practices examined as part of the Victorian Youth Mentoring Alliance's (VYMA) Quality Assurance Pilot. As a result Connect9 became the first Victorian mentoring program to gain statewide accreditation and Tomorrow:Today became the first organisation to become a VYMA Quality Member. Additionally Tomorrow:Today's Quality Assurance Project will be used as a template for other organisations

The main learning from Connect9 in 2013 remains the need to focus more on Mental Health.

Hands on Learning (HOL)

HOL has been offered to selected students at Benalla P-12 College since the start of 2010. 70-80% of participants to date have presented with literacy and numeracy problems. Enrolments have been 90% male. 25 young people enrolled in Benalla P-12 College HOL in 2013, 19 of them for ten weeks or more. In 2013 TTF supported the introduction and delivery of Hands on Learning at FCJ College. Classes for the six selected students commenced at the start of Term 2. Benalla P-12 College HOL has enjoyed marked success from its inception. According to an evaluation conducted by the University of Melbourne, it was assessed as *"one of the three most successful versions of the project to date"*, based on high quality staffing, informed student selection, support for the program within the school and strong community connections. As a result of HOL,

young people, formerly identified as disengaged, at risk of early school leaving, or in need of an alternative program, now:

- o Feel more connected to the Benalla community
- o Feel better able to cope when things go wrong
- o Feel supported by friends and family
- o Intend to go on to Year 12.

There is a reduction in absentee and suspension rates of HOL participants at Benalla P-12 College (FCJ not yet assessed as 2013 is the first year of operation).

Benalla P-12 College and FCJ College combined with Belvoir Specialist School (in Wodonga) for a highly successful billy-cart construction/race activity and BBQ in December 2013.

The improved focus on collaboration for student outcomes has led to active discussion about the introduction of Hands on Learning programs at the Grade 5, 6 level. The Australian body, Hands on Learning Australia, have various models of action which are under discussion with Benalla P-12 College and Education Benalla Program.

Connect Girls

Specifically targeting absence rates in Year 9 Connect Girls was delivered as a two-year Pilot at Benalla P-12 College during 2012-13, with a core enrolment of 15 girls.

Connect Girls programming, focusing on health, fitness, personal grooming, aspirations, career planning and career pathways, has effected significant improvements in the students' school engagement and overall school attendance.

A successful 'Local Solutions' government grant application, driven by a Benalla College teacher in close collaboration with TTF, and based on multiple discussions with TTF and NE Tracks LLEN, has provided the opportunity for development and expansion of the Connect Girls ethos within context of the school's new 'Shared Aspirations' program, to be delivered across the entire Year 9 cohort.

Transitions activities

Activities have included bus trips to Melbourne for 68 Years 11 and 12 students to visit Melbourne and LaTrobe Universities, and Monash and Deakin Universities; the awarding of four TTF scholarships to assist young people transition to tertiary education; funding and organisational input to enable delivery of Benalla Careers Day 2013; Career Action Planning seminars for all Year 10 students; and involvement in the After School Hours part-time work project, which links disconnected young people to employment. Regular broadcast media and presentations to local organisations and Government has built on the key message of community endorsement for achievement of strong educational outcomes. It is anticipated that the Transitions area, with its focus on engagement and attitudes, will be a strong growth area within EBP.

A challenge for the Student Wellbeing subprogram is in reflecting and planning around the needs of young people who sit “*outside*” the current programs.

Enhancing staff use of technology could expand opportunities.

Liaison and advocacy

The combined approach of staff, volunteers and Board members encourages recognition across sectors that a ‘common purpose’ is required to mitigate the effects of low socio-economic status on educational outcomes.

The development, consolidation and delivery/shared delivery of the various projects and activities comprise only one broad component of the Education Benalla Program. Throughout the initiative’s history, its practical outreach and engagement have been underpinned by extensive and ongoing behind-the-scenes work by the Education Benalla Program Convenor, the TTF chairperson and EBP Manager. There is substantial pro bono weekly time commitment in research, strategic thinking, planning, networking and promotion.

The Education Benalla Program is delivering a combined and collaborative ‘whole of community’ focus on changing Benalla’s educational profile. Activity in 2013 under the umbrella of Liaison & Advocacy has included ensuring continuing funding of the program and consistent and strategic development of linkages across the community. These linkages are evidenced in many practical ways, e.g. ensuring that all eligible playgroup participants progress on to kindergarten. It has also included continued facilitation of the Benalla Parent Education Working Group (a sub-committee of the Benalla Early Years Network); membership of the working group charged with developing a new four year plan for the Benalla Early Years Network; and Development of two Common Referral Form/Processes, (i) in collaboration with Maternal Child Health; (ii) in collaboration with Benalla Rural City and Benalla Health. A challenge has been in engaging with Government to ensure the sustainability of the whole-of-community approach to addressing the educational impact of low socio-economic status, and in ‘getting across the notion’ of collective impact.

Planning, Capacity Building & Support Activities

EBP activity under the umbrella of planning, capacity building and support in 2013 has included:

The establishment and funding of a Dads’ playgroup on the first Saturday of each month

Support by the Early Years staff to a number of other playgroups and kindergartens in the district, as well as helping to set up a new playgroup at Broken Creek Primary School

Membership of and grant funding to the Benalla Toy Library

Allocation of Small Grants to other early years providers

Designing and coordinating Let's Read Benalla, a reading challenge to read *'Ten thousand stories to Benalla's children aged 0 to 5 by Christmas'*. The challenge included all families participating in Tomorrow:Today early years programs as well as Year 9's from Benalla College reading weekly to children in long day care

Support for a successful 'Local Solutions' government funding application enabling development of the new 'Shared Aspirations' program at Benalla P-12 College

Continued involvement in the After School Part-time Work project

Continued support for delivery of Youth Mental Health First Aid training

Continuing delivery of the TTF's community Small Grants program to support a range of child, family, community and youth development initiatives

Waminda Community House operating functions and program of activities have been improved during 2013. TTF's resourcing of Waminda's capacity building is one example of many that demonstrates the commitment of TTF to help existing organisations and groups to more comprehensively achieve their purpose.

Individual tailored support to children and families

An important adjunct to the EBP, this support has included funding a number of children to attend family daycare; funding music lessons for children from single parent families; supporting young people and families to purchase laptops, sports uniforms, etc; and provision of tertiary transitions scholarships.

Conclusion

The Education Benalla Program is running smoothly; it is described as *"high functioning and well-structured"* due to the calibre and team skills of the staff, commitment to the town and its residents, and the extraordinary level of networking undertaken across Benalla. Community service structures and systems have been strengthened, as have the outputs and outcomes of activities undertaken by various agencies and groups throughout the district. It is now quite likely that a child or parent identified as needing a particular intervention will be introduced and connected to a number of relevant capacity building activities. Education Benalla Program activities delivered by Tomorrow:Today Foundation, or through shared delivery with one or more partners, are do-

ing well to reach target groups, whilst remaining open to all. A challenge will be in maintaining the momentum and the current level of excellence.

The EBP's *'It takes a village'* approach is assisting to build collaboration across government and non-government organisations as well as local business and community groups. At the same time as government agencies in Benalla are embracing the EBP approach to cross-sector collaboration, 2013 has confirmed the difficulty of attracting strategic, whole-of-program Government funding support.

Some project level effects are in evidence, notably the improvement in literacy measures as a result of Reading Buddies, improved parent/child engagement through early years programs and the improvement in wellbeing and connection of Hands on Learning and Connect9 students. It is the combination of projects, including mutually reinforcing activities of collaborating agencies, that is predicted to achieve noticeable shifts in measures relating to student attainment levels.