

The Education Benalla Program

Report # 5 for the Tomorrow: Today Foundation

Evaluation of Program Delivery in 2014 & Overview of Phase 1 (2010 – 2014) – Summary

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The Education Benalla Program (EBP) is large-scale community project (or “collective impact initiative”) that collaborates actively across public and private sectors, agencies, businesses and community groups in order to improve educational outcomes for young people in the Benalla district of north east Victoria. Catalyst for the initiative was the release of the 2007 Vinson Report which (a) located Benalla within Victoria’s 40 most disadvantaged postcodes, and (b) highlighted the particular impact of limited education on social mobility, the building of social capital and/or the perpetuation of disadvantage. The EBP is the flagship program of the Tomorrow Today Foundation (TTF). It was recently honoured as one of the “*Top 50 Australian Philanthropic Gifts*” of all time, an award that underlines the growing profile and reputation of the EBP as a model for whole-of-community educational intervention, and of TTF as “*a model for community-led investment in rural communities to address inequity and inequality*”.

Planned as a two-stage intervention to be funded and delivered over 10 years, the EBP is currently in its sixth year. The current report documents program developments during 2014, the fifth year of delivery while examining its overall impact and achievement over Stage 1 (i.e. its first five years).

The EBP is guided by:

- the overall 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***” ;
- by three long-term aims:
 1. significant and sustained improvement in Year 12 completion rates

2. significant and sustained improvement in transitioning to tertiary education
 3. significant and sustained improvement in completing a tertiary degree/diploma or apprenticeship
- and four key objectives:
 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 sub-programs**
- **Liaison and advocacy** across and with government and non-government organisations and community groups to help align a focus of effort
- **Organisational planning, capacity building and support** to specific institutions/groups
- **Individual, tailored support** to children and families also features as an important adjunct to the program.

Project activity is undertaken in four identifiable ways:

- TTF delivers the activity (Connect 9, PEEP)
- TTF shares delivery of the activity in partnership with a government or non-government agency or community group (Reading Buddies)
- TTF helps shape and provides funds for an activity delivered by another organisation (HOL, Local Solutions Parent Pathways, Youth Mental Health Day, Benalla Careers Day)
- TTF resources an organisation that independently delivers an activity (Grants Program)

Objective/Result area	Currently being addressed by:
All Benalla children start school ready to learn	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • PEEP programs • support to kindergartens and playgroups • partnering Benalla P-12 in the 'Great Start to School' program • assisting development of the Benalla Early Years Network strategic plan and convening the 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 • 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 • Youth Mental Health Forum
Raised educational expectations by family and community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transitions activities • cross-sector collaborations • PEEP • Connect9 • Hands On Learning • Parent information nights • regular media stories • scholarships • 'Great Start to School' program • Supporting Benalla College's Year 9 Shared Aspirations & Parent Pathways Program. • Part time work • Careers Day • Uni bus trips

THE EARLY YEARS & READINESS SUB-PROGRAMS

A) PEEP/PLAYGROUPS

NUMERICALLY

Early Years outreach commenced in March 2011 with the establishment of two small playgroups; one in the town centre and one at Waminda Community House in the public housing estate. Playgroup attendances have continued to multiply since then, i.e. between 30-40 regular families by mid-2012; 69 families – and 105 children – in 2013. For two years, September 2012 to September 2014, the playgroups have been delivered in parallel with PEEP, ultimately being absorbed under the PEEP umbrella.

PEEP (Parents Early Education Partnership) is an English initiative that responds to research findings that 30% of parents fail to talk meaningfully, or read, to their children. Delivery of PEEP commenced in September 2012, with initial funding assistance for two years from the Victorian State Government Advancing Country Towns initiative. Drawing extensively on TTF's strong relationship and active collaboration with Benalla Rural City Council (BRCC) Maternal Child Health staff and Family Liaison Workers, PEEP has evolved naturally over its lifetime as families have progressed their children through from the babies' session. By the end of 2013, four PEEP sessions were being offered each week.

At December 2014, TTF was offering seven weekly PEEP sessions, and bringing in between 50-70 families each week (some attending multiple sessions).

PARTICIPATION

PLAYGROUPS	2011	2012	2013	2014
Children	84	99	105	
Families	54	69	69	
PEEP		2012	2013	2014
Children		40	131	218
Families		32	95	154

SOCIAL AND LEARNING OUTCOMES

- Early Years programming is continuing to expand through both word of mouth and TTF's strong relationship with BRCC Maternal Child Health and Family Liaison workers who provide initial contact with many new mums, girls who *"in the main, need to be here"*.
- Individual breakthroughs and success stories continue to be facilitated and nurtured by the Early Years sessions and the opportunities for parents to debrief, share

information and model parenting skills. *“Parents continue to come – It’s become part of what they do each week ... We’re obviously filling a need”.*

- While acknowledging the impact and importance of the Early Years program in assisting young mums develop their parenting skills, staff recognise that connecting with the hardest-to-engage families remains a challenge. Similarly, the PEEP Co-ordinator has highlighted the difficulty in some instances of *“getting vulnerable girls to see the importance of [PEEP messages]”*. To this end, time continues to be spent in developing contacts with DHS in order to help promote engagement with still hard-to-contact families in the public housing estate. It is also anticipated that the PEEP Co-ordinator will be released, where possible, to undertake home visits and attempt to engage the mums in their own or neutral spaces.

PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT AND EXPANSION

“The sessions change according to need”, notes the Early Years Co-ordinator, pointing to the strong crossover between the Parent Education, Mother Goose and Playgroup components. The most significant changes to delivery in 2014 have been:

- The decision to extend and generalise the Parent Education components of Early Years programming. As a result (and commencing in the latter half of 2014), the playgroups and Mother Goose programs have been absorbed into PEEP.
- Expansion and development of the PEEP ‘Great Start to School’ program, previously delivered by TTF at their premises over summer 2012-2013 and 2013-2014. In the 2014 ‘Great Start to School’ Program TTF partnered with Benalla P-12 College in a nine-week sequence of parent education and school readiness sessions held in Term IV and delivered at both the Waller and Avon campuses.

B) READING BUDDIES

Reading Buddies (RBs) rosters community volunteers to work under classroom teacher direction, with junior years students who (a) are underperforming in reading, writing and number skills and (b) have been identified as likely to benefit from individualised support. The program was piloted in 2012 at what was then Benalla East Primary School (now the Avon Campus of Benalla P-12 College), extended to St Joseph’s Catholic Primary School in 2013, and in 2014 to Australian Christian College Hume and Benalla P-12 College Waller campus.

NUMERICALLY

Component	2012	2013	2014
No of people who completed RB Training	11 Avon campus	10 Avon campus	23 All Benalla schools
Student participation	15	19 Avon St 4 St Josephs	13 Avon 15 Waller 6 St Joseph's 3 ACC Hume
No. of RBs at each setting	11 Avon campus	10 Avon campus	13 Avon 12 Waller 4 St Josephs 3 ACC Hume
Overall Voluntary hours completed by RBs	148	678 hrs Avon 207 hrs St Josephs	477 hrs Avon 370 hrs Waller 155 hrs St Josephs 220 hrs ACC Hume

SOCIAL AND LEARNING OUTCOMES

- Periodic glitches notwithstanding, it is generally recognised that the program is working and “getting results”. One (Principal) interviewee expressed admiration for the commitment being demonstrated by the volunteers and stressed the importance of the RBs being appropriately acknowledged and recognised for their input by school leadership. A number of RBs are reporting having derived as much enjoyment/benefit from the program as have the children.
- The program has faced a number of challenges in 2014, i.e.
 - maintaining the consistency, reliability and effectiveness of the volunteers.
 - ensuring clarity among all players about the program’s intent given concern that changes to the model can dilute the 1:1 impact of the RB partnership.
- In this regard, it is recognised that:
 - clear and consistent communication between all parties, including content within volunteer training and PD with school staff is needed to ensure smooth-running and effectiveness of the program, and
 - there is a need to monitor the RB-student match. The volunteer is just that, a volunteer, and should not be used instead of someone with appropriate specialist training to assist children with high needs.

PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT AND EXPANSION

- Reading Buddies has been extended to two new sites in 2014, Australian Christian College Hume and Waller Campus of Benalla P-2 College. Accordingly, the program is now being delivered at all junior primary settings in Benalla.
- Discussion is proceeding as to the possibility of current participants continuing to receive RB support when they go into Grade 3.
- To avoid confusion and misinterpretation of how RBs should be delivered, TTF has streamlined its training process. It has been suggested that, in future, TTF explore the feasibility of addressing school staff meetings before Reading Buddy selection and training.

THE MIDDLE YEARS WELL-BEING SUBPROGRAMS

A) HANDS ON LEARNING

NUMERICALLY

- Hands on Learning (HOL) has been offered to around 100 selected students in Years 7-10 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.
- In 2014 Benalla P-12 College HOL was expanded to provide alternative educational experiences for 12 young people in Grades 5 & 6 at the Faithfull Campus.
- TTF has further expanded its partnership with local schools by supporting the introduction and delivery of HOL at FCJ College in 2013. Six young people took part in the program in 2013, eight in 2014.

SOCIAL AND LEARNING OUTCOMES

- Benalla P-12 College HOL was cited by Hands on Learning Australia (HOLA) as one of the three most successful HOL deliveries to date based on high quality staffing, informed student selection, support for the program within the school and strong community connections.
- The program has developed a strong and positive community focus and profile through multiple projects that have included setting up exercise stations on Jaycee Island adjacent to the Benalla Lake walk, repairing seating at Thoona Cemetery, painting a cubby-house for Waminda Community House, and a painting project at Benalla Railway station.

- Thanks in part to mentoring by Benalla P-12 College HOL personnel, HOLA has described the roll-out of HOL at FCJ College as the smoothest HOL start to date. The two HOL programs combined with Wodonga’s Belvoir Specialist School for a highly successful billy-cart construction and race activity and BBQ in December 2013 and December 2014.
- 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:
 - Feel more connected to the Benalla community
 - Feel better able to cope when things go wrong
 - Feel supported by friends and family
 - Intend to go on to Year 12

PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT AND EXPANSION

- Recognition of the positive impact of the program has prompted Benalla P-12 College to set up an additional HOL program, this version designed specifically for a mixed-gender Year 5 & 6 cohort.
- The roll-out and initial delivery of the Year 5 & 6 HOL at the Faithfull campus of Benalla P-12 College has benefited from the experience of the existing staff and is reportedly running well with a number of 2015 participants already selected.

C) THE CONNECT 9 MENTORING PROGRAM

NUMERICALLY

Connect9 volunteers mentor young people in group sessions alongside a series of individual mentor/mentee experiences that range over bushwalking, visiting workplaces, sports, movies, kayaking, guitar club, pottery, etc. The ten week program typically begins with a get-to-know you fitness activity at the Benalla YMCA Aquatic Centre and concludes with a gliding session and family BBQ.

Seven deliveries of the program to date have provided mentoring experience to 82 young people, many of them identified as ‘vulnerable’.

CONNECT 9	2011	2012	2013	2014
No of participants		15	10	11

	15	11* (single sex program adjunct to Connect Girls at Benalla College)	8	12
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SOCIAL AND LEARNING OUTCOMES

- There have been seven deliveries of Connect9 to date. Learnings from each delivery have enabled TTF to streamline its recruitment, selection and debriefing processes, as well as to focus increasingly on career discussion and issues to do with mental health.
- Positive outcomes of the program have included its use as a springboard for several young people into work experience, part-time employment and career counselling.
- Interview and survey feedback has likewise consistently highlighted the program's success in enhancing the young people's communication and socialisation skills, in facilitating connections to the broader Benalla community, and in helping to build confidence and general well-being.
- The biggest learning to come out of seven deliveries of the program has been the critical importance of **ensuring that the mentors are suited to the role**. While suitability is the primary consideration, it is apparent that in order to maximise effectiveness, **the mentor needs to be (a) committed to the program; and (b) very clear about his/her role**, i.e. to understand what is expected of them.

PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT AND EXPANSION

- Acknowledgment and recognition of the value and effectiveness of Connect9 earned TTF accreditation as a Quality member of the Victorian Youth Mentoring Alliance early in 2013.
- Content and structure are continuing to evolve in response to mentor feedback and also to innovations at Benalla P-12 College. Given the focus of the College's Year 9 Aspirations program on career preparation, and rather than duplicate that program's resume-writing and interview presentation content, staff chose to introduce a yoga alternative to the Connect9 schedule. The inclusion of yoga responded to strong indications from the 2013 cohort that there was a need to focus on mental health and well-being. Staff were pleased to note that almost all Connect9 participants attended.

D) OTHER ACTIVITY WITHIN THE MIDDLE YEARS WELL-BEING DOMAIN

A Benalla Youth Mental Health Forum, targeting Years 9 and 10, was piloted on July 22 at the Benalla Lakeside Centre with 120 students in attendance. Feedback from participants confirmed that mental health is regarded as a key area of concern among senior secondary school students and that young people were keen on further sessions that could be attended by their parents.

PLANNED PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT AND EXPANSION WITHIN THE MIDDLE YEARS WELL-BEING DOMAIN

Planning and discussion are currently underway between TTF, NE Tracks LLEN, Department of Educating and Training (DET), FCJ College and Benalla P-12 College re the development of a program to attract young people who (a) are neither in education or employment; and (b) have not been successfully targeted by the existing Benalla Youth Engagement Program. The new program aims to reach an estimated 220 young people of 15-19 years who are “just on the streets”. It will be modelled on the Oakwood School in Melbourne and an alternative program at Wodonga Senior Secondary College.

TTF is also looking at introducing a small group tutoring program in 2015 to address the low literacy and numeracy rates, exacerbated by poor attendance, of some students at Benalla P-12 College. The program will initially engage four students from Year 7 and four from Year 8.

THE TRANSITIONS SUB-PROGRAM

The EBP’s whole of community ethos is being articulated at the Transitions level through the reinforcement of TTF’s partnerships with schools, NE Tracks LLEN and Benalla Rural City. Activity under the Transitions umbrella has included:

- **Supporting the ‘*Shared Aspirations & Parents Pathways Program*’ at Benalla P-12 College.**

Drawing support (resources, advice and input) from both TTF and NE Tracks LLEN, *Shared Aspirations* is an extension of Connect Girls (which was delivered by the school in partnership with TTF in 2012-13). It also draws on the careers element of the Connect 9 Program and has been made possible by a grant (submitted by the College in collaboration with TTF) from the Victorian Government Local Solutions initiative. Delivered as a component of Benalla P-12 College’s overall revamp of its Year 9 curriculum, it has enabled the Year 9 team **(80 students, 5 teachers)** to incorporate Careers/Pathways planning into the general syllabus. In addition to providing input and assistance with the initial application process for *Shared Aspirations*, TTF’s support for the program included funding two students to attend a “Discover your future” camp in Melbourne, conducting mock job interviews and

helping source interview panellists from the Benalla community. The aim of increasing Benalla parents' connections to education motivated Advancing Country Towns to collaborate with NE Tracks LLEN to introduce and stage two deliveries of the 'Parents' Pathways' program in 2013. TTF agreed to provide a further two years funding for the initiative – as an adjunct to Shared Aspirations. (In 2014 this included a six week parent training sequence provided by staff from The Centre, Wangaratta.)

- **Extending delivery of CAPs (Career Action Plan) workshops to Year 9 students.**

TTF has funded these planning seminars conducted by motivational Life Coach Glenn Irvine for Year 10 students from Benalla P-12 College and FCJ College since 2013. Recognising their value, Benalla P-12 College now funds the Year 9 sessions while TTF will continue to fund Year 10.

- **A second delivery of the University bus trips initiative, enabling 86 young people (Years 10-12) to spend a day visiting metropolitan university campuses.**

The initiative teamed TTF with the schools, the regional DEECD SULO (Student University Liaison Officer) and Benalla Rural City Council who provided 11 peer mentors for the students through its Country2City mentoring project

- **Revamping Benalla Careers Day**

This has entailed a move from providing a series of displays and small group sessions at the local TAFE campus to giving students some hands-on jobs & skills by visiting local businesses, services and industries.

- **Funding the delivery of the After School Part Time Work program run in conjunction with NE Tracks LLEN.**

LIAISON AND ADVOCACY

While the outreach and engagement of the EBP constitutes its public face, it has clearly been supported and made possible, throughout its lifetime, by the behind-the-scenes efforts of the program's Executive Officer and the two Board members most closely linked to its operation. As in previous years, particular note should be made of the ongoing *pro bono* time commitment involved in: Continuing to keep abreast of relevant research in the areas of educational intervention, philanthropy and public policy; strategic and short-term planning that continues to shape program design and delivery; networking and promotion that are fundamental to a whole-of-community focus on changing that community's educational profile.

TTF has continued to showcase the work and content of the EBP, to 'push the message' across sectors and in presentations, enhance the capacity of other organisations, ensure the program is appropriately funded and well-governed, and continued to plan, shape and

modify program content in response to discussion, debate, feedback, learnings and current research. In 2014, EBP benefited from an estimated 120 community partnerships.

ORGANISATIONAL PLANNING, CAPACITY BUILDING AND SUPPORT

EBP activity under the umbrella of planning, capacity building and support in 2014 has included:

- Support and funding of a Dads' playgroup
- Support by Early Years staff to other playgroups and kindergartens in the district
- Provision of grants to support youth development initiatives
- Designing, co-ordinating and expanding the 'Let's Read Benalla' project across all Benalla kindergartens as well as Benalla P-12 College, Australian Christian College Hume, Kids' Cottage day-care and BRC Family Day Care.

INDIVIDUAL SUPPORT TO CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

An important adjunct to the EBP, this support has traditionally included funding children from vulnerable or financially disadvantaged families to attend after school and vacation care, school camps and excursions, singing, dance and music lessons, as well as funding uniforms, fees and equipment for hobby and sporting clubs. TTF annually funds four tertiary transition scholarships, and over the years have responded to a number of requests to facilitate tutoring for young people needing additional help with English and Mathematics.

CONCLUSION

In the light of its success to date; the depth and intensity surrounding its establishment; the rigour and topicality of its research base; its realistic time-frame; its preparedness to self-reflect, formally evaluate and act on the learnings gathered over the course of program delivery; the diversity and richness of its 120 partnerships; it's clear and well-defined objectives; its capacity to maximise its volunteer skill base; high quality and energised staffing; its vision, commitment and sense of a 'bigger picture', TTF is clearly 'ticking all the right boxes'.

It is only reasonable to argue that the EBP represents 'Best Practice' in the area of Philanthropy-driven collective impact community intervention. EBP staff are the first to acknowledge that – as it approaches its fifth year mark – program success has yet to be demonstrated in official statistics and/or changes to AEDI and NAPLAN data. There is strong agreement, however, that *"it's happening"*.