Literature Review

Education and Social Disadvantage

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LITERATURE REVIEW – EDUCATION AND SOCIAL DISADVANTAGE

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for the Board of Tomorrow:Today Foundation**

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** Tomorrow:Today Foundation is Benalla district's Community Foundation, formed and run by local people to provide funds for local community projects. Our purpose is to enable the people of Benalla and district to create a stronger, more resilient and prosperous rural community.
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Literature Review: Education & Social Disadvantage

Background / Context

Dropping off the edge: the distribution of disadvantage in Australia by Tony Vinson (2007) is the most thorough and rigorous analysis of social disadvantage in Australia. The report analysed 24 indicators of disadvantage. It found that Benalla is significantly disadvantaged in comparison to the rest of Victoria; rating in the "top 40" of 726 postcodes. For this reason, it is important for Tomorrow:Today to understand the study and its potential to inform our planning and decision-making.

The Vinson analysis is more than an average of 24 indicators of disadvantage. Central to the study was the assessment of how different indicators have the potential to impact on other indicators, and how some cause much more cumulative disadvantage than others. In discussing the range of indicators assessed for their correlation to social disadvantage, Vinson notes **"it is difficult to deny the centrality of limited education and its impact on the acquisition of economic and life skills in the making and sustaining of disadvantage in Australia."** (p.96) This stand-alone statement resulted in a discussion with the Director of Education in this region; who would welcome the involvement of Tomorrow:Today Foundation, and sees the time as 'ripe' for a partnership between government and philanthropy in Benalla district to achieve agreed outcomes.

Statements in this review are taken directly from research papers, conference papers and presentations accessed by the author during July and August 2007. There is no doubt that educational experts would be able to dramatically improve on the range of readings. All papers have legitimacy in that most were accessed from either the Australian Council for Education Research, Victorian Dept. Education, or the Education Foundation. In some cases additional searches were made for specific authors of national and/or international standing.

This review does not include specific analysis of Benalla student or Benalla school performance. Whilst it may be a worthwhile project, it would need to be placed in the context of understanding how social disadvantage and education 'play off' each other in rural Australia.

This review set out to answer the following questions:
- What does the Vinson report indicate are the education and learning issues that impact on disadvantage?
- What does the literature say can be done to improve these measures of disadvantage?
- Are there actions required in Benalla district that are outside the domain of government where philanthropy can play a useful role?
- If "yes", what are possible small and major projects that would measurably improve the outlook for residents?
- What partnerships may be possible with government to improve education and learning outcomes for Benalla district residents?

This report is presented in the following manner –
1.   Social disadvantage

2. How being rural influences student outcomes
3. How the school environment influences student outcomes
4. How the student's community ('neighbourhood') and the student's family influences student outcomes
5. What experts say should be done to challenge social disadvantage and improve educational outcomes
6. Discussion

1. Social disadvantage

Key Messages:
- Social disadvantage blocks life opportunities and prevents people from participating fully in society
- Social disadvantage includes limiting factors in one's life situation such as poor health, disabilities, lack of education and skills, and being subjected to inequitable treatment or discrimination in a variety of forms
- Achieving a good education is instrumental in reducing social disadvantage – in fact the effect of attaining a formal education is more important today than in previous generations. By extension, the penalties to one's chances in life for failure and non-completion are becoming harsher
- Social disadvantage and low educational performance feed off each other. Lower educational performance increases measures of socio-economic disadvantage, and a high level of socio-economic disadvantage has been demonstrated to lower educational performance.
- Across OECD countries, Australia rates highly in terms of quality of education, but rates poorly in terms of equity of access

The range of difficulties that follow from social disadvantage includes economic poverty but they are wider than a lack of financial resources. They include limiting factors in one's life situation such as poor health, disabilities, lack of education and skills, and being subjected to inequitable treatment or discrimination in a variety of forms.[1] Vinson notes that "even in times of relative prosperity the individuals and families of some neighbourhoods can continue to miss out or 'drop off the edge', with consequences for their wellbeing and particularly that of their children. Vinson quotes research that has found associations between poor neighbourhoods and other social problems that are more than the consequences of macroeconomic forces and household characteristics. The researchers comment: 'The larger and longer-running an area's problems, the stronger the cumulative impact becomes, causing a drain on services with resultant lower-quality 'outputs', such as educational performance or health care.'[2] So, cumulative disadvantage in a district results in lower educational performance.

The following indicators are all linked to social disadvantage and were used by Vinson[3] (amongst others)

- Non-attendance at preschool
- Incomplete education (17-24 year olds)
- Early school leaving of local population
- Post-schooling qualifications
- Unskilled workers
- Unemployment

[1] Rowntree Foundation 2003 in T.Vinson Dropping off the Edge
[2] ibid, p.2
[3] ibid p.3

- Long-term unemployment
- Low mean taxable income
- Computer use / access to internet

The benefits of education appear to extend into later stages of life[4]. The educational sorting system plays a part in reinforcing exclusion and marginalisation. As the demand for education grows, and as overall levels of attainment rise, the odds of succeeding after a poor start lengthen[5]. An analysis by the C.D. Howe Institute of Canada (quoted by Bentley 2006[6]) found that a country's literacy scores rising by one per cent relative to the international average is associated with an eventual 2.5 percent relative rise in labour productivity and a 1.5 percent rise in GDP per head. These effects are three times as great as for investment in physical capital. Moreover, the results include that raising literacy and numeracy scores for people at the bottom of the skills distribution is more important to economic growth than producing more highly skilled graduates.

In Australia, the worst off 25% of students are twice as likely to score badly in reading tests as those not in the bottom quartile of the wealth distribution. This matters - research from England demonstrates that those who reach the expected standard of numeracy and literacy by age 11 have a 70% chance of getting the qualifications at 16 they need to head towards higher education. For those who do not reach the same threshold at 11, their chances of the same at 16 are 12%[7]. The effect of formal educational attainment on our individual chances in life is growing; the income returns to staying in education are larger than a generation ago. But by extension, the penalties for failure and non-completion are becoming harsher, as the 'distribution of social risk' changes around us.

Lack of qualifications, non-completion of secondary education, basic numeracy and literacy problems are all strongly correlated with unemployment, poorer health, relationship breakdown and prison[8]. In an analysis of outcome performance against socio-economic context, Australia was firmly in the 'high quality, low equity' quadrant – meaning that whilst the quality of our education is up there with the best internationally, the equity of distribution of that quality education is poor.

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[4] ibid p23
[5] Bentley et all (2004) A fair go: public value and diversity in education.
[6] Bentley,T 2006 Focusing inward, focusing outward
[7] Bentley T et al (2004) A fair go – public value and diversity in education
[8] ibid (p.11)

2. How being rural influences student outcomes

Key messages:
- The gap between participation in the final year of school between metropolitan and non-metropolitan locations is eight percentage points
- Falling test scores are associated with distance of schools from the major cities

Over the past 20 years there have been significant changes to the levels of participation in the senior secondary years of schooling in Australia. The percentage of students remaining to the final year of schooling rose from 35% in 1980 to just over 73% in 2001 (following a peak of 77% in 1992). There has been a push in educational policy to encourage young people to complete Year 12 or its vocational equivalent. Recent research has shown that those who obtain a Year 12 qualification or its vocational equivalent are more likely to continue their involvement in education and training, gain re-employment-related skills and generally fare better in the labour market compared to those who do not complete Year 12 or its equivalent.[9]

At present a little less than three-quarters of young Australians remain at school to Year 12. By investigating patterns of participation in Year 12, Australian educational researchers have found that there are net effects in participation in the final year of school between school sectors (government and independent) and between metropolitan and non-metropolitan locations. Other net effects include earlier achievement, gender, socioeconomic background and cultural background. This body of research was different than looking simply at retention rates; which are computed as the ratio of the full-time enrolment in Year 12 to the enrolment in an earlier Year level, and are not able to take account of students who repeat a year, who are enrolled on a part time basis or who transfer between states or sectors. The gap between participation in the final year of school between metropolitan and non-metropolitan locations is eight percentage points.[10]

A geographic analysis finds that the data mostly indicate that falling test scores are associated with distance of schools from the major cities. This conforms with patterns that apply across nations, regions and school sector jurisdictions[11].

Once at university, a student's regional and socioeconomic background has little influence on their likelihood of completion. Once students from a lower socioeconomic background enter university, their background does not negatively effect their chances of completing the course.[12]

Approx 30% of young people who had relocated from a non-metro area to a major city in the years following secondary school went on to experience a further move

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[9] Fullarton et al Patterns of participation in Year 12
[10] ibid
[11] Education Foundation Equity, excellence and effectiveness p.7
[12] Marks Completing University – characteristics and outcomes

back to a non-metro area within the observed time period (Year 11 1997 through to 2004 modal age 23 years).[13]

Young women who held tertiary qualifications were less likely to return to non-metro areas than were young women who did not hold such qualifications.
There were no differences in rates of marriage or aspects of life satisfaction across the groups of non-metro 'Stayers', 'Returners' and 'Leavers'.[14]

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[13] Hillman & Rothman Movement of non-metro youth towards the cities
[14] ibid

3. How the school environment influences student outcomes

Key messages:
- Independent, Catholic and government schools form a hierarchy in relation to levels of school completion, educational outcomes and university entrance.
- There is a similar hierarchy between city, regional and remote areas of Australia
- There is significant differences in performance between regions - - -
- The most consistent predictor of levels of student completion and successful education is the socio-economic status (SES) background of students ie performance in schools is strongly linked to student background
- Australian students are highly segregated along social and academic lines
- Segregation of students tends to intensify between-school differences in student outcomes
- Schools differ in effectiveness
- Effective schools are found in both the government and non-government sectors
- Some schools consistently perform well
- Effectiveness extends beyond cognitive outcomes
- Some school factors help raise performance

A report examining the factors that influence course completion by young Australians who commence university found that the ENTER score gained in Year 12 was the strongest correlate of expected course completion identified. About 94% of students with ENTER scores above 90 were expected to complete a course compared to 73% of students with scores between 60 and 69 … a difference of 20 points in ENTER score more than doubles the odds of course completion when controlling for other variables.

The main aim of the Victorian Department of Education & Training is 'an assured future for all Victorians and a prosperous society through learning'. The Victorian Government's *Blueprint for Government Schools* contributes to the achievement of this aim through a number of initiatives designed to support all young people to become creative, adaptable and self-directed learners. Professional learning for teachers plays a critical role in this endeavour by equipping them with the expertise, skills and knowledge they need to develop these capacities in students[15].

Educational intentions of young people are influenced not only by attitudes to school but also by achievements in the foundation areas of literacy and numeracy and various aspects of student background.[16] Approximately one-sixth of the variation in achievement scores on both the reading comprehension tests and the mathematics tests could be attributed to differences between schools. A number of reports have identified the importance of achievement in literacy and numeracy. Lower achievement has been associated with lower engagement with school, lower participation in Year 12, lower tertiary entrance scores and less successful transitions from school.

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[15] Dept.Education & Training, Victoria
[16] Siek Toon Khoo et al Attitudes, Intentions and Participation

A detailed assessment of literacy programs run in Victorian schools by the Auditor General[17] found that whilst there was some small improvement in the lowest performing students at year 3 due to reading intervention programs, it could not be generally concluded that literacy programs were providing a general improvement in literacy levels. *(note: this appears to be a methodological issue, and should not be read as 'proof' that interventions are not working.)*

One research report showed a strong link between School Socio-economic Status (SES) and student achievement in both literacy and numeracy, consistent with other research. The link was found to influence differences in achievement levels between students and differences in achievement levels between schools. This researcher suggested that further research be conducted to examine the nature of this link, to investigate how SES influences individual student achievement and how a school's average SES influences achievement.[18]

While early school programs focus on the needs of boys in literacy and girls in numeracy, the middle-school years also require the exploration and implementation of gender relevant programs designed to ensure all students achieve appropriate levels in reading comprehension and mathematics.[19]

Teese (1996) in a study of educational and economic indicators of regional disadvantage in Victoria found that across the state regions which experienced the biggest falls in school completion had also experienced increases during the 1990s in levels of VCE failure. The prevalence of high levels of unemployment in a region did not alter this pattern. It suggest that how well children are doing academically in schools is a strong influence on their plans and behaviour, reinforcing the need for schools to find appropriate ways of maintaining high levels of general attainment and ensuring that young people from all backgrounds are able to reach those levels.[20]

A report commissioned by the Victorian Premier's Department demonstrated that in Victoria, schools do differ in effectiveness. Some schools out-perform others while some under-perform across a range of performance measures. After modelling to control for intake differences, comparisons of variation in student outcomes suggest that the school a student attends can have a significant effect on his or her Year 12 results and therefore post-school options.[21]

In general independent, Catholic and government schools form a hierarchy in relation to levels of school completion, educational outcomes and university entrance. There is a similar hierarchy between, city, regional and remote areas of Australia. There also is evidence of significant variations within these broad regions. The most consistent predictor of levels of student completion and succession education is the socio-economic status background of students[22].

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[17] Auditor General Victoria Improving literacy standards in government schools
[18] Rothman & McMillan Influences on achievement in literacy & numeracy
[19] ibid
[20] reported in Lamb 1996 Completing school in Australia: trends in the 1990s
[21] Lamb et al 2004 School Performance
[22] Keating & Lamb (2004) Public education and the Australian community

The Lamb et al report on school performance drew on an international study to demonstrate that Australia's more highly segregated system of schooling (government and independent) tends to contribute to comparatively large differences between schools in student achievement. Segregation in the school system tends to reinforce rather than weaken existing patterns of social inequity.[23] The sustained drift of students from government to non-governments schools over the last 30 years, underpinned by a public assumption that standards and quality in non-government schools are higher than in government schools, has seen[24]:

- a growing concentration of higher SES students in the independent school sector;
- a corresponding increasing concentration of lower SES students in the government school sector;
- a weaker social spread of students within the Catholic sector;
- high concentrations of low SES students in small government and Catholic secondary schools. Typically these schools have poor outcomes

Selectivity in schooling, according to Keating and Lamb's research results in a student mix which is more stable and homogeneous, so creating a better educational environment. Teachers can be more confident about what to expect from students and hence can maintain higher expectations and be more confident of instruction that will work. Conversely, teachers in more heterogeneous schools face greater challenges with less certainty from one year to another of the capacities, preparedness and behavious of the students they teach. Under these circumstances their ability to plan for the longer term and to get the instructional formulae right is substantially less, and hence their opportunity to add value is reduced. It is no coincidence that there are high correlations between teacher satisfaction, teacher absenteeism, and students' performance[25].

Effective schools are found in both the government and non-government sectors. Higher than expected Year 12 performance, for example, is not restricted to schools with particular social intakes or achievement profiles. Results achieved by schools in individual subject areas show that while many schools have 'strengths' and 'weaknesses', that is their effectiveness is not 'across the board', some tend to be consistent in their effectiveness.[26] After adjusting for the effects of intake, there are many government (and private) schools performing well above expected levels (p.66).

School performance is often measured using cognitive achievement measures such as final year achievement. Yet school effectiveness can be assessed through other measures of student outcomes. Rates of transition from school to further study and work are examples. Transition rates indicate how well schools function to encourage and support students to continue to engage in education and training after leaving school as well as to find employment. Analyses of transition outcomes show substantial variation between schools after adjusting for differences in social and academic composition. Larger numbers of independent schools than government schools are effective in promoting entry to university and to non-apprenticeship forms

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[23] ibid
[24] Education Foundation Equity, excellence and effectiveness
[25] Education Foundation Equity, excellence and effectiveness
[26] ibid

of VET. However, while government schools do not do so well as a group in promoting entry to university, many are successful in gaining higher than expected rates of entry into apprenticeships and full-time work.

In the analyses undertaken by Lamb et al[27] it is apparent that there is no single factor that explains why some schools gain better results than others. It is likely to reflect a combination of factors that includes pupil management policies, resources, approaches to school organisation, and teaching practices. The results suggest that intake is an important element. High concentrations of middle class students (mean SES) and high achieving students (mean achievement) provide certain schools with a platform on which they can build successful outcomes. Like physical resources, pupils provide a resource that helps some schools organise their teaching and other programs in ways which raise levels of achievement. Yet it is now recognised that there is a major migratory pattern of students on the basis of scholastic achievement and expectations, for which socio-economic status is a proxy. It appears as if more academically successful and motivated students are migrating to schools that have stronger histories of academic success. Less successful and motivated students are found in residualised schools whose difficulties are compounded by the selection and exclusion practices of some schools in higher demand[28].

As well as composition of student intake, the results suggest that quality of teachers reflected in teaching styles and levels of satisfaction with teaching are influential. In junior secondary mathematics achievement, for example, certain features of teaching were significantly related to student achievement. All else equal, higher concentrations of teachers satisfied with their job (itself linked to the school environment) help produce better results. Teaching styles are also important. In schools where teachers rely more often on traditional methods rather than more innovative teaching practices the results are lower, all else equal. Also important in helping schools promote high level performance is the academic climate schools create reflected in the behaviour of students, broad aspiration levels, student views on teachers and school and engagement in school life. High-performing schools adopt policies facilitating student engagement, through the provision of programs, extra-curricular programs and student support.[29]

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[27] Lamb S et al (2004) School performance in Australia
[28] Education Foundation   Equity, excellence and effectiveness
[29] ibid

4. How the student's community ('neighbourhood') and the student's family influences student outcomes

Key messages:
- There is a striking correlation between socio-economic disadvantage at the neighbourhood scale and educational under achievement. Students from socially disadvantaged neighbourhoods not only achieve less well at school, they are also less likely to stay on at school or enter further or higher education and are more likely in the future to be unemployed or in low paid jobs.
- Public education systems have been constructed upon neighbourhood but this definition has weakened with increased capacity for mobility
- The attitudes that parents and students bring to the educational process are more deeply and directly affected by the strength of community and family bonds than by the general socio economic character of their communities.
- Schooling systems will not overcome growing patterns of exclusion and marginalisation by incrementally improving their attainment scores
- While the positive effects of living in a high-income neighbourhood diminish by the age of 21, the negative effects associated with low-income neighbourhoods persist.

Performance in schools is strongly linked to student background. There are large differences in performance between students based on their social backgrounds. Students from lower SocioEconomicStatus backgrounds (those whose parents work in less well paid jobs and have low levels of education) perform less well at school than students from higher SES backgrounds (those where parents more often have professional jobs and high levels of income). For example, in 2000 the average tertiary entrance score for Year 12 students in the bottom quintile of SES was, on a 100 point scale, 22 points below the mean score achieved by students in the highest quintile of SES (52.9 compared with 74.9).[30] The body of research demonstrates that children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds tend to achieve less well at school, are less likely to stay on at school or enter further or higher education and are more likely in the future to be unemployed or in low paid jobs. These students have higher levels of need and require additional support to achieve the same outcomes attained by other groups of students.[31]

Even though there are some high performers in schools with a low average school SES and some low performers in schools with a high average school SES, schools with a low average schools SES are far more likely to also have a low average level of Literacy performance whereas schools with a high average schools SES are far more likely to also have a high average level of Literacy performance.[32] This has big implications on funding policies for the department and should also be considered by external funders – that is that resourcing on the basis of individual students may not be the best strategy; rather funding schools with high densities of socio-economically disadvantaged students is indicated.

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[30] Lamb et al School performance in Australia
[31] ibid
[32] Holmes-Smith,P. (2006)

Public education systems have been constructed upon neighbourhood. The neighbourhood definition has weakened with the growth of secondary education and increased capacity for mobility. As observable patterns of educational outcomes between secondary schools increase there has been increased attention upon measures to create school improvement and improve the quality and capacities of school leaders and teachers. While worthwhile investments these approaches have allowed the dual impacts of social geography and selectivity upon patterns of learning outcomes to be ignored [33]. Bentley (2004) states that the competitive use of individual choice, combined with selection and streaming and an increasing concentration of social geography will stratify the opportunities available to students from different socio-economic backgrounds and undermine the performance of the system as a whole. For example, seven out of the ten nations with the greatest socio-economic selection effect (ie where wealth has the greatest influence on your chances of being a high achiever) stream students for the first time before the age of 15[34].

Tom Bentley from the Demos Foundation notes the importance of treating family as a powerful, formative partner in the educational process, not a distant background to schooling. [35]

Robert Putnam[36] noted that studies in several OECD countries have strongly suggested that social capital is an important ingredient in educational performance. His research demonstrates that the attitudes parents and students bring to the educational process are more deeply and directly affected by the strength of community and family bonds than by the general socio-economic or racial charater of their communities. By his account, community-based social capital is a better predictor of test scores and dropout rates than more traiditonal measures like teacher quality of spending per pupil. This picture resonates with the Vinson report which shows how strikingly consistent the correlation between socio-economic disadvantage is with educational underachievement, and clarifies the deep influence of 'social cohesion' as a mediating factor. Putnam suggests that a student's stock of social capital must include both strong peer networks and a positive institutional orientation towards learning. In the former case, research mong college students have illustrated that the quality of peers can be more important than the quality of teaching staff. In the latter, a parent and student's attitude towards education is better indicated by the strength of community and family bonds than it is by either socio-economic or racial status. In fact, the evidence suggests that a positive orientation towards learning is a better, more powerful indicator of educational attainment than teaching quality, class size and spending per pupil, though these factors may also play a role in contributing towards a more positive orientation to learning[37].

In a study on the neighbourhood effects and community spillovers in the Australian youth labour market, it was found that significant neighbourhood effects on unemployment outcomes exist in high and low-income areas. While the positive

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[33] Keating & Lamb (2004) Public education and the Australian community
[34] Bentley, T et al (2004)
[35] Bentley,T (2006)
[36] Robert Putnam "Community-based social capital and educational performance' quoted in Bentley, T et al (2004) Public education and the Australian community
[37] Bentley T et al (2004) A fair go: public value and diversity in education

effects of living in a high-income neighbourhood diminish by the age of 21, the negative effects associated with low-income neighbourhoods persist.[38]

Different student outcomes are only partly explained by internal variation in the school and teacher performance. It is how the school organisation interacts with wider patterns of economic, social and cultural resources that make the bigger difference. Schooling systems will not overcome growing patterns of exclusion and marginalisation by incrementally improving their attainment scores. So teaching, resourcing, leadership all matter, but they cannot work in isolation from the wider context. Bentley[39] advocates reforming wider frameworks to reinforce personalised learning and reflect evidence about impact and achievement – eg assessment for learning, independent learning skills, team and community-based learning.

Research by Bentley et al[40] for the Education Foundation noted three kinds of capital as offering an alternative rationale for a pupil's success. It posits that:
- Strong financial capital where the student can access supplemental opportunities and is not burdened by income-generating duties is preferable to weak financial capital;
- Strong cultural capital that indicates a positive attitude to learning and exposure to a range of critical arts and popular knowledge is preferable to weak cultural capital;
- Strong cultural capital where the student enjoys both a collaborative and competitive atmosphere within a respectful peer group and can readily partake in group activities and has access to a wider network of opportunities is preferable to weak social capital

This sets a contemporary challenge for policy makers. In addition to the critical skills and knowledge a student must acquire, a responsive system must also attempt to gauge the existing capital stocks of its students, while learning how to maximise their development through the educational process.

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[38] Andrews et al Neighbourhood effects and community spillovers in the Australian youth labour market
[39] Bentley, T (2006) Focusing inward, focusing outward
[40] Bentley T et al (2004) A fair go: public value and diversity in education

5. What experts say should be done to challenge social disadvantage and improve educational outcomes

- Any approach should be designed to be holistic – school improvements, whole-of-community capacity development and mitigating social disadvantage. In the first instance, gross disadvantage should be the focus of attention.
- The most dynamic educational interventions will show a definite link between resilient communities and successful learners
- The case for investment in early childhood and families is at least as compelling as the need for any change within the existing formal school framework
- The existing school infrastructure is only one component of the educational environment in a given district
- Work across government, Catholic and independent schools to find a more equitable resourcing model that encompasses agreed education and social principles.

Bentley[41] (2006) asserts that Australia needs system reforms that…
- Broaden the range of innovators working on a shared challenge
- Use central policy to frame and connect elements of local systems, and make whole systems more transparent
- Surround formal schooling with new learning communities that can interact positively with them
- Harness the voice and motivations of students themselves
- Connect directly with family learning and wellbeing
- Build organisational frameworks whose learning becomes self-sustaining.

The report to the Victorian Dept of Premier and Cabinet on school performance in Australia[42] states there are a number of policy options to address the impact of segregation on the performance of Australia's schools. One is differential resourcing to provide schools serving larger numbers of disadvantaged students with the resources to address the more intensive educational needs of their students. Another option is to address current selection and funding arrangements that work to intensify segregation. The authors cite the current Commonwealth preference for funding non-government schools (funding increased by 107% between 1991 and 2000, while the growth in funding for government schools was 52%). The funding is provided despite the fact that average combined per capita funding from both private and government sources is as much as 40% higher in independent schools than in government schools (p.66). The authors also note that school policies and school features are also important to consider. High performance is not limited to non-governments schools. After adjusting for the effects of intake, there are many government (and private) schools performing well above expected levels.

An investigation commissioned by the Education Foundation resulted in a forum to focus on public education. It found that the debate in Australia has for decades equated public education with state-run government schools that provide free and secular education that are open to all. Yet the EF found that religious education or

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[41] Bentley, To (2006)
[42] Lamb et al 2004 School performance in Australia

independent school education should not disqualify a school from being a provider of public education. A public education does not require government ownership of schools. An approach will need to be fashioned that accommodates the realities of mixes of government and fee-based funding of non-government schools within Australia's federalist patterns of access and quality in schooling, and cooperation across the sectors to benefit all young Australians.

Keating & Lamb[43] note that the debate over public education in Australia is frequently misplaced. Their paper argues that there is a double imperative for reconciliation between the government school systems and elements of the non-government school sector. This is because the current relationships promote two forms of selectivity: between and within sectors, and because they mislead the policy responses to educational under-achievement. They state that reconciliation should be built upon two factors:

- shared education and social principles between the government school sector and large and arguably majority elements of the non-government school sectors. These include the traditional ideals of public education, a sense of public obligation, and a belief in equality of opportunity; and
- an initial concentration upon groups of students and families that face the greatest disadvantages in schooling. As argued in this paper this would mean an initial concentration upon selected regions.

An endeavour would be to move towards full funding for the non-government schools that share the principles and purposes, and for them to work with the government school sector so that they can not only share in the delivery of universality, but rebuild a feature of public education that has seriously been eroded in Australia.

Bentley (2004)[44] says that whilst the structure, funding and regulation of our school systems has direct and important effects on the distribution of opportunity to students and on overall levels of attainment, it is not simply about the role of private, or 'government-independent' schools. He says there are other, stronger, factors which run across all types of school. Equally, outcomes and attainment are influenced by the quality of teaching, school organisation and funding. But these factors turn out to be less powerful in influencing outcomes than factors such as social geography, personal engagement in learning and community engagement (social and cultural capital). He states that five overarching conclusions stand out as paramount:

- Investing in school improvement without seeking to harness the forces of social capital and social geography is, in the medium term, self defeating

- The links between resilient communities and successful learners are there to be built on; the most dynamic educational interventions of the next generation will address both dimensions together.

- Allowing voluntary choices to alter the fundamental structures of educational opportunity in ways which inhibit social mobility will also harm educational

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[43] Keating & Lamb (2004) Public education and the Australian community
[44] Bentley T et al (2004) A fair go: public value and diversity in education

achievement overall, and represent a massive long-term cost for any society to bear.

- The case for public educational investment in early childhood and families is at least as compelling as the need for any change within the existing formal school framework

- The 'educational commons' is far broader and more flexible than the existing infrastructure of schooling.

Amongst a range of suggestions he makes for re-shaping our system of learning he includes :

- a strategic agenda for building community resilience and cultural capital through school-community partnerships, taking the existing 'extended school' model far further;
- early childhood programs and the extension of provision, again based on place-based partnerships and direct engagement of families in learning and the shaping of learning provision;
- the expansion of school clusters through innovation programs encouraging the transfer of good practices, and incentives for forms of cross-school collaboration which diversify socio-economic composition across the whole learner group and create opportunities for 'flexible specialisation' of curriculum offer and extension;
- a student voice program designed to generate more powerful information on how to improve learning experiences through direct feedback from current students;
- program support for groups of schools committed to improving social diversity and equity in tandem with cognitive outcomes;
- strategic investment in out of school hours learning capacity in every local community;
- major investment in 'public learning assets' accessible to all, including museums, galleries, libraries and sporting facilities.

If greater individual choice reduced the influence of out-of-school factors on a student's learning career, inevitably what would follow would be a call for greater choice in the education system. However the international data that exists seems to point to a different conclusion. Results from the OECD's Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), a three-yearly survey of the knowledge and skills of 15 year olds, imply that a socially mixed system, where students of different backgrounds are channelled into separated educational pathways, produces unequal outcomes[45].

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[45] Bentley T et al (2004)

DISCUSSION

Benalla is a highly disadvantaged locality. By both substantial measures – the Australian Bureau of Statistics "SEIFA" index (socio-economic indexes for areas) and the Jesuit Social Services analysis of social disadvantage by postcode, (Vinson "Dropping of the Edge" report) Benalla is at risk of having a number of measures of disadvantage accumulate into an entrenched and intractable problem.

Social disadvantage impacts on life chances – families with low socio-economic status and communities with high levels of social disadvantage have been shown to have poorer health, more disabilities, less education and skills, and be subjected to inequitable treatment or discrimination in a variety of forms. As a rural community, we have quite good levels of social cohesion, and this helps reduce the impact of social disadvantage. It also affords us the opportunity to improve our socio-economic situation by firmly addressing some of the underlying problems that add up to social disadvantage.

In discussing the range of indicators assessed for their correlation to social disadvantage, Vinson notes **"it is difficult to deny the centrality of limited education and its impact on the acquisition of economic and life skills in the making and sustaining of disadvantage in Australia."**

The higher the level of social disadvantage, the harder it is to achieve a good level of education.

The acquisition of a basic education (completion of Year 12 or equivalent) helps lift the individual and their community out of disadvantage.

The Victorian State ministry for education and the regional directorate of education is continually looking at how to improve government educational services. The Australian research reviewed for this report is emphatic that any approach aimed at changing predicted educational outcomes should be designed to be holistic: school improvements, whole-of-community capacity development and mitigating social disadvantage.

Here is our challenge. How can community, philanthropy and government work together to improve educational outcomes – to 'raise the bar' - for all Benalla district students?

The literature reviewed for this report has spanned analyses of Australian longitudinal surveys, international quantitative analysis and Victorian academic opinions. Even the OECD data shows that 'engagement with learning' has a significant effect on performance independent of any other factor.[46] One Australian author argues[47] large bureaucracies are optimised to enforce standards across a system. They are less adept at responding to complex systems where there is a weaker, more diffuse relationship between action and outcome. Bentley says that the most powerful system changes will combine internal and external resources –

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[46] Bentley T et al (2004) p.14
[47] Jake Chapman Demos Foundation pamphlet, System Failure in Bentley T et al (2004)

- Schools *and* research knowledge
- Core curriculum *and* extended learning program
- Face to face *and* online community
- Expert tutor *and* work-based practice
- Home *and* library or museum
- Family *and* teachers

As a community foundation, we are in the box seat to influence a new approach that is of assistance to existing systems and helps make the job of schools and teachers easier and more satisfying. We can consider taking on the difficult jobs of strengthening the links between schools and families, of finding ways for students to have more extra-curricular opportunities, and of improving commitment to life-long-learning in the general population. We can harness the best minds in Australia to focus on Benalla to advise and work with us on early childhood learning and whole-of-system change. Partnerships with clearly articulated roles and responsibilities are necessary, and the challenge to achieve this will be in the whole-hearted commitment to engaging in change processes. It would need time, and resources, and excellent monitoring, evaluation and adaptive management – but if Tomorrow:Today doesn't commit, who will?

Liz Chapman
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