

THE EDUCATION BENALLA PROGRAM



**A Case Study of Place-based Action and Collective
Impact in Regional Australia**

Research Report 46, September 2016

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THE UNIVERSITY OF
MELBOURNE

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GRADUATE
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THE EDUCATION BENALLA PROGRAM: A Case Study of Place-based Action and Collective Impact
in Regional Australia

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ISBN: 978 0 7340 5308 4

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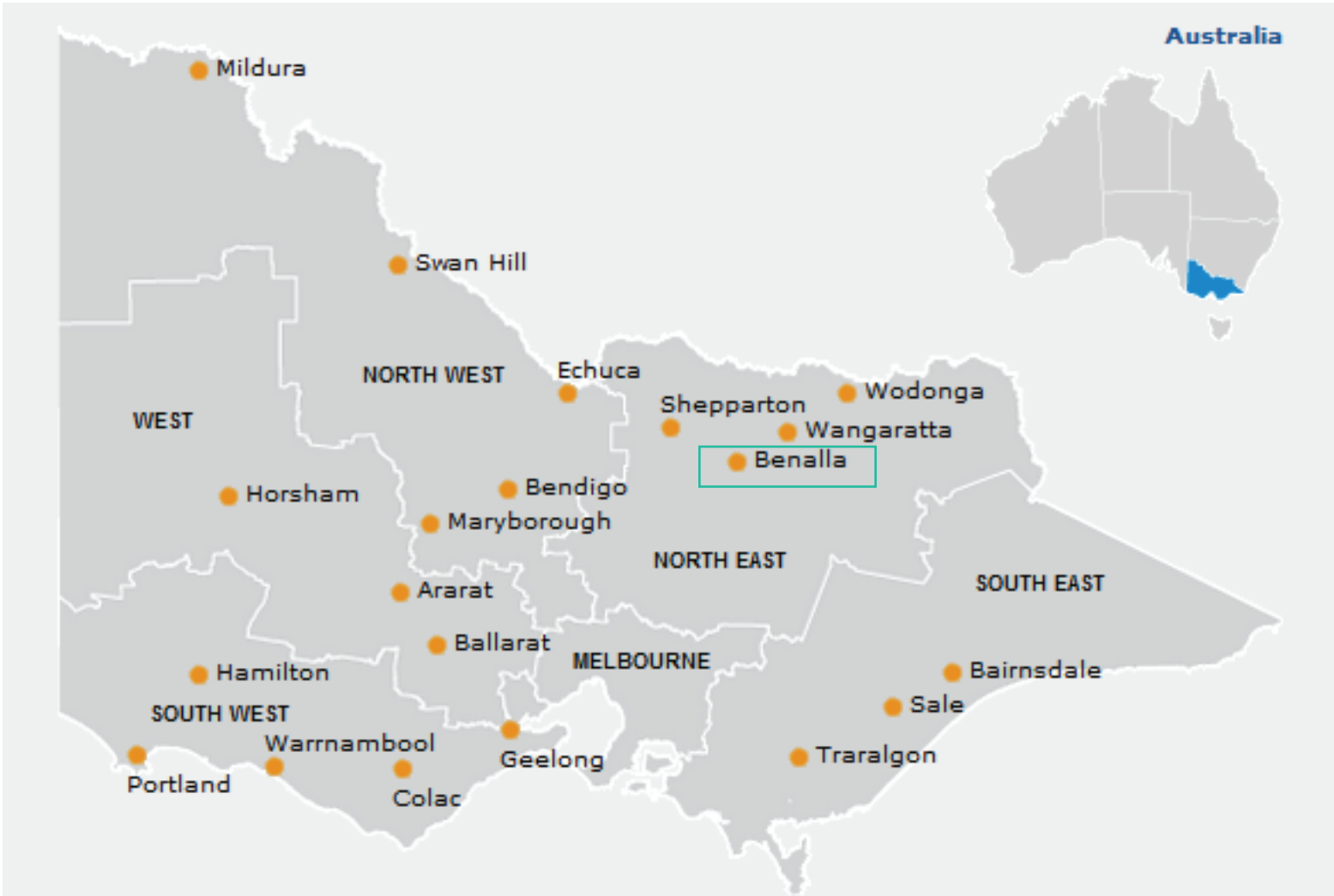
At the Youth Research Centre we acknowledge the Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples of this nation. We acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the lands on which our centre is located and where we conduct our research and teaching. We pay our respects to ancestors and Elders, past, present and future.

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Suggested citation: Stokes, H. & Turnbull, M. (2016). *The Education Benalla Program: A case study of Collective Impact in regional Australia*. Melbourne, VIC: University of Melbourne Graduate School of Education, Youth Research Centre.

Back cover photo by Emily Baker. All other photos courtesy of the Tomorrow Today Foundation

Report designed by Jessica Crofts and Anne Farrelly



Source: <http://www.liveinvictoria.vic.gov.au/living-in-victoria/melbourne-and-regional-victoria#.V-oAJEY2fSg>



TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction.....	5
Education Completion Rates for Young People in Benalla that Equal or Exceed the Victorian Average by 2030.....	5
Theoretical Context of the EBP: Place-based Intervention and Collective Impact: Findings from Literature.....	6
The EBP: Program History.....	9
The Education Benalla Program’s Objectives.....	11
What the EBP looks like - Components of the Education Benalla Model.....	12
Delivery, Development and Consolidation of Sub-Programs.....	13
Early Years and School Readiness Sub-Programs.....	13
Middle Years Programs.....	16
Transitions Activities.....	22
Liaison & Advocacy.....	23
Conclusion.....	26
References.....	30
Appendix 1.....	33
Appendix 2.....	34

INTRODUCTION

The Education Benalla Program (EBP) is a large-scale community project that collaboratively works with public and private sectors, agencies, businesses and community groups in order to improve educational outcomes for young people in the Benalla district in north-east Victoria. Responding to concerns of the impact of social disadvantage on educational attainment and aspiration in the district, the EBP delivers, coordinates and supports a suite of sub-programs and related activities within the key areas of, School Readiness, Student Well-being and Student Transitions. The program is committed to effecting measurable improvement in Literacy and Numeracy levels, rates of Year 12 completion, transition to tertiary education and training or apprenticeships, and familial expectations of education. Launched in 2010 and currently in its sixth year (and second phase) of delivery, the program is guided by the long-term aim of:

Education Completion Rates for Young People in Benalla that Equal or Exceed the Victorian an Average by 2030.

The ‘collaborative action’, philanthropy-led approach taken by the EBP has been described as a compelling instance of what is popularly dubbed ‘place-based’ and/or ‘collective impact’ initiatives. (The term ‘place-based’, as applied to programs aimed at addressing social problems, has gained widespread international currency since the year 2000, while the descriptor ‘collective impact’ has been attached to multiple actions across the world since it was propagated by Stanford University academics in 2011.) The

current report describes the program and its origins; it looks at and charts the history and development of its multiple components during the first phase of program delivery; and evaluates its success at achieving its stated objectives and at addressing challenges in the process. The EBP’s achievements during its first five years are examined against Best Practice criteria associated with both Place-based and Collective Impact frameworks. Not only has the program been a ground-breaking exercise in its own right; it is fair to say that its success to date testifies to its cogency as a model capable of being adopted and adapted by comparable communities.

The growing reputation of the EBP as a prototype for effective collaboration was underlined in 2013 when it was honoured as one of the “Top 50 Australian Philanthropic Gifts” of all time. (That award formally identified the program’s parent organisation, the Tomorrow Today Foundation (TTF), as “a model for community-led investment in rural communities to address inequity and inequality.”) In the same year, the EBP was identified as an exemplar of successful Collective Impact in Australia by both the Centre for Social Policy and the LLEAP (Leading Learning in Education & Philanthropy) Advisory Group (the latter then overseeing a national investigation into philanthropy in education) (Falkiner-Rose, 2015; LLEAP, 2013; Thomas, 2013). Subsequently, in reviewing the first five-year phase of its delivery, Catriona Fay, Philanthropic Services Manager for Perpetual Trustees, glowingly described the EBP as having become “the gold standard” for community collaboration in this country.

The EBP is the creation and flagship project of the Tomorrow Today Foundation. Set up in 2002, in the wake of the Federal Government’s Future for Rural and Regional Australia campaign, the TTF is a Benalla-based philanthropic organisation, established and run by local residents in order to provide funds for community projects, promote the strengths of the district (i.e. “what Benalla does well”), and increase the community’s resilience and prosperity¹. At the core of its creation was concern at growing levels of socioeconomic disadvantage within what, traditionally, had been the heart of a prosperous Victorian pastoral, agricultural and manufacturing centre; a concern reinforced by the identification of Benalla Rural City (by both Jesuit Social Services and the SEIFA Index) as “highly disadvantaged”. As has been pointed out by long-term residents and community observers, from the 1980s on Benalla has needed to absorb the combined impacts of long-term drought, economic challenges within the farming sector, the restructuring of local government (including the loss of local Telstra, VicRoads and SEC branches) and relocation of government housing, among other challenges.

Since its inception, TTF has drawn on donations from local business and citizens to implement small grants and fund a diversity of community projects. The EBP articulates TTF’s commitment to support for public education by resourcing projects outside government funding domains (Chapman, 2007b, 11). Explicit in the development and delivery of the EBP has been recognition that:

- High levels of social disadvantage are impacting adversely on educational attainment in the Benalla district.

And the contentions that:

- A whole of community, place-based, ‘collective impact’ or holistic approach, focusing on the needs of children, young

people and their families from early infancy to late adolescence, was likely to be more effective than a schools-only approach to improving student outcomes.

- Cross-sectoral partnerships, encompassing schools, community groups and government agencies were crucial to achieving the desired outcome.

Theoretical Context of the EBP: Place-based intervention and Collective Impact: Findings from the Literature

The concept of Place as a platform for service or system reform has been increasingly embraced by policy makers and funders over the past fifteen years or so, in part due to recognition that communities can differ markedly and that the services and policies appropriate to one may well not work for another. The shift towards ‘place’ reflects growing awareness that traditional, heavily segmented approaches are failing to address the complexity of modern social problems, and that integrated and co-ordinated approaches, involving multiple players, are more likely to succeed (Moore, 2014; Griggs, 2008).

Pointing to the limited success of multiple individual Australian social change programs, notwithstanding significant investment of time, energy and money (see, for instance, Stokes & Turnbull, 2011; Wright, 2015) has called for a fundamental shift of mindset within the service and welfare sector. Not only is there glaring need for the multiple actors within this sector to work together much more productively, but there is also the vital need for sector actors to collaborate more coherently and strategically with government, philanthropy and business (Wright, 2015). Wright decries the extent of duplication (i.e. lack of communication) within services, citing the example of one Western Sydney school where the involvement of more

¹ For full detail on the Foundation, see Falkiner-Rose (2015) *passim*

than thirty organisations has failed to affect youth unemployment rates. Adamant that “the era of the single purpose organisation attempting to bring about social change is over” (para. 1), Wright emphasises the key role playable by funders and the potential for the collective impact framework to redefine the sector.

Australian thinking in this area has drawn primarily on examples from the UK, Canada and USA, including projects as diverse as the Area-based initiatives implemented in Britain over the last 40 years; the Sure Start program (again in the UK); the Strive initiative in America (CCCH, 2012); and the development and dissemination in Canada of the Early Development Index (EDI). (The EDI, like its Australian counterpart, the AEDC, measures early child development benchmarks and provides data that can be used to promote social cohesion and harness resources².)

Such initiatives have served as blue-prints for the implementation of Australian programs such as the Stronger Families & Communities Strategy 2000-2008; the Communities for Children program 2004-present; the Local Solutions project 2011-2014; Neighbourhood

Renewal 2001-2013; and the Best Start program 2002-present. Supported by numerous government policies, all of them have operated (or are operating) at multiple levels, boast a solid research base, have cross-sectoral governance structures and involve multiple stakeholders (CCCH, 2012; Moore, 2014; Schroeder, 2012).

Projects of this kind, designed to address aspects of social disadvantage within particular geographical localities have enabled identification of a suite of characteristics that appear to be proving effective. Perhaps most pertinent to the current study are the findings of the Place-based Approaches Roundtable convened in 2012 in Melbourne by the Royal Children’s Hospital’s Centre for Community Health (CCCH, 2012). In compiling and presenting a summary of key characteristics and attributes of successful place-based intervention, the Roundtable emphasised the importance of: (a) clearly articulated goals shared by Government and community, (b) a core focus on the needs of children and families within a defined and targeted locality, (c) strong consultation, collaboration and partnership across sectors, (e) utilisation of existing infrastructure and resources to greater effect, (f) incorporation of high quality services that reduce barriers to access and increase networks, (g) a long-term commitment, and (h) regular tracking, and responsiveness to data and evaluation (CCCH, 2012; Inkelas, 2012).

2 According to Schroeder (2012), dissemination of Early Development Index data in Canada has become a major catalyst for change by promoting a sense of collective responsibility for unequal developmental outcomes. By 2012 response to EDI data had spawned some 60 cross-sectoral partnerships and collaborations aimed at improving child health in the province of British Columbia.



Tomorrow Today Foundation, Cecily Court, Benalla

The merits of mainstream people-based policies versus place-based policies have spawned a degree of debate within the social sciences (Byron, 2010). The end-result would seem to be consensus as to the desirability of mixed or holistic person-place interventions. Byron, for instance, argues that place-based approaches (a) enable the targeting of people experiencing multiple and inter-related forms of disadvantage (often beyond the capacity of single organisations) and (b) facilitate delivery of better integrated and more holistic support services. As a general rule, the success of place-based approaches usually depends on the extent to which place-based policy integrates with and reinforces people-based policy/ support (Byron, 2010; Moore, 2012).

Otherwise, however, the literature has been limited to date (Griggs, 2008; Juarez, 20). While we acknowledge that extensive research around place-based education partially intersects with our research (Bartsch, 2008; Cuervo, 2014), it is clear that significant gaps remain. For example: as Moore (2014) pointed out recently, there is still no definitive place-based model per se. Specific strategies still being relatively new and likely to take time to 'bear fruit', there are gaps in the evidence as to their impact so far, as regards long-term positive outcomes for children and families. Likewise, it is too early to see what long-term differences collaborative approaches will make to the quality of life in regional areas, and whether or not such difference might be sustainable. Limits to the evidence are compounded by inconsistency in evaluation methodologies, the shortage to date of rigorous longitudinal evaluations, a paucity of published findings drawn from systematic analysis, and the difficulty of demonstrating effectiveness of interventions when there are still major uncertainties as to how best to address complex social problems (CCH, 2012; Griggs, 2008). Notwithstanding a lengthy tradition of philanthropic investment in social and educational change, there is a decided shortage of "robust models [that] have been demonstrated to work" (Oberklaid, 2012, 4).

Place-based approaches have been described as synonymous with area-based approaches, comprehensive community initiatives, complex adaptive systems, and Collective Impact initiatives (Moore, 2014). Sharing a common ground of "Stakeholders engaging in a collaborative process to address issues as they are experienced within a geographic space" (CCCH, 2012, 9), they have been said to represent a 'New generation of efforts' in seeking to break down cycles of poverty and revitalise communities (CCH, 2012, 11). 'Collective Impact' itself has been defined as a 'particular form of place-based approach' that is distinguished by its results focus and combined efforts by philanthropy, community services and business (Moore, 2014).

The term 'Collective Impact' was first coined and defined by Kania & Kramer (2011). Arguing that the sheer complexity of most social problems rendered traditional 'isolated impact' models (i.e. multiple organisations working independently to address issues) inadequate to the task. They cited such highly structured collaborative initiatives as the markedly successful Strive Educational Partnership in Cincinnati or Opportunity Chicago Employment program, as prototypes for a different approach (Kania & Kramer, 2011; O'Neil & Graham, 2014; Hanley-Brown, Kania & Kramer, 2014).

While the term might be new, it obviously draws on a long tradition of strategic attempts to tackle social issues through partnerships that are framed by a vision for the future of a geographic region (Irby & Boyle, 2014). There are clear similarities and kinship, likewise, to such well-established concepts and descriptors as Cross-sectoral partnering, Whole-of-community intervention or Interagency collaboration (for examples of which, see Stokes & Turnbull, 2011; Semmens & Stokes, 1997; Stokes & Wyn, 1998; Stokes & Tyler, 1997). Edmonson & Hecht (2015, 6) concede that, at first glance, the Collective Impact approach looks "eerily similar" to what practitioners have been doing for years.

Where the concept and label of Collective Impact have differed – and where they have “resonated [so] deeply with practitioners” Hanley-Brown et al. (2014, 2) has been in providing a framework and language so seductive that they that have gained international attention (including White House endorsement). Insisting that adopting such an approach may be the only way society can make large-scale progress given the complexity of the era, Hanley-Brown et al. (2014, 2) argue that Collective Impact is more than just “a fancy name for collaboration”, and is in fact “fundamentally different, more disciplined and higher performing” than its predecessors or counterparts.

In their original ‘manifesto’, Kania & Kramer (2011) posited five conditions that differentiate Collective Impact from other forms of collaboration: a common agenda, shared measurement, mutually reinforcing activities, continuous communication and backbone support. (Backbone support is provided by the project’s lead agent through ‘cascading levels of linked collaboration’.) Fundamental to success and maintenance of momentum are the pre-conditions of an influential and passionate champion (able to provide dynamic leadership), adequate financial resources (including at least one ‘anchor funder’ able to resource development, roll-out and initial delivery of the project), and urgency for change.

Kania and colleagues subsequently augmented that original 5-condition framework by arguing the need for Collective Impact partners to undergo several ‘mindset shifts’ as regards who is involved, how they work together, and how progress happens. Key considerations here were the crucial importance of: (a) building strong interpersonal relationships and trust between practitioners/stake-holders, (b) flexibility, i.e. “enabling collective seeing, learning and doing” rather than rigid adherence to a linear plan, (c) preparedness to share credit and think about being part of a larger context, (d) continuous

learning and adaptation, and (e) authentic engagement with people who are experiencing the problem at first-hand (see Kania, Hanley-Brown & Juster, 2014, 2-5).

Since 2012 Collective Impact has enjoyed “tremendous momentum as a disciplined cross-sector approach to solving social and environmental problems on a large scale” (Kania, Hanley-Brown & Juster, 2). While, in part, this momentum may have been related to shortfalls in government funding during the global economic recession, or to growing disillusionment with the ability of governments to solve these problems, it cannot be denied that, through its widespread application across the health, education, welfare and community development sectors, including concerted attempts to address aspects of poverty, homelessness and disadvantage, collaboration for Collective Impact is, indeed, becoming ‘the new normal’ (Turner, Merchant, Kania & Martin, 2012; Parkhurst & Preskill, 2014). That being so, and while ‘inspired’ by the proliferation of both the Collective Impact concept and language in only three years, Kania et al. (2014) have expressed concern at a growing tendency to apply the label to projects that deviate from key elements of the model (the 5 conditions, strong focus on data and continuous learning). Given the potential for non-aligned initiatives to “affect the current tide toward working collectively”, they have stressed the importance of maintaining the integrity of the approach (Kania, Hanley-Brown & Juster, 2014, 4).

The EBP: Program History

TTF personnel cite release of the 2007 Vinson Report, Dropping off the edge, as the catalyst for development of the EBP. Having located Benalla within Victoria’s 40 most disadvantaged postcodes, based on the convergence of 24 indicators of disadvantage (among them low income, poor health, low work skills, long-term

unemployment, lack of Internet access), Vinson (2007) highlighted the particular impact of limited education on social mobility, the building of social capital and/or the perpetuation of disadvantage. This comment on the difficulty of denying the role of low educational attainment on the making and sustaining of disadvantage resonated particularly strongly with the Tomorrow Today Foundation Board (Falkiner-Rose, 2015).

Drawing on OECD data, Vinson confirmed strong correlations between non-completion of schooling, a lack of literacy skills and lack of qualifications with unemployment, poorer health, relationship breakdown and contact with the justice system. While (as has been conceded by Randolph, 2004, 63), “the concentration of disadvantage in specific neighbourhoods and regions is a widespread characteristic of all advanced economies”, Vinson described Australia as operating within a particularly “high quality, low equity quadrant”, characterised by increasing gaps and opportunities between rich and poor. Unsurprisingly, he noted that more than half of disadvantaged communities across the country were in rural areas. At the same time, in highlighting the difficulties of transcending the poverty/unemployment/isolation cycle, he suggested that the greater levels of social cohesion characteristic of some rural communities might be of advantage in taking collective action (Vinson, 2007, 97-98).

In reflecting on Vinson’s findings, TTF set up an Education Program Advisory Committee to investigate thoroughly the implications for Benalla. An extensive literature search, undertaken on the committee’s behalf by chairperson Liz Chapman looked also at relevant research undertaken by Education Foundation Australia, and reports and individual studies by Bentley (2006), Keating & Lamb (2004), Putnam (2004) and Holmes-Smith (2006). The review (Chapman, 2007a) confirmed that TTF was confronting a number of strong evidence-based ‘givens’, i.e.:

- That “Social disadvantage and low educational performance feed off each other” (Chapman, 2007a, 3).
- That there are correlations between unemployment, poorer health, relationship breakdowns and involvement in the justice system with early school leaving, a lack of qualifications, basic literacy/numeracy problems.
- That the “combination of attitudes, well-being, early success in literacy/numeracy, financial constraints and positive role models all have a role to play in a young person’s decision to stay on, or turn away from, education” (Chapman, 2007a, 3).
- That whereas students with high social capital frequently enjoy access to enriching learning experiences that draw on parental links to business, industry and cultural organisations and networks, these experiences and linkages are often unavailable to young people who are facing geographic and socio-economic disadvantage (and have low social capital).
- That social isolation as a result of such factors as geography, physical location, poor health, disability, lack of money, lack of education or lack of transport, can damage both child development and family functioning; and
- That social problems are more likely to occur in less equal societies (Moore, 2012).

Having posed the question, “Is there some-one somewhere who knows what a comprehensive community-based integrated support system really looks like?”, and having been compelled, after extensive searching, to conclude “apparently not” (Chapman, 2007b, 9), the TTF acknowledged that it faced the significant challenge of developing a comprehensive initiative that would facilitate a community, philanthropy and government alliance in order

to “raise the bar for Benalla” (Chapman, 2007a; Chapman, 2007b, 9). It was recognised that the challenge would encompass finding practical ways to:

- Strengthen links between schools and families.
- Connect young people to extra-curricular activities.
- Improve commitment to life-long learning within the community.
- Harness advice on early childhood learning, whole-of-system change.
- Develop partnerships with other agencies intent on effecting change.

As a Community Foundation the organisation believed it was in the position of being able to draw together all requisite local and external players. Believing (a) that philanthropy could tread where Government would or could not, and (b) that direct delivery of programs would be vital to success, TTF launched the EBP’s ‘Foundation Year’ in 2010, with initial focus on the key areas of School Readiness and Student Wellbeing. The roll-out of sub-programs in 2010-11 was documented by the University of Melbourne in its first report; subsequent reports have examined and detailed the program’s outcomes and evolution.

The Education Benalla Program’s Objectives

The EBP has been designed as a two-stage intervention, to be funded and delivered over two consecutive five year periods on the understanding that any serious attempt at addressing the impacts of social disadvantage needed to: (a) take a long-term view, and (b) take into account all aspects of young people’s lives and opportunities, both within the home and community. Having completed Stage 1 in 2015, the program is currently in the first year of Stage 2.

Explicit in the EBP’s design have been the arguments:

- That formal schooling is only one component of the educational environment in any district.
- That more than one educational initiative is needed to bring about the desired result of all Benalla’s young people staying in education and training.
- That sustainability of the project will depend on its being embedded in the community as a way of working; and
- That cross-sectoral partnerships (schools, community groups, government agencies, etc.) are crucial to achieving desired outcomes.

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

- All Benalla and district children start school ready to learn.
- Improved literacy and numeracy levels.
- Improved student-assessed levels of well-being.
- Raised family and community expectations of education.

What the EBP looks like - Components of the Education Benalla Model

At the time of writing, the EBP is being articulated as in the Model below:

- **Delivery, development and consolidation of a range of sub-programs** (from a Parents Early Education Partnership Program, to a suite of activities related to school leaving and transitions).
- **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**

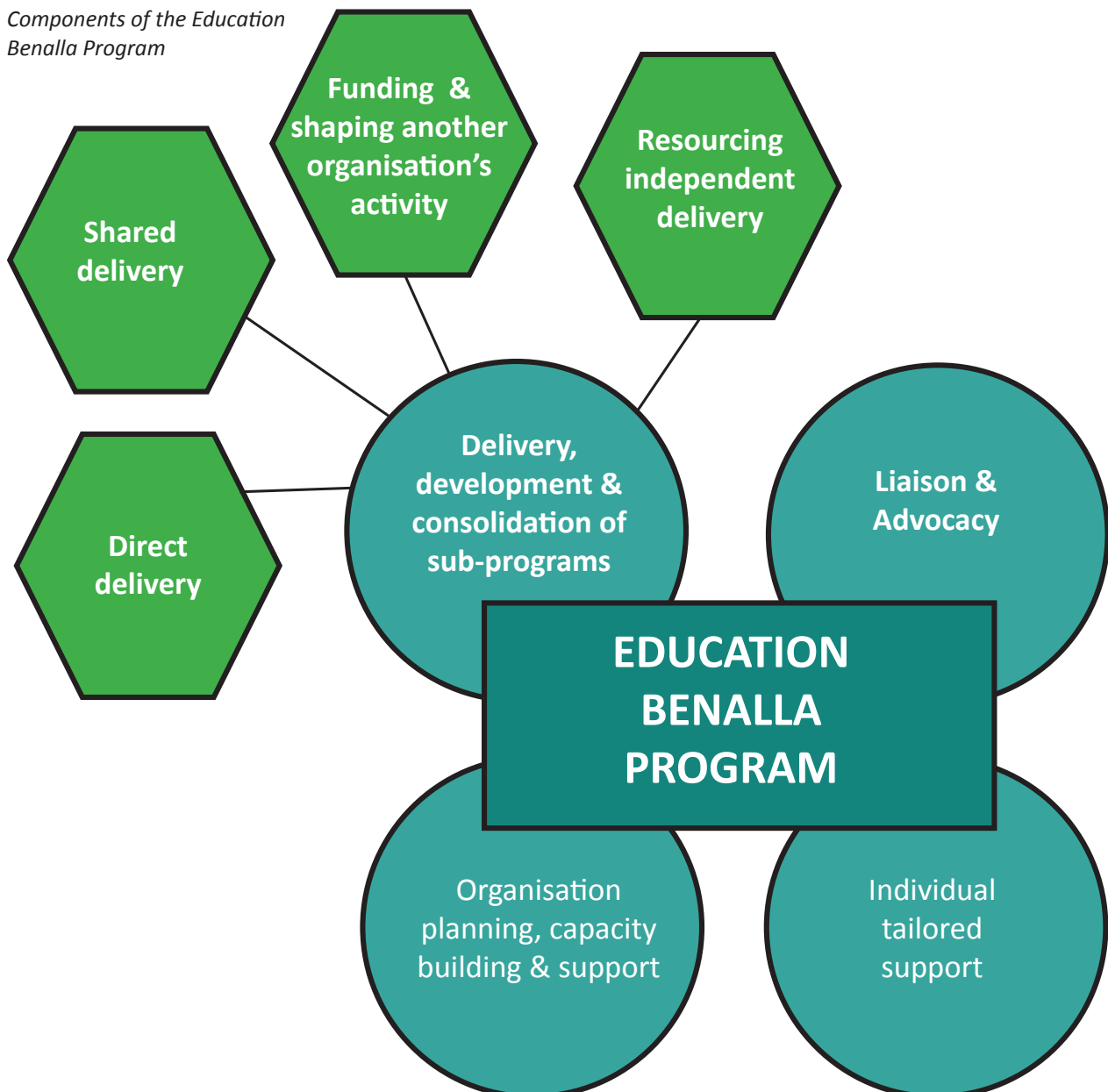
and support to specific institutions/ groups; and

- **Individual, tailored support** to children and families.

The current report focuses primarily on the EBP's sub-programs which are delivered in four identifiable ways:

- Activity delivered by TTF itself.
- Activity delivered by TTF in partnership with a government or non-government agency or community group.
- Activity delivered by another organisation, with funding and support by TTF.
- Activity delivered independently by another organisation with TTF resources.

*Components of the Education
Benalla Program*



DELIVERY, DEVELOPMENT AND CONSOLIDATION OF SUB-PROGRAMS



Participants in the PEEP program

1. Early Years and School Readiness Sub-Programs

A) PLAYGROUPS/PEEP (Parents Early Education Partnership)

Delivered by TTF itself in partnership with Benalla Health

The Early Years component of the EBP was developed in response to concerns that around 30% of the estimated 400 children aged 0-2 years in the Benalla district at the commencement of the program were outside the system, i.e. not

receiving Maternal & Child Health services or not accessing family and community support agencies. The sub-program articulates the key area of school readiness, with the playgroups and PEEP activities specifically addressing **Key Objective/ Result area 1 of the EBP: That all Benalla children start school ready to learn.** The Key Performance Indicator of the sub-program has been identified as: **By school commencement, all Benalla's children are; (a) socially ready to learn and (b) have basic pre-literacy and pre-numeracy skills.**

While the EBP early years activities are open to (and have been taken up by) families across the



Young child participating in the PEEP program

Benalla district's socio-economic spectrum, there has been particular emphasis throughout its history on engaging and recruiting Benalla's more marginalised families. Prior to the EBP, Benalla had a well-established network of early childhood services. There were strong indications, however, that more vulnerable families felt uncomfortable accessing these services, and that there was a clear need to augment the existing services with specifically-targeted activities.

Early years outreach commenced at Easter 2011 with the appointment of Early Years Specialist (EYS), and establishment of two play groups, one 'in town' and in close proximity to the TTF office, the other at the Waminda Housing Estate's Neighbourhood House. By the end of 2011, Wednesday and Thursday groups (in town) were bringing in more than 20 families; another six families were attending at Waminda. TTF also helped resource and provided space for a 'Twins' playgroup, run by a local parent, during this period.

Playgroup attendances have continued to multiply (i.e. between 30-40 regular families by mid-2012; 69 families – and 105 children – in 2013), in part as the EBP rolled out and delivered the PEEP Program. For two years, September 2012 to September 2014, the playgroups were delivered in tandem with PEEP, ultimately being absorbed under the PEEP umbrella.

The PEEP Program is an English initiative, developed as a five-year program that takes children and parents from birth to school commencement. PEEP responds to research findings that 30% of parents fail to talk meaningfully, or read to their children or interact with their children over a family meal (Stokes & Turnbull, 2015, 4). PEEP encourages parents to maximise everyday learning opportunities by listening, talking, singing, sharing stories and books with their child.

Benalla PEEP commenced delivery in September 2012, with the appointment of a coordinator and funding assistance for two years from the Advancing Country Towns State Government initiative (via local government). The program has drawn extensively on TTF's strong relationship with Benalla Rural City Council's Maternal and Child Health and active collaboration with BRCC's Family Liaison Workers. Delivery 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, by the end of 2015, seven, bringing in an estimated 200 families with 220 children.

b) GREAT START TO SCHOOL Delivered by TTF in partnership with Benalla P-12 College Junior campuses

As part of the Early Years outreach, TTF staff initiated an intensive preparation for school program focusing on parents which they titled 'Ready for School' PEEP, over, summer 2012-13. This program involved 15 families and elicited very positive feedback from participants who welcomed the opportunity to talk amongst themselves and share parenting advice. Accordingly, it was repeated, with a different group of parents and children, during the 2013-14 summer, and subsequently 'morphed' into the Great Start to School (GSTS) transition partnership with Benalla P-12 College at the end of 2014. The GSTS has been delivered twice to

date; the second (2015) delivery managed to engage 51 families (out of a combined 2016 Prep/Foundation Year enrolment of 60 students).

Content of the GSTS program has included a sequence of talks for parents focusing on 'Making school a positive experience', 'Fostering independence', 'Helping build your child's learning skills', and 'Getting ready for the big day', followed by a sequence of introduction to school activities (without the parents) led by a mix of TTF and school personnel.

For teachers, GSTS has provided the opportunity to observe next year's students, see how they interact with each other and other adults, check out their listening skills and behaviour, and *"get a few strategies in place"*.

c) READING BUDDIES

Delivered by TTF in collaboration with local Junior school campuses

The Reading Buddies (RB) Program specifically addresses **Key Objective/ Result area 2 of the EBP: Improved Literacy and Numeracy levels**. The Key Performance Indicator is identified as: By Grade 2, literacy and numeracy levels are at the high end of predicted results for like schools.

Reading Buddies 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 volunteer Buddies' time commitments range from one to three morning sessions a week. TTF funds their recruitment, training and support, while coordination, timetabling and delivery of the program are organised and resourced within each school campus.

While, in practice, the volunteers are likely to spend time with a number of students

over the course of any single session, the key focus of the program has been consistently on the development of an individual, one-to-one relationship between Buddy and student. (Implicit in the program's creation is recognition that, due to work commitments, many parents of children in Prep or Grades 1 & 2 have limited time to hear their child read, either at home or by participating in schoolroom rosters.)

The RB program was piloted in 2012 at what was then Benalla East PS (now, as a result of the Benalla Regeneration Program, the Avon Street Prep-4 campus of Benalla P-12 College). The campus in question was regarded as particularly suited to such an innovation, having: (a) faced a considerable number of challenges in recent years, and (b) indicated strong enthusiasm (that included willingness to allocate a part-time staff-member to co-ordinate the day-by-day running of RB). Early indicators of program success included: improvements in punctuality and attendance; increased confidence levels; and improvements in vocabulary development and word attack skills.

Highlighting "the great support" provided by her son's regular RB over the past school year, an Avon Street parent observes:

" ... At the start of this year, we were really concerned about J ... because he found reading so hard. He lacked a lot of confidence just to give things a go ... he would just refuse to read, refuse to even give it a go ... Now he loves reading, he looks forward to reading ... Loves his relationship with G (Reading Buddy) ... In terms of his overall learning, he's just a different boy. He's not scared to just have a go, not scared to make mistakes ... that's a really big difference ... he's a really confident kid now ... I don't have to worry every day that he's struggling ... [he's] happier".

During 2014, TTF achieved its aim of having RB embraced by all early primary settings in Benalla, with the Australian Christian College Hume, St Joseph's Catholic Primary School and Benalla P-12's second junior Campus (Waller Street) all responding to positive reports from the pilot setting by also opting to introduce the program. At last count, 25 RBs were assisting children across the four campuses.

There is general agreement that the major challenge faced by RB has been around maintaining the consistency, reliability and effectiveness of the volunteers. It is recognised that volunteers will inevitably "come and go" over time due to conflicting demands (travel, health, family, etc.), that some volunteers are "naturals" for the role (where others may need support) and that individual personalities can be a variable in the development of relationships between RB and student or teacher.

By its very nature, voluntarism appeals primarily to older people who, in some cases, may also be "old school" in their educational views, and may find modern approaches to classroom structure and management a little confronting. Accordingly, early emphasis has needed to be placed (in training) on the importance of volunteers modelling their interactions on those of the teacher. To that end, there has needed to be some focus by individual teachers and co-ordinators on bringing some of the Buddies "up to speed" with changing pedagogical styles - and, in the process, ensuring that they recognise classroom boundaries - and on building the volunteers' understanding of technology and the learning process.

d) Other Early Years activity within the EBP

From the outset, direct delivery of the Early Years component of the EBP has been augmented by resourcing support to kindergartens and other playgroups, convening a Parent Education

Working Group, assisting development of the Benalla Early Years Network strategic plan, supporting annual 'Let's Read Benalla' campaigns, and funding enrichment activities for individual students/families. The PEEP program has spawned a Young Mums offshoot, a Breastfeeding group, a Great Start to School group and a Parents as Partners workshop series (aimed at providing parents with strategies to increase their children's engagement with Literacy in Prep).

2. MIDDLE YEARS PROGRAMS

A) Benalla College 'Hands on Learning,' delivered by Benalla P-12 College with funding and support from TTF

Hands on Learning (HOL) is an alternative or early intervention educational program that seeks to increase attendance and retention of middle years students regarded as at risk of disengagement and/or early school leaving. HOL responds to current research in the areas of Middle Schools curricula that highlight the importance of module-based educational experiences that are authentic, cater for individual differences, and emphasise teamwork, communication, negotiation and the achievement of personal success. Participation is by referral. Seventy to eighty per cent of participants have literacy and numeracy problems. Ninety per cent are male. Duration of enrolment is based on individual need.

Having evolved from a pilot program initiated by Russell Kerr at Frankston High School in 1999, HOL and its philosophy has since been developed and propagated by the not-for-profit organisation Hands on Learning Australia. By December 2014, more than twelve HOL Programs had been established throughout Victoria and on Cape York Peninsula, catering for the needs and interests of more than 1000 Junior Secondary students. Having recently completed its fifth year of delivery, Benalla College HOL has been identified

as “one of the three most successful versions of the program to date” (Stokes & Turnbull, 2015, 7).

“I hated school ... Before I started HOL I was late every day ... for up to two hours late ... I just couldn’t be bothered getting out of bed ... Then I Worked with Frank at FCJ [HOL]. I enjoyed just being there, being able to get onto a job and doing it ... Being taught skills – that’s what inspired me to want to become a boiler maker. Since then it’s improved and improved and improved ...It boosted my confidence and now I’m doing a lot more Hands On subjects, like metalwork, auto-welding, VET auto ...I feel better about school thanks to HOL” [Former FCJ HOL Student, now in Year 11]

Hands On Learning in Benalla addresses key EBP **Objective/Result area 3: Improved student-assessed levels of well-being**. The program actively seeks to increase school attendance, reduce student suspension, increase engagement in learning and class participation, and help develop pathways. It addresses the key objective of the EBP, i.e. Improved student-assessed levels of well-being. It likewise addresses **Key**

Objectives 2 and 4: Improved Literacy and Numeracy levels and Raised expectations of education, and the strategy:

- To provide opportunities for the most disadvantaged students to develop academic, social and interpersonal skills through personal tutoring or other activities.

Hands On Learning commenced delivery at Benalla College’s Middle Years campus at the start of 2010 and has continued to be offered two days a week, to two groups of approximately ten students each. Throughout its duration, it has been staffed by the combination of a teacher and experienced tradesperson (a cabinet-maker). TTF has supported the program by funding the tradesperson’s salary, and some materials expenses.

Initial activities undertaken by program participants included constructing seats in the school grounds, work on school gardens, use of equipment (such as angle-grinders, whipper-snippers, soldering irons), painting occupational health and safety strips on steps throughout the campus and preparation of percussion sticks for playgroups. From 2012, staff and students have developed a number of highly workable partnerships within the wider Benalla community,



Young people participating in skill building activities as part of Hands on Learning

resulting in completion of such projects as construction of seating at a local Primary School, a major construction and renovation project within the children's section of the Benalla Cemetery, setting up exercise stations on Jaycee Island adjacent to the Benalla Lake walk, painting a cubby-house for Waminda Community House, and planting for the Benalla Honeyeater Program.

From its inception, a key condition of enrolment in the program has been agreement by the young person that he/she attend other classes. In this regard, HOL is seen as a useful "lever" to improving overall school attendance.

Not unexpectedly, given the complexity of issues faced by many of the young participants, HOL has been an effective alternative for some students more than others. By and large, however, there have been clear indications since the end of the first year that participation in HOL has facilitated (and continues to facilitate) increased school attendance and decreased suspensions. By 2014, school records had indicated a 74% drop in school suspensions, credited to the impact of HOL and Positive Behaviour strategies, over the course of the EBP (School principal, participating school).

Recognition of the positive impact of the program has impelled expansion of the HOL philosophy and program in Benalla, including the establishment of two offshoot deliveries. Both have again been supported by TTF.

Thanks to active mentoring by Benalla College HOL staff (both informally and through in-services and HOL network meetings), HOL was initiated at FCJ Catholic College in 2013. Subsequently, as a result of discussions around the need for alternative educational strategies for young people already becoming disengaged from education in the senior primary years, a second Benalla College HOL, this time geared to a mixed-gender cohort of Year 5 and 6 students, commenced delivery in mid-2014. As a result of HOL within its three deliveries,

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.
- Have been provided with opportunities to acquire and practice leadership skills.
- Have had (in some cases) opportunities to develop a positive relationship with a male adult.
- Intend to go on to Year 12.

The findings from a case study of its implementation at Benalla College, conducted by the Youth Research Centre for HOLA in 2013, confirmed the parent organisation's own assessment of its success, and identified high quality staffing, informed student selection, support for the program within the school and strong community connections as key factors in that success.

b) CONNECT9 Delivered directly by TTF in conjunction with multiple community groups

In an era where more and more young people lack appropriate role models and father figures, or any feeling of connectedness to the community, an abundance of research has underlined the value of mentors as adults other than parents able to offer support, insights into the wider world and, often, assistance with accessing personal and community networks (Falkiner-Rose, 2015). Eby et al. (2008) have highlighted general agreement among scholars (across several disciplines) as to the association between mentoring programs and changes-for-the-better in the lives of participants, demonstrating that mentoring

can enjoy particular success as a positive youth development strategy, a deterrent of negative behaviour or a means of school retention and re-engagement. In examining a range of mentoring programs, across all Australian states and territories, MacCallum & Beltman (2002, 47) have concluded that such programs can take a variety of approaches while still producing “discernible positive outcomes.”

TTF endorses the potential value of mentoring programs, agreeing wholeheartedly that “student learning takes place in a broader community than the school environment,” (Chapman, 2007b, 7) and that positive interaction between the community and its schools can contribute to improved educational (and ‘life’) outcomes.

The mentoring component of the EBP specifically addresses **Key Objective/ Result area 3, i.e. Improved Student-assessed levels of well-being.**

The identified Key Performance Indicator is Year 9 secondary students report moderate to high levels of school and community connectedness. It seeks to:

- Improve connection of teenagers to the community by increasing their membership of local clubs and societies.
- Provide opportunities for Year 9 students to develop a significant relationship with adults other than parents.
- Provide opportunities for disadvantaged young people to develop their academic, social and interpersonal skills.
- Help the students match their skills, interests and talents to career options.

The Tomorrow Today Foundation consistently acknowledges the vital impact on EBP of Benalla being home to a large number of residents with strong commitments to volunteerism. It is able to draw on an enviable database of potential mentors/volunteer workers from diverse backgrounds, including teaching, pharmacy, business and agriculture. In addition to ensuring the success of the Reading Buddies initiative or providing crucial assistance to individual young people through after-school tutoring, TTF’s valued volunteer cohort are offering time, willingness and personal skills to the EBP’s Middle Years Mentoring initiative. All volunteers selected as mentors complete a formal induction and training module which includes an information session, workshops based on components of the Victorian Youth Mentoring Alliance Training Package, the development of individual program plans, a post-program debriefing session and guidelines for disengaging with mentees.

Connect9 volunteers are paired with young people in a sequence of group sessions (including a Masterchef activity, a ‘Be Happy – de-stress’ Yoga session, a library-based treasure hunt and an interactive career seminar), alongside a sequence of individual mentor/mentee experiences that range over going to the movies, horse-riding, kayaking, guitar club and pottery. In recognition of the link between physical health and positive wellbeing each young person and their mentor receives 10 weeks free membership of the local YMCA aquatic centre and gymnasium. The program concludes with a gliding session and family BBQ.

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.

There have been nine deliveries of Connect9 to date (i.e. early 2016), bringing in more than 100 young people. The marked success of the Pilot delivery, in Term 3, 2011, confirmed



Young people and mentors taking part in activities for Connect9

ONE EXPERIENCED MENTOR'S FEELINGS ABOUT Connect9, 2014

"It's eye-opening what the normal teenage experience can be now compared with when we were kids ... I grew up in Benalla – went to Waller Street and the High School. Hoped to be a cabinet maker but ended up in the farming sector ... did a lot of jobs ... mobile butchering, fencing, learned to shear and did that for ten years., I was a carpenter on and off in Melbourne, spent three years in Perth, ... fly out, fly in to Patartha ... my wife is in H.R. and I stayed at home with kids for a couple of years, strawberry farming ... I saw an article in the Ensign asking for mentors and I came down and had a chat ... It was a personal challenge to know the boundaries and ideologies. But I could relate a lot to kids – being physically different, short and dumpy, I got bullied at school ... I felt I'd been through many of the issues most of the kids had been through ... Felt I had something to give back ... My eldest son got a bit 'antsy' because I wasn't home during the program, until I explained that 'this boy had no father figure at all' ... he understood, took it on board and was more proud of his dad afterwards.

I worked with two kids, P and B. B presented really well. Any kid prepared to stand up and shake your hand at first meeting is a good sign ... At first I was asking 'Why does this kid need a mentoring program?' ... only after a few weeks did I probe through to the issues underneath. P, the other kid, was quite the opposite – very reserved, introverted. His dad was a bit condescending, a bit mocking, and P needed to be brought out of his shell and told the glass is still half full. Talking to his mum, I heard what I hoped for was actually happening. He was talking at home, doing this and that ... We still keep in touch – I hear he's been doing some extra-curricular stuff and public speaking at school. He realises there are some nice adults out there... He's got a new scenario The defining moment was when we caught up for coffee late in the program and I couldn't shut him up ... [The experience] has been really enjoyable. I'll happily come back ... I've almost recruited another couple of mentors. Another mum said her son was disappointed he didn't get me. That's nice feedback to get".

the strong need for such an initiative and informed subsequent shaping of the program. Learnings from each delivery, for instance, 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.

"We have a growing knowledge of what the mentees enjoy, what type of person they do best with ... We've learned who is best to network and make things possible. Growing knowledge of what mentors enjoy, what type of person they do best with ... Plus referrals coming through the schools [and welfare staff] means we're getting the cohort we want." [Sabine Smyth, former volunteers co-ordinator]

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.

Staff indicate that the biggest learning to emanate from multiple deliveries of the program has been the critical importance of **ensuring that the mentors are suited to the role.** ("They're the lynchpin ... can make or break the program".) Program observations, over seven deliveries, have indicated that the most effective mentors tend to be highly adaptable, to have an open mind, to feel comfortable contributing to group sessions, to "love working with kids" and to be excited by young people being different. 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.

The training program currently focuses strongly on promoting recognition that:

- The four group sessions are designed to help mentor-mentee partnerships get to know each other sufficiently to collaborate in then choosing individual activities.
- Connecting a young person to a community activity is not just “*filling in time*” but hopefully promotes heightened awareness of local resources. (Positive experiences on CONNECT9 have since impelled a number of young people to join a local recreation or sports club.)
- The mentor’s expectations of bonding with the young person needs to be realistic.
- Shared individual activities must be something that motivates and interests the mentee; and that (provided, the activity is safe), the mentor needs to be accommodating about the choice of activity and prepared to step outside his/her comfort zone.

Co-ordinating and organising the program also poses demands and hiccoughs. As with any undertaking that deals with real life and people giving up their time, “*volunteers get sick or have to travel unexpectedly ... Our challenge is to not panic, be able to pull (replacement) people in while keeping the young person unaware of the whole scenario and feeling there is an adult there.*” The Co-ordinator emphasises the value to TTF of having built up a very strong volunteer pool over the EBP’s lifetime, enabling recruitment at the last minute or “*filling in in an emergency.*”

c) Other Middle Years activities

In addition to support for HOL at both Benalla College and FCJ College, and direct delivery of the CONNECT9 mentoring program, a range of activities reinforce the EBP’s desired outcome of Improved levels of Well-being within the district’s Middle Years population. These currently include (or have included):

- Tutoring, through Individual partnerships or through the ‘Connect’ Tutoring Program (delivered by a TTF-funded teacher, meeting weekly with 7 Year 7 & 8 students, identified as ‘at risk’, and focusing on re-engaging them with education).
- Individual funding support to students/families and small grants for youth development initiatives.
- Funding of youth mental health first aid for volunteers, staff and parents; and support for delivery of annual Youth Mental Health Forums in Benalla.
- Support for a Flexible Learning Centre (an alternative education initiative, formally a Benalla campus of Wodonga SC, aimed at re-engaging some of the 200 school-age young people in Benalla identified by DET statistics as not in either education, training or work).
- Support for a Year 9 Aspirations program



Young person participating in the Connect9 program

at Benalla College (the successor to 'Connect Girls' a partnership between the College, TTF and the DET in 2012-2014)³

Delivery of a paid part-time work program, (a series of workshops providing young people with employment information, employment skills and connections to employers).

3. TRANSITIONS ACTIVITIES⁴

The Transitions sub-program responds to Program Objective 4: Raised family and community expectations for students to go on to tertiary education.

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:

Parents Pathways

The aim of increasing Benalla parents' connections to education motivated the Advancing Country Towns initiative to collaborate with NE Tracks LLEN to introduce and deliver (twice) the 'Work Pathways for Parents' program in 2013. The program is designed to provide opportunities for parents and carers to experience a positive learning environment in a school setting. Given that parent engagement is seen as a key part of the Benalla College's Year 9 Shared Aspirations concept, TTF agreed to provide a further two years funding for the initiative – as an adjunct to Shared Aspirations. (This included a six week parent training sequence provided by team members from The Centre, Wangaratta.) According to a College spokesperson:

³ For detail on the Connect Girls initiative, see Falkiner-Rose, 2015, :58-80.

⁴ For further detail on EBP's Transitions focus, see Falkiner-Rose, 2015, 60-62.

"We recognise it's all about families ... we make sure the parents know exactly what we're doing in the classes, that someone talks to them about what's happening ... We need to find good reasons for parents to come into school, to improve the way they feel about themselves and school ... Some are used to coming in only when there's a problem ... Some have had bad experiences of their own and they found schools intimidating ... [Now] some of them can't wait to get here on Wednesdays ... some want an Advanced Program ... It's important that there's someone to greet them at the door ... offer coffee ... computer access ... I've personally got to know some parents in a very positive light".

Citing instances of parents being overheard commenting: "That wasn't so bad" or volunteering "I feel so much better about going in the front door [at Faithfull Street]", the College highlights the impact of publicity about Parents' Pathways, both inside and outside school, as boosting individual attendees' self-esteem. (One mother enjoyed having her photo in the local paper for the first time in her life as part of an article on Shared Aspirations.)

Support for delivery of Year 10 CAPS (CAREER ACTION PLANS) workshops at both schools

A University Bus Trips initiative, enabling young people to spend a day visiting metropolitan university campuses.

The initiative has teamed TTF with the schools, the regional DEECD SULO (Student University Liaison Officer) and Benalla Rural City (which has provided peer mentors for the students through the Council's Innovations program). TTF has funded the two buses. 80 students took part in

2015. According to one teacher participant:

“The day exposed a lot of the kids to something they’d never seen before... we made the most of the time ... We told them in advance that we wanted to see a Lecture Theatre and accommodation, have an opportunity to talk about courses and costing, walk around and see a café [etc.] ... The Unis were very co-operative. You don’t know what a university is until you walk around and see all the vibrant activity. We have visits [to the school] from uni people but its not the same as going to see for themselves ...

You could see changes to attitude in the bus coming home ... The overriding thing with country kids is always cost ... and you could hear them start to talk about possibilities ... The best outcome of the day was just ‘awareness’ ... a lot of kids decided they liked the feeling of one or other [campus] ... The day also created a ‘group’ back at school, a good mix of kids who’ve ‘all been there ... we all learned about Uni’ ... I doubt whether there’ll be any problem filling the buses next year”.

Both schools have acknowledged: *“We couldn’t do this without TTF”.*

Benalla Careers Day

TTF partnered NE Tracks LLEN and Goulburn Ovens TAFE for three years in delivering an annual Benalla Careers Day, and in 2015 took over responsibility for co-ordinating the activity. Catering for between 120-140 Year 10 students each time, Benalla Careers Day provides participants with some hands-on Jobs & Skills exposure courtesy of bus trips to local businesses, services and industries; in the afternoon representatives of business, local Government, the Army and further education providers

provided information via a musical chairs-style ‘round robin’.

In addition to the above, Transitions activity has included (from the EBP’s inception) seminars such as, Parents as Careers Advisors or Can My Wallet Afford It?, drawing on partnerships with Centrelink, DET, GOTAFE, Careers Education Association of Victoria and University of Melbourne – Dookie Campus.

4. LIAISON & ADVOCACY

Program success testifies to the collective impact of:

- A highly skilled and enthusiastic staff (described as “extraordinary” by one board member).
- The strong volunteer ethos (that, it is increasingly apparent, is an enviable characteristic of the Benalla community).
- An inclusive local culture.
- The commitment of the TTF board; and
- The breadth and strength of multiple cross-sectoral partnerships.

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 EO 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.
- The strategic and short-term planning that continues to shape program design and delivery.
- Networking (i.e. the practicalities of

“going out and building relationships with funders and outside organisations”); and

- Promotion.

All of which are fundamental to a whole-of-community focus on changing that community’s educational profile.

As a result of its Liaison and Advocacy activity, TTF has continued to:

- Showcase the work and content of the EBP to visitors (including a range of political, philanthropic and educational bodies) and at public forums.
- ‘Push the message’ across sectors and in presentations to key organisations that ‘collective action’ is the most effective means of addressing the social and educational impacts of generational unemployment, low SES and limited aspirations.
- Help enhance the capacity of other organisations to deliver activities in line with the ‘common purpose.’
- Ensure the program is appropriately funded, governed, staffed and evaluated; and
- Plan, shape and modify program content

“It takes a lot of vision to say we’re gonna make a difference. ... In Benalla they’ve got an opportunity – with sustained funding - because, it was never going to be less than a 10 year program and beyond, to get the sort of change that you would like to happen. It’s incremental and you’ve got to plug away at it year after year ... It’s fruiting now. Hence the willingness [of local organisations] to work with TTF and hence its much stronger credibility in the community”. [NE Tracks LLEN]

in response to discussion, debate, feedback, learnings and current research.

This activity has been undertaken at two levels:

- One internal to Benalla, in the form of supporting the success of other initiatives, as a key player and committee member on multiple committees and interest groups, and as key contact for agencies, schools and the like.
- The other, outside Benalla, primarily carried out by the Board, and constituting *“a solid dissemination of program elements.”* As TTF’s Liz Chapman has observed: *“Place-based is becoming the ‘hot thing’ ... we’re proud of what we’re doing and what’s in train, and we’re happy to disseminate outside Benalla ... responding to requests to understand the EBP better”.*

The EBP’s multiple partners over Stage 1 have included funding, advisory and program partners. At a funding level, it is noted that the EBP’s objectives and overall philosophy align well with the priorities of a number of philanthropic trusts.

Major funding partners for Stage 1 of the EBP have been the R E Ross Trust, The Ian Potter Foundation, The Ledger Charitable Trust managed by Perpetual, The William Buckland Foundation and the Department of Education and Training. Activity level funding has also been provided by FRRR’s Rural Education Program, the Yulgilbar Foundation, Newsboys Foundation, the Jack Brockhoff Foundation, George Hicks Foundation, the Kimberley Foundation, the Dick and Vera Bertalli Educational Program and the State Government Advancing Country Towns initiative.

At program level, key Stage 1 partners have been the Benalla Early Years Network, Benalla P-12 College, FCJ College, St Joseph’s Primary School, Australian Christian College Hume, NE

Tracks LLEN, Benalla Health and Benalla Rural City Council.

Addressing a seminar organised by the William Buckland Foundation in February 2015, TTF representative Liz Chapman made specific reference to the large number of Benalla residents who have been involved with the EBP over its first phase. It has been estimated that 1500 individual students, adults and volunteers have had a direct involvement in one or other activity. This conservative estimate does not take into account individuals involved across various programs or activities or the numbers of parents and families of participants, partners and families of volunteers, school staff, and members of partnering agencies who have had some contact with the EBP.

Organisational planning, capacity building and support to specific institutions/groups.

In line with the Stanford Collective Impact Model domains of Shared Agenda and Mutually reinforcing activities, from the outset the EBP has sought to maximise its whole-of-community impact through activity as diverse as supporting and providing funds for other early years playgroups (including a Dads' playgroup and a playgroup catering for twins); funding establishment of a Kinship Care network in the region; grants assisting schools and families to access scout camps, music camps; helping build capacity of the Waminda Community House through membership of its committee of management; active membership of the Benalla Early Years Network and other local service collectives; assisting Benalla P-12's application for a Local Solutions grant; and design and co-ordination of the 'Let's Read Benalla' initiative across all Benalla pre-schools.

Individual, tailored support to children and families

Over the program's lifetime this has included providing tutoring for a number of young people, either at risk of school leaving or disengaged from education; funding three-year-old preschool where there was particular benefit for children, funding sports or arts connections for a number of young people from financially disadvantaged families (in 2013, for instance, 58 young people were provided with funding to access club memberships, purchase laptops or uniforms); funding transport to enable young mums to attend the PEEP Young Mums group; and scholarships to assist young people transition to post-secondary education.



Babies participating in storytime as part of the PEEP

CONCLUSION

Addressing a Placed-based Solutions Conference in Sydney in August 2014, Doug Taylor CEO of United Way Australia pointed to a generation of well-intentioned efforts by Governments, NGOs and community members to tackle locational disadvantage. While acknowledging there had been “*small victories*” along the way, Taylor expressed concern at an overall lack of community level change, suggesting a critical need to work differently for collective impact. Specifically, Taylor underlined the need to move from approaches that were too often piecemeal, inadequately (i.e. short-term) funded, provided professional services to passive clients within an overly complex service system, and proceeded from the deficit view that the community was the problem, to an agenda that:

- Was community (rather than Government contract) focused.
- Engaged clients, families and a mobilised community in the solution.
- Adhered to an assertive outreach philosophy.
- Was funded through genuine partnerships.
- Offered intense and comprehensive interventions utilising a service system that was “joined up” and “wrapped around”.

The Melbourne-based Place-based Roundtable (CCCH, 2012) identified the variables needed to facilitate place-based change:

- Most importantly, the relationships between citizens, service providers, policy makers and stakeholders.
- A long-term commitment.
- The time, money and human resources required to develop communities.

- Evidence-based strategies to promote change and the processes to capture learnings from delivery of these strategies
- Creative thinking and willingness to take risks.

According to the Roundtable Report (CCCH, 2012) and related literature (CCCH, 2014; Moore, 2014) attributes of successful place-based models include:

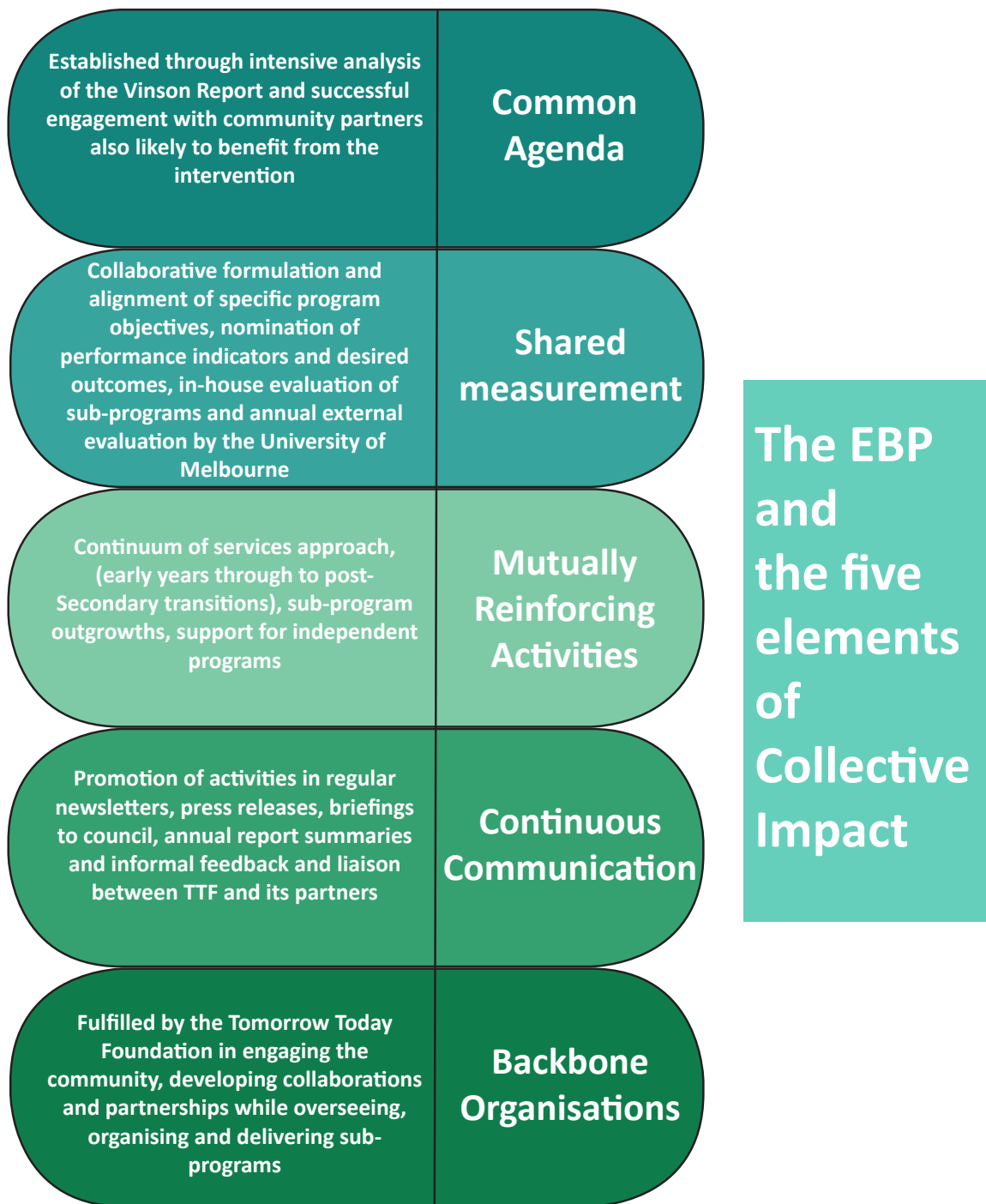
- Clearly articulated objectives.
- Data measurement and tracking that informs decisions.
- Strong consultative leadership.
- Long-term commitments.
- The capacity to liaise with government and respond to local community.
- Effective work-force skills.

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 extent diversity and richness of its more than 120 partnerships; its clear and well-defined objectives; 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’, skilfully meeting the place-based criteria and variables enumerated above.

It is only reasonable likewise to argue that the EBP represents ‘Best Practice’ in the area of philanthropy-driven collective impact community intervention. In examining examples of Collective Action in Australia in 2013, the Centre for Social

Policy (Thomas, 2013) highlighted the close alignment of the EBP to the Collective Impact model developed and enshrined by Kania, Kramer and colleagues. Drawing on a combination of philanthropic and government funding, the EBP likewise meets the five key conditions that comprise the Stanford Model. The project’s common agenda, established through intensive analysis of the Vinson Report findings and related research, has underpinned successful engagement by community partners also likely to benefit from the intervention.

Shared Measurement strategies, designed to demonstrate how positive program outcomes will outweigh costs (both human and financial) have included formulation of specific program objectives, nomination of Performance Indicators and desired outcomes (e.g. improved adolescent well-being, increased Year 12 retention), in-house evaluation of sub-programs and annual external evaluation by the University of Melbourne (see Falkiner-Rose, 2015, 29, 36-38). The EBP’s continuum of services approach (from early years through to post-secondary transitions), as well as sub-program outgrowths (such as the Early Years Young Mums, Parents as Partners and Great Start to School initiatives, and



the Middle Years Paid part-time work, Parents Pathways and Careers Day programs), and three deliveries of HOL and support for a Flexible Learning Centre evidence its Mutually Reinforcing Activities.

The CI condition of Continuous Communication is articulated by promotion of activities in regular newsletters, press releases, briefings to council, annual report summaries and informal feedback and liaison between TTF and its partners. The role of the Backbone organisation, engaging the community, developing collaborations and partnerships while overseeing, organising and delivering sub-programs is clearly fulfilled by the Tomorrow Today Foundation (Thomas, 2013).

Education Benalla Program staff are the first to acknowledge they are *“in it for the long haul”* and that program success has yet to be demonstrated in official statistics or (for instance) in significant changes to NAPLAN data. (Acknowledgement that it will take some years for change to affect local averages was implicit in program design). At the same time, Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) data for 2015 has shown positive improvement, since 2012, in school readiness for local five year olds starting school. AEDC 2015 reports both an increase in the number of Benalla children who are *“on track”* and significant progress in the domains of Language & Cognitive skills and Communication skills & General Knowledge.

Pragmatically acknowledging that *“we’re on track to do what we set out to do”*, i.e. *“to effect a process of change in measurable ways over a long period of time”*, EBP Committee chair Liz Chapman cites the next step as *“Just bringing it home – starting translating the effects into [measurable] impact.”* Conceding that challenges remain (including the need for gradual transfer of sub-program delivery to appropriate stakeholders so as to ensure TTF does not *“settle into being service delivery,”* and the resoluteness/strength of purpose to discard program elements that are not working well), she believes that *“we’re*

where I knew we could be and where we need to be ... it’s happening.” Her sentiments have been echoed by two partners, representatives of the education and local government sectors respectively.

“It’s a trite overdone saying – but if ever you can see that it takes a village to raise a child just look at our community. For the first time in probably a decade or more, we have a collective understanding of the responsibility we all play in the lives and education of our kids. It can’t be just another 12 months of trying things out. It’s got to be - this is the way we do things in Benalla from now on. This is the way we do education. We’re shoulder to shoulder with TTF. For the first time we’ve got an Early Years Plan with Benalla Rural City Council that reflects that whole of community approach. We’ve got the ducks all lined up and we just have to keep being relentless.” [Junior Primary Campus Principal]

“It’s the real life stories and the difference in people’s lives [that are testifying to success] ... TTF and many of these initiatives and programs really take a long, long time to show marked improvement in many of their indicators ... [yet] I think what a different community Benalla would be if TTF wasn’t here ... They’re an integral part of the community services sector in Benalla.” [Benalla Rural City Council]

Inequities and shortfalls within the 21st century Australian educational landscape reflect a deepening economic divide as relative levels of poverty have increased in Australia. While at one end of the spectrum, Australian school students reportedly perform well above the OECD average, at the other end, significant numbers of young people are under-achieving. Keating and Lamb (2004) and Black (2006,; 2007), among others,

have highlighted the unequal distribution of the benefits of national prosperity and have confirmed the nexus between entrenched social disadvantage and poorer educational outcomes. In what has become more and more “a low equity country” (AIHW, 2007, 118), programs like EBP are clearly vital in addressing the impacts of the socio-economic divide and in effecting significant and positive change for those who most need it. Certainly, initiatives as well-designed, administered and delivered as the EBP has been deserve optimum support and continuity in the struggle for greater social justice.



Student and mentor in the Connect9 program



Students learning archery from a mentor in Connect9

Participants in the PEEP program



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APPENDIX 1

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 • 'Connect' Tutoring Program • 'Connect Girls' program at Benalla College (2012-2014) • 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 • Support for Wodonga SC (Benalla campus) Flexible Learning Centre • Paid Part-Time Work program
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 Training program • Development of Year 10 Career Action Plans • Careers Day • Uni bus trips

APPENDIX 2

Some perceptions of the partnerships and collaborations that underpin the EBP

Interviewed in mid-2014, a long-time resident of Benalla who admitted to sadness at some of the changes he had seen in the district over the past generation or so, credited TTF with having effected real positive change by helping the community work together.

“It is a marvellous town ... scratch the surface a bit though and there’s things like old money versus [new] ... the public sector that used to be in town is no longer here ...you’ve got a lot of single parents and public housing, a lot of poverty ... and there have been problems ... plus we had the situation where Benalla people were talking their own town down. There’s no greater critic of Benalla than Benalla people themselves ... [Now] Benalla is changing because a lot of people are working together ... it’s an unusual instance of the [town’s] establishment working to change the community’s image ... [The various services and organisations] are more likely to collaborate now than they did five years ago, not working in silos, defending their turf ... It’s pretty powerful.”

In terms of interagency collaboration (and in mining the capacity of local organisations to move beyond ‘territorialism’ in quest for the ‘bigger picture’), TTF itself expressed satisfaction at having been instrumental in nurturing multiple partnerships.

“Benalla is so much better than it was 5 years ago. It has taken a long time to develop the trust, to share data, talk

about what does and doesn’t work – leave the baggage behind and focus on what needs to be done.”

These sentiments have been endorsed by a number of TTF’s partners. For instance, having worked with the Board since 2002, Gail Timmers, former CEO of NE Tracks LLEN, has assessed:

“As each [sub]program has been rolled out over the years it has built credibility. It was up against it a bit when they first came on board and they were dealing with schools. Schools say ‘Education is our business ... who the hell are you to come in and suggest we do some things differently? That’s changed [dramatically] over time. There’s much more a Thank God you’re here, open arms attitude now. That’s happened as its built its program base, its got results, there’s change occurring. And so people then see ... the credibility and confidence in TTF is much stronger now, not only in the Education sector but also amongst local government and other agencies in the town that all have some common business.”

Particular credit has been paid by the LLEN to the rigorousness of the EBP’s theoretical underpinnings. *“TTF usually moves forward with a very strong evidence base. They look long and hard at the sort of things they want to do and try to do it with a strong research underpinning. It’s not just someone’s good idea.”*[Gail Timmers]

Particularly striking to the long-term observer has been the growth of TTF’s partnership with local schools. *“The relationship is of high importance to us”*, concurs Benalla College’s Principal, pointing out that a number of important program

options would not have been possible without TTF (e.g. *“The great relationship the HOL staff has is reflected in what we’re achieving with the kids ... yet we couldn’t run it in its current form without TTF”*). Having been surprised and impressed since taking on the Principal’s role (June 2012) at the “collective impact” evident in the large number of players from different agencies wanting to make a difference in education for struggling young people, she has acknowledged:

“It is wonderful to be part of it ... I can just see the support that we have has continued to grow ... and it’s continued to make a real difference to a number of our families and a number of our kids we’d lose otherwise, and collectively it’s making a difference in a much more positive way.”

As noted earlier (in discussing the Shared Aspirations program), a Victorian Educational Excellence Award recently enabled Benalla College teachers Sue Oakley and Anne Forster to visit and experience Pathways and Transitions planning in a number of settings in the United States. The teachers cite the visit as having been; (a) quite inspirational in the way it confirmed the importance of engaging parents in conversations about improving educational aspirations, and (b) strong validation of what TTF is doing. Likewise they cite TTF support (through planning meetings) as having facilitated a new approach to the Year 9 experience.

“TTF’s relationship with Benalla College is strong ... We share data ... Our Career Education works because someone from TTF has input ... is looking into the fishbowl of what’s happening ... TTF is helping us extend our partnerships [for example: with the LLEN and Benalla Rural City] ... plus the community’s knowledge of TTF is useful to the school ... TTF being on board helps legitimise what the school does.”

Benalla Rural City Council representatives, Amanda Aldous and Jane Archbold have highlighted:

- TTF’s capacity to understand the complexity of the issues to be tackled.
- Its responsiveness and strong belief in a whole of community approach.
- The value to other organisations of TTF’s well-established networks.

“These guys have built up [relationships with schools, etc.] and they have been wonderful in sharing that and creating opportunities for access for me and my projects. There are some good partnerships going on in this town.”

“What we have really valued is the partnerships that we have been able to establish with TTF ... As a Council, it’s been very co-operative and collaborative ... “

- Thanks to the level of commitment and capacity of the Board and staff, its ability to break ‘new ground’, overcome scepticism or work counter to perceived wisdom.

“There’s a view held by many philanthropic groups that a community needs to be a certain size ... and have a big enough base ... or you’ll never get an intervention program of this type to work. Benalla defies that. Obviously it has some major advantages There’s the goodwill in the community ... the reputation of it all ...a very dedicated board who do their research and are people active in the community. The diversity and variety of the programs they offer too . Often it’s not really big amounts but it’s just that they really make a difference in the lives of various individuals ...the small grants that they can give ...”

Yet another interviewee has emphasised the down to earth robustness, stability, and solidity of TTF, and the rigorousness of its interventions and commitment to:

“... actually target things that are really meaningful and hands on ... Sometimes you’ll get organisations that have these great froth and bubble ideas that really don’t get to the nitty gritty of what the problem is ... TTF have done the research to say: ‘What’s the impact going to be if we start working with young mothers?’ , ‘What’s the impact going to be if we work on aspirations of Year 9 kids?’ ... and they actually listen to what we can find out and we listen to what they can find out.

TTF are stable ... other organisations come in and they’re gone in a few months, while TTF are still here. They’re not after the quick fix ... there’s longevity and scope to everything they do ... If they were an organisation that just had their own agenda and it was all about their annual report ... just tick this box ... I don’t think it [would work]. They are fair dinkum about what they’re doing”.



Young person participating in flying lessons as part of Connect9



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