

20 February 2024

Mr Trung Luu
Chair
Legislative Council Legal and Social Issues Committee
Inquiry into the State Education System in Victoria
Parliament House
Spring Street
EAST MELBOURNE VIC 3002

Dear Mr Luu

We apologise for the lateness of this submission to the Inquiry into the State Education System in Victoria, but hope it can still be considered.

In relation to the Inquiry Terms of Reference, the focus of our submission will be on Benalla-specific responses regarding:

- 1) trends in student outcomes,
- 3) the current state of student wellbeing, and
- 5) examples of best practice in other educational settings to improve student learning outcomes and wellbeing

Benalla is one of 29 communities in Victoria identified as “persistently disadvantaged” (1) meaning that even if more resources are allocated to the same services, the underlying level of disadvantage may not improve. A different approach is necessary.

Tomorrow Today, Benalla’s independent community foundation, is leading a long-term, place-based intervention to mitigate the impact of disadvantage to measurably and sustainably improve student outcomes.

A fundamental underpinning of the Education Benalla Program is that children learn in three environments – the family, the school and the community. Supporting children in each environment, or ‘educational setting’, will be more effective than a schools-only approach, particularly in disadvantaged communities.

Education Benalla Program partners include Local and State Government departments and agencies, all Benalla schools, preschools and childcare centres, Benalla service groups, clubs and societies, other not-for-profits and local businesses. More than 120 local organisational partners support the Program in multiple ways. In addition, the Department of Education is currently providing much needed ‘backbone funding’ towards this collective impact approach, which since inception has been largely funded by philanthropy.

Trends in student outcomes

Disparities correlated with socio-economic disadvantage, compounded by COVID-19

Children who live in socio-economically disadvantaged communities do not do as well at school as children who live in more advantaged communities.

Socio-economically disadvantaged students attend fewer hours of early childhood education, have lower attendance at school, are more likely to leave school early, and are less likely to go to university. (2)

COVID-19 compounded these problems, as disadvantaged families and communities suffer more than most, both during and after pandemics. Vulnerable children bear the brunt of interrupted education, parental job loss, lost opportunity, abuse and disconnection.

We closely monitor student outcomes and have been particularly concerned about the impacts of COVID. Research from the University of Melbourne (3) confirms what we are seeing— that vulnerable children will experience exacerbated risk as a consequence of the COVID school interruption. It is likely that the equity gap will increase and for many, the chance of moving out of vulnerability will be diminished.

While ‘social factors’ are often identified as the reason for lower educational performance in rural, regional and remote communities, the discussion about solutions tends to be confined to schools. We would welcome more policy attention being given to the family and community learning environments.

Other factors contributing to decline in outcomes

Preschool children being read to less often

Each year, Tomorrow Today partners with local preschools to undertake screening of pre-literacy, pre-numeracy and oral language skills of four-year-old children as they start the pre-school year. Compared with the previous year’s cohort, we found a significant decrease in the 2023 cohort’s knowledge of how books work (Concepts About Print), an ability to re-tell a story that had been read to them, and answer story comprehension.

Our results suggest children are being read to less often. The increased cost of living is adding pressure on both parents to work full time, leaving less time for parents to read books with their children. We also believe there has been an increased use of screen-based technology for learning and entertainment, which has negatively impacted children’s reading development.

Tomorrow Today literacy screening results	2021 developing as expected (92 students)	2022 developing as expected (115 students)	2023 developing as expected (141 students)
Concepts About Print	60%	89%	12%
Knowledge of 1-10	67%	58%	58%
Phonological awareness	28%	23%	28%
Story re-tell	24%	42%	18%
Story comprehension	36%	52%	31%

The negative impact on children’s reading development identified above, is being mitigated in Benalla by substantial additional work with children in their preschool year as part of the Early Years component of the Education Benalla Program.

In addition to preschool screening at the start of the year, Tomorrow Today:

- Provides preschool teachers with;
 - play-based resources and activities to use in their classroom settings,
 - resources to send home for parents, with tips to further develop their children’s pre-literacy, pre-numeracy and oral language skills through everyday activities at home.
- Recruits, trains and supports volunteer ‘Kinder Pals’ to regularly visit the preschools to read and talk about picture books with small groups of children,
- Supports preschools to prepare children for school entry by running the ‘Kinder Immersion’ program in term four, with small groups of children identified by their preschool as not academically or socially ‘ready’ to start school the following year,
- Repeats the preschool screening at the end of the year. Results are shared with parents, preschool teachers and each child’s primary school. This enables schools to be aware of children’s skills before entering their Foundation year.

‘Preschool screening’ received a special commendation at the 2023 Victorian Early Years Awards in the category of Creating Collaborative Community Partnerships.

Students not at school

Absenteeism is known to impact student learning and sense of belonging at school. The average number of days missed by Benalla students is alarming. Absenteeism has doubled since COVID and is significantly higher than the Victorian State average (reference 2022 Annual Report to Benalla P-12 College school community).

Before COVID-19 the data available was collated on a whole-of-school basis. Since 2020, data is broken down into primary and secondary cohorts. Information below from 2020 onwards calculates both primary and secondary levels and then takes an average.

Whole of School Average	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Benalla P-12 College days absent	18.6	15.1	33.15	33.1	35.3
State-wide days absent	16.3	15.1	17.4	15.2	9.8

Raw data used in the table above indicates absences are consistently higher in secondary levels than primary. In 2022, Year P-6 students missed an average of 27.7 school days, while Year 7-12 students missed an average of 42.9 days of school.

Note - in tracking and understanding school absence, we believe it would be helpful if the Department added ‘school refusal’ as one of the reasons for non-attendance - describing student-driven refusal to attend school, often against the wishes and efforts of their parents and the school.

Due to COVID, students who commenced Prep in 2020 missed an average of 17 weeks’ face-to-face teaching during their first year. Three years later, the Year 3 NAPLAN results collected in 2023 indicate remote learning created a significant, negative impact on their literacy skills.

The current state of student wellbeing in Benalla

In 2023, Tomorrow Today undertook an independent census of student wellbeing and engagement in partnership with the Department of Education South Australia.

The Wellbeing and Engagement Census (WEC) measured 1172 students in Year 5 to 12 attending schools in Benalla Rural City. The census was conducted over five weeks between 27 March to 12 May 2023.

It is intended that the survey will be repeated at regular intervals as a point in time measure of need and change in the wellbeing and engagement of Benalla's young people. While no trend analysis is currently available, the following results may be of interest to the Inquiry.

WEC measured three areas of development:

1. Social and emotional wellbeing.
2. Relationships, engagement and learning in school.
3. Physical health and lifestyle and after school activities.

Of the students surveyed, 784 submitted a valid response (67% of students). The results found:

- The self-reported happiness, optimism and life satisfaction was highest in Years 5 and 6, and steadily decreased from Year 7.
- Just over half of students told us they had at least one important adult they could connect with at school (53%). Of this result, most were in Years 5 and 6. The number decreased through the middle years of secondary school, with 51% in Year 7, and 39% by Year 9. However, by Year 12, 71% of students said they were connected with an adult at school.
- Cognitive engagement with schooling was mostly high in upper primary (55% of Year 6 students) but decreased to fewer than a quarter of students in Years 8 and 9 (23% and 22%, respectively) increasing again in Year 12 (50%).
- Most students indicated a high academic self-concept² up to Year 7, with rates dropping to fewer than half in Years 8 and 9, before increasing to 63% of Year 12 students.
- Few students³ had high levels of feeling they could meet academic and learning expectations, however, there was a small increase from Year 10 (18%) to Year 12 (32%).
- Of all the wellbeing components, students responded lowest in resilience (measured for Year 10 to Year 12 students only) with only 15% of Year 10-12 students self-reporting high wellbeing for resilience, 52% showing medium wellbeing and 33% having low wellbeing, with respect to resilience. Year 12 students had slightly higher levels of resilience compared to Year 10 and 11.
- Motivation to achieve goals was relatively stable at Year 10-12, with fewer than one in five showing low wellbeing in this domain.
- 51% of students in Years 10-12 reported high expectations for success⁴ and a further 38% posted 'medium' in this category.
- Year 9 students had the lowest wellbeing and sense of connection to their community.

In addition to the above, we note that the serious staffing shortage at Benalla P-12 College, resulting in short-term relief teachers and 'collapsed' classes, is reducing student engagement.

Example of best practice involving other educational settings to improve student learning outcomes and wellbeing

Education Benalla Program

When the Jesuit Social Services research into comparative disadvantage by postcode (4) was released in 2007, Benalla was named in the “top 40” of most disadvantaged postcodes in Victoria. The author, Prof. Tony Vinson, found that limited education was central to the making and sustaining of disadvantage in Australia today.

Improving educational outcomes is central to reducing levels of disadvantage.

Tomorrow Today researched the broad issue of low socio-economic status and educational outcomes. A literature review and discussion papers were circulated; local knowledge and external experts were consulted. Consideration was given by a specially formed Community Advisory Committee and recommendations received by the Board of Tomorrow Today. A whole-of-community intervention was developed with an eye on long-term change, focused on the central issue of improving children’s educational outcomes. The Department of Education (Hume Regional Office) provided considerable input and support.

To improve student outcomes and Year 12 completion requires teenagers to be connected and well; literate and numerate; with a sense of potential. It requires that students have increased career awareness, and increased confidence about their future pathway and the skills required.

This requires a family and community response as well as school excellence. It starts with the early years as well as teenagers and their families. It requires community-wide collaboration that ensures that all children start school ready to learn and works towards teenagers having power and agency to achieve.

Tomorrow Today is coordinating a community-wide response, which commenced operations in 2010.

The Program consists of multiple, coordinated and complementary projects and activities. It is supported by highly productive partnerships across the community to ensure that

- Every Benalla child starts school ready to learn,
- Numeracy and literacy is measurably improved,
- Student wellbeing is improved, and
- Community expectations for children’s education are raised.

The long-term aim is that Year 12 completion rates for Benalla’s children will equal or exceed the State average.

There are three sub program areas and each area has multiple activities and projects at any time. Some activities are long-term commitments; others are opportunistic activities. The range of projects is monitored and reviewed; adjusted and varied. There are now more than 20 projects functioning at Tomorrow Today and in the community as part of the Education Benalla Program.

The following publications provide further information:

<https://tomorrowtoday.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/TT-EBP-10-Yr-Publication-SP.pdf>

https://tomorrowtoday.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/DPS_Tomorrow-Today_Annual-Report_Digital.pdf

Evidence of Change

Evaluation of the Education Benalla Program (EBP) was conducted by Ludowyk Evaluation across 2022 and 2023. The Executive Summary is attached.

The evaluation strongly supported that two of the key outcomes are on track:

- *Every Benalla child starts school ready to learn* – Evidence: Benalla’s school starters have decreased in vulnerability from 2012 to 2021, while children in a benchmark Regional Victorian community have increased vulnerability in the same period.
- *Young people have high aspirations for their education and employment* – Evidence: EBP activities are supporting participants to plan future study and work. Year 12 completion rates have trended upwards to 100% in 2021 and fewer young people are not participating in any education, employment or training (NEET) following school compared with 2016 (a decrease of 19% or equivalent of 2% of all 15-24 year olds).

In relation to ‘starting school ready to learn’ above, the Australian Early Development Census demonstrates that Benalla’s children are significantly improving their developmental status. This is despite Benalla being identified as a ‘persistently disadvantaged’ community and having had the worst level of child vulnerability of all Victorian local government areas in 2015.

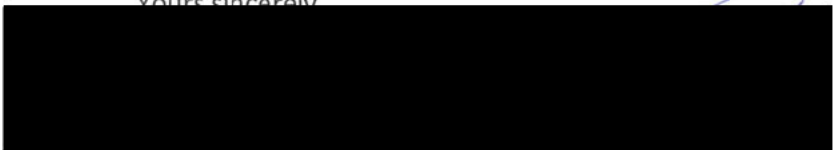
Change over time – Australian Early Development Census

Developmentally vulnerable on one or more domain	2012	2015	2018	2021
Benalla	31.1	32.9	23.5	21.2
Victoria	19.5	19.9	19.9	19.9
Australia	22.0	22.0	21.7	22.0

The evaluation states that ‘the Education Benalla Program has been identified as providing enormous benefit to Benalla’s children and young people, and their families by improving young people’s readiness for school and improving young people’s post school pathways. It is also sustaining the community in many other ways, including providing capacity and collegiality that is helping keep educators in their jobs a little longer, increasing capacity of education sector, and directly supporting families in need of financial aid.’

Post COVID, it is more important than ever that Tomorrow Today is supported to continue its whole-of-community, child-by-child intervention that has the active support of more than 120 community, public and private organisations that operate in Benalla, including all school. We would welcome an opportunity to discuss this successful place-based approach to improving educational outcomes in a persistently disadvantaged rural community.

Yours sincerely


Sue Fleming
Executive Officer

References

- (1) Vinson, T. and Rawsthorne, M. (2015) Dropping Off the Edge – persistent communal disadvantage in Australia
- (2) Lamb, S., Jackson, J., Walstab, A., and Huo, S. (2015) Educational opportunity in Australia 2015: Who succeeds and who misses out. Centre of Research on Educational Systems, for the Mitchell Institute, Melbourne: Mitchell Institute
- (3) Ziebell, N., Acquaro, D., Wee Tiong Seah, and Pearn, C. (2020) Australian Education Survey: Examining the impact of COVID-19 Report Summary. The University of Melbourne
- (4) Vinson, T. (2007) Dropping Off the Edge – the distribution of disadvantage in Australia. Jesuit Social Services.