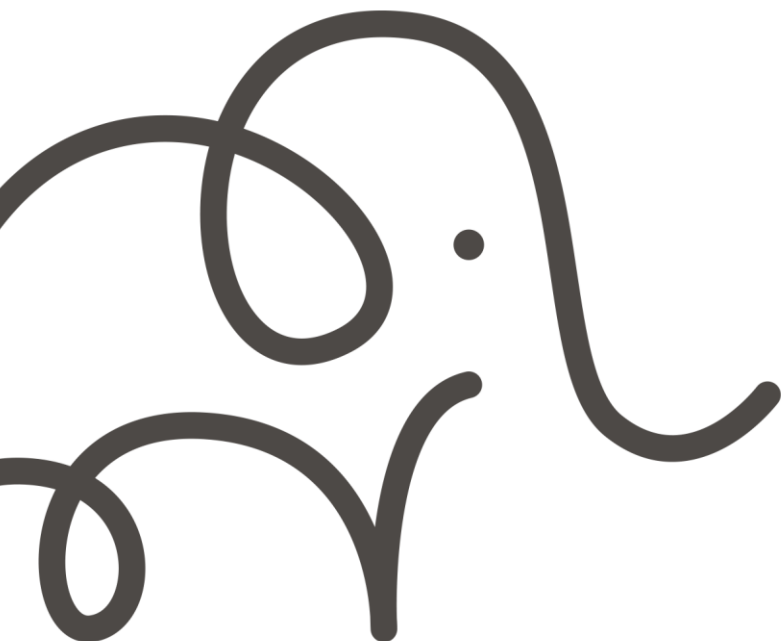




EDUCATION BENALLA PROGRAM
EVALUATION
SUMMARY REPORT
PREPARED FOR TOMORROW TODAY

NOVEMBER 2023



LUDOWYK EVALUATION

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We acknowledge that this report was developed on Aboriginal lands of our first Australians, the Wadawurrung people and the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nation, whose sovereignty of the land was never ceded. We pay our respect to their elders past, present and emerging, and extend this respect to all first Australians. We note that in 2021, the Year 12 or equivalent attainment rate was 1.3 times as high for non-Indigenous Australians aged 20-24 as for Indigenous Australians (91% compared with 68%) – 23 percentage points lower than for non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians

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1 INTRODUCTION

Benalla is a rural city on the Broken River in North Eastern Victoria, with a population of 14,528 in 2021¹. Featuring impressive landscape, and renowned for its annual street art festival, Benalla also experiences high levels of socio-economically disadvantage. While 19% of the population is aged 0-17, there are fewer young people in Benalla than in much of regional Victoria, and the proportion of young people in Benalla has been decreasing since 2011. A lesser proportion of young people in Benalla completed Year 12 or an equivalent (34.4% compared to 54.4% in Victoria); young people in Benalla tend to disengage from schooling in higher numbers than their peers in the rest of Victoria².

Tomorrow Today is Benalla's independent community foundation. Established in 2002, Tomorrow Today's purpose is *to enable the people of Benalla and District to create a stronger, more resilient and prosperous rural community*.

In 2007, the Dropping Off the Edge report into disadvantage in Australia was released. Benalla ranked in the top 5% of disadvantaged postcodes in Victoria. Tomorrow Today's Board recognised they had a role to play and supported the formation of a Community Advisory Committee to investigate ways to improve the educational outcomes of Benalla's young people.

Launched in 2010 with support from philanthropy and the Department of Education, the Education Benalla Program (EBP, the Program) is a whole-of-community initiative, comprising multiple initiatives designed to support young people's schooling as well as their lives and opportunities beyond schooling. The Education Benalla Program engages families, schools and community organisations and services, to improve student outcomes.

1.1 THIS EVALUATION

In 2021 Tomorrow Today commissioned Ludowyk Evaluation to conduct a two year, independent evaluation to understand the impact and value of the Education Benalla Program to the community of Benalla, government and philanthropic funders. An evaluation plan was developed in conjunction with The Ian Potter Foundation, to support this independent evaluation.

Key Evaluation Questions are:

1. How effective is the EBP?
 - a. How does the EBP (including its key elements) produce change in Benalla?
 - b. How is need understood?
 - c. Is change occurring where it is intended/needed?
 - d. What is the reach of the program (who is and isn't being reached, how has reach changed over time)?
2. What are the key achievements of the EBP to date?

¹ <https://abs.gov.au/census/find-census-data/quickstats/2021/LGA21010>

² <https://profile.id.com.au/benalla/schooling?EndYear=2011&DataType=UR&BMID=40>

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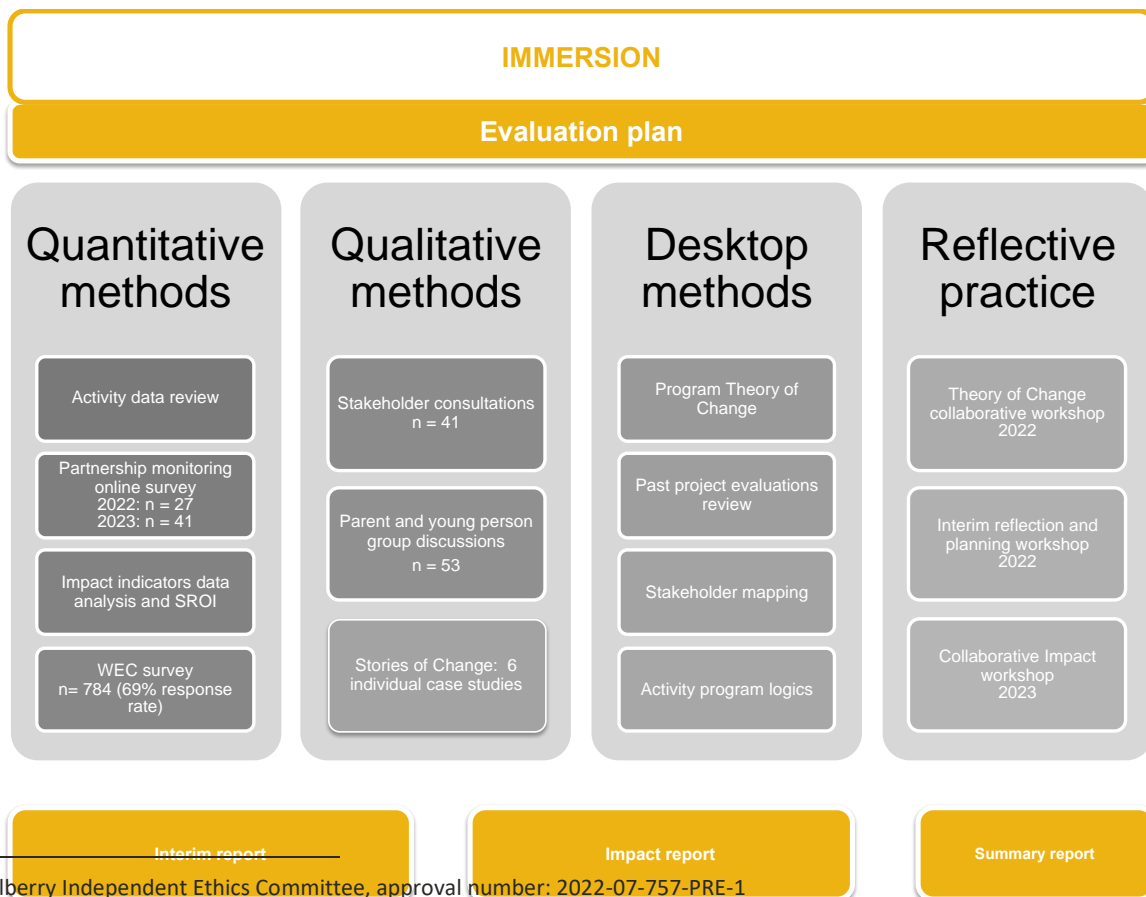
3. What has been the long term impact of the EBP?
 - a. To what extent can impacts be attributed to EBP?
 - b. What is needed for impact to be sustained?
4. What is the value of the EBP to the Benalla community and to government?
5. What has been learnt?
 - a. What has been the impact of COVID-19 on young people’s education outcomes in Benalla?
 - b. What opportunities exist for EBP to increase its impact?

The interim evaluation report (November, 2022) shared findings on the model. This report presents findings on outcomes and impact of the Education Benalla Program.

1.2 METHODS

The evaluation was based on a multi-method program of research, including formative evaluation and development of program theory, quantitative and qualitative methods. Research was supported through external accountabilities, including independent HREC³ and RISEC and Catholic Education Office approvals.

Figure 1: Summary of methods



³ Bellberry Independent Ethics Committee, approval number: 2022-07-757-PRE-1

A note on reading charts in this report: Statistical significance was tested using t-test at the $p \leq 0.05$ level. Where results are significantly different than comparison groups, these are indicated with arrows (↑ for a significantly higher result and ↓ for a significantly lower result)

LUDOWYK EVALUATION

2 SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

	KEY OUTCOMES	FINDING	EVIDENCE
KEY OUTCOMES	Every Benalla child starts school ready to learn	STRONGLY SUPPORTED	Benalla’s school starters have decreased in vulnerability from 2012 to 2021, while children in a benchmark Regional Victorian community have increased in vulnerability in the same period.
	Children’s numeracy and literacy meets expected benchmarks	UNCLEAR	Changes in NAPLAN results indicate improvements in numeracy and literacy performance prior to 2020. The impact of COVID lockdowns on student performance confounds understandings of EBP impact from 2020 to 2022.
	Children and young people have improved wellbeing	MODERATELY SUPPORTED FOR PROGRAM PARTICIPANTS	A majority of those participating in EBP activities have improved wellbeing in the short term, attributable to the Program. Trend analysis of population level wellbeing of young people was not available. However the evaluation provides a baseline (through the WEC survey data) for future comparison.
	Community members have high aspirations for the education and employment of young people	WEAKLY SUPPORTED	Indirect measures of community members’ aspirations for young people indicate improvement over time.
	Young people have high aspirations for their education and employment	STRONGLY SUPPORTED	EBP activities are supporting participants to plan for future study and work. Year 12 completion rates have trended upwards to 100% in 2021 and fewer young people are not in any of education, employment or training following school compared with 2016 (a decrease 19% or equivalent to of 2% of all 15-24 year olds).
	The Benalla community is better equipped to respond to the effects of disadvantage on children, young people and their families	MODERATELY SUPPORTED	The EBP is strengthening the education sector as well as supporting many families. However increasing pressures on the education and service sectors, as well as families, are confounding the impact that the Program is able to deliver. Nevertheless, the community remains much stronger for having the EBP, than it would otherwise be.
CONTRIBUTORS	Families of young children (0-5 years) are more confident to provide a supportive	STRONGLY SUPPORTED	EBP is reaching four in five families of young children and influencing the home learning environment.

learning environment at home		
All young children receive school readiness support	MODERATELY SUPPORTED	EBP activities support school readiness, but some children are missing out.
Children receive the literacy and numeracy support they need	MODERATELY SUPPORTED	EBP activities are boosting children’s literacy and numeracy up to the first year of school, but there remain children missing out.
Young people are connect to, and supported by, their community	MODERATELY SUPPORTED	Most young people feel supported by the community at least a little, with decreasing sense of support from Years 7 to 9. EBP activities are contributing at least a little to social connection for a majority of participants, and more significantly for some.
Young people have increased work and education experiences	STRONGLY SUPPORTED	The range of activities for young people delivered and contributed to by the EBP are reaching almost half of all young people in Benalla. These activities are increasing their work and education experiences.
Young people feel positive about the future	MODERATELY SUPPORTED	Most young people that are reached by the Program feel at least a little more positive about the future, with Work Experience and University Bus Trips having the greatest impact.
Community organisations, schools, childcare and services are better resourced, informed, networked and aligned	STRONGLY SUPPORTED	The strong trust and respect of Education Benalla Program staff, and the Program’s resourcefulness and relationships, are influencing schools, preschools and early childhood centres enormously, and creating a better informed and networked service sector.

LUDOWYK EVALUATION

3 ADDRESSING THE KEY EVALUATION QUESTIONS

3.1 HOW EFFECTIVE IS THE EBP?

The Education Benalla Program has been shown to be a highly effective initiative working for the benefit of the community in Benalla.

HOW DOES THE EBP (INCLUDING ITS KEY ELEMENTS) PRODUCE CHANGE IN BENALLA?

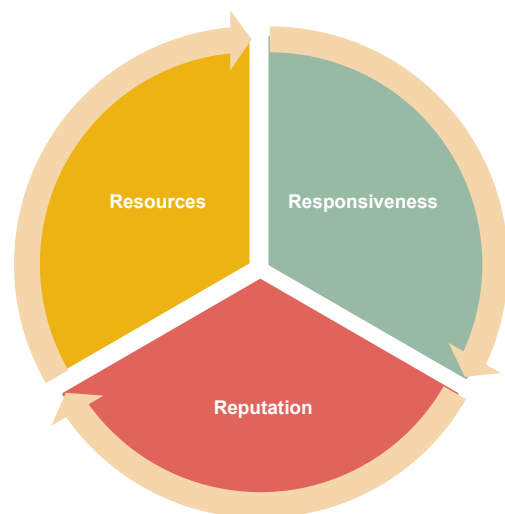
The Education Benalla Program theory of change describes how the initiative works in collaboration with the Benalla community as well as directly through its own staff, to deliver a range of initiatives for the community. Through continuous engagement with data and research (including this evaluation) the EBP adapts its offerings to respond to community need and young people's priorities. The program theory of change was strongly validated through key findings. However, it is noted that key to the EBP's effectiveness is not only its collaborative ways of working to create collective impact, but also its ability to apply interventions, knowledge, human resourcing and financial support directly for the Benalla community. These tenets of the initiative taken together have proven to be highly impactful.

Key factors driving the success of the Program include its strong brand and reputation (associated with its consistency, local knowledge, the high calibre of staff and their lasting relationships across the education sector in particular), the resources it is able to deploy for the benefit of the community, and its highly entrepreneurial approach which allows it to be extremely responsive and agile (where other community services are not), to ensure that no one is ever turned away.

These success factors: resourcing, responsiveness and reputation, are mutually reinforcing of each other to drive the Education Benalla Program's success.

HOW IS NEED UNDERSTOOD?

Extensive research has informed the design of EBP interventions. The Program's understanding of need is particularly informed by the original research undertaken at the Program's inception in 2009 and 2010. This included determinations about the value of early years support focussing on the preschool years and first year of Primary School (Prep), and that disengagement for young people commenced around Year 9. Findings from this evaluation provide an improved and current picture of wellbeing and engagement need for young people in Benalla, indicating challenges are arising from Year 7



Similarly, while early years support is strongly validated as the most impactful time to influence children's learning and development, schools reported migration flows in and out of Benalla which mean that many children and their families did not have the opportunity to engage in EBP early years programs. Feedback from Primary School teachers suggests high demand for additional immersive learning support.

IS CHANGE OCCURRING WHERE IT IS INTENDED/NEEDED?

The EBP appears to be successfully driving change where it is intended for the children, families, and young people in Benalla who engage with their activities.

WHAT IS THE REACH OF THE PROGRAM (WHO IS AND ISN'T BEING REACHED, HOW HAS REACH CHANGED OVER TIME)?

The extent of change produced by the EBP is in large part limited by the reach of the Program. The universal Early Years program Parents Early Education Partnership (PEEP) is reaching 78% of families. Those who are not attending include families with little to no need for parenting or developmental support for their children, as well as some highly disadvantaged families. Tomorrow Today has attempted to deliver PEEP in other locations to reach more disadvantaged families but found they had little engagement. Other strategies are recommended at 9.5.2 below to increase the reach with families struggling with more acute challenges.

Reach with young people has shifted as program offerings continue to evolve. Findings suggest there may be value in commencing wellbeing and engagement offerings for young people prior to Year 9.

There remains a lot of potential to work with more children and young people, particularly disadvantaged families and children in the Early Years and Middle Years of school. The Program's ability to leverage this potential will be necessarily limited by its resources.

3.2 WHAT ARE THE KEY ACHIEVEMENTS OF THE EBP TO DATE?

The EBP has been remarkably successful in its mission. Notable achievements identified through this evaluation include:

- The extent to which Tomorrow Today and Program activities are embedded in, and beloved by, the Benalla community
- The high calibre of their staff and program offerings
- Their reach with Benalla's families of young children
- Their impact on the school readiness of young children in Benalla
- The many young people whose lives are improving through their work

3.3 WHAT HAS BEEN THE LONG TERM IMPACT OF THE EBP?

The Education Benalla Program seeks to achieve two inter-connected impacts:

- 1) Increase the education attainment of young people in Benalla

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- 2) Strengthen the community's capacity and capability to respond to the effects of disadvantage on young people's education

Since 2012, Benalla has seen a decrease of 9.9% in the number of children who are considered developmentally vulnerable at school commencement.

While there have been fluctuations in Year 12 completion rates, the community achieved 100% completion rates in both 2021 and 2022 (of students who commenced Year 12). Post school pathways of young people indicate that while there have been no changes in the proportion of young people who go on to further study or training, there has been an increase in the proportion of young people who go on to employment and a decrease of 19% in the number of disengaged people aged 15 -24 years (or 2% of young people overall). Taken together, these findings suggest that young people who may not be inclined towards further study are more successful at engaging in employment than previously.

In addition to broader population shifts in both school readiness and young people's post school pathways, the evaluation identified that the EBP can have a much deeper impact for some of those it works with, with the support provided to some individuals consistently over years ultimately breaking cycles of dysfunction and disengagement, and transforming lives.

The Benalla community is multi-faceted and the Program does not work with all social agencies or attempt to respond to all facets of disadvantage. However organisations (particularly preschools and schools) and families that engage with the EBP are shown to be better resourced, networked and effective as a result of the Program's collaborative work.

TO WHAT EXTENT CAN IMPACTS BE ATTRIBUTED TO THE EBP?

The reach and near universally reported positive influence of the EBP's Early Years programs, the absence of any other unique early years offerings in Benalla, and the observation of an opposite trend (of increasing vulnerability) in the benchmark community of Swan Hill, provide a high level of confidence that a majority of the improvements in the school readiness of Benalla's children can be attributed to the EBP.

The extent of EBP initiatives that work with young people to make future plans, support their work experience opportunities and plan for future work or study were shown to be some of the most impactful activities for young people, when planning for future work or study. The reach of programs for young people (very conservatively estimated at 48%), combined with a pattern of outcomes of moderate impact for a majority of participants and a deep impact for a large minority of those engaged with EBP activities, indicate that the Program is influencing a substantial proportion of Benalla's young people. When we limit to only the young people who report their future plans for work and/or study who have been helped 'a lot' by EBP activities, we have 68 Year 10-12 students, or 25% of young people. These findings provide a moderate level of confidence that the Program is contributing to the changes observed for young people.

WHAT IS NEEDED FOR IMPACT TO BE SUSTAINED?

Tomorrow Today has developed a robust and well governed operating model for its backbone, which is highly effective. The only limitation to its sustainability is the ongoing burden of seeking funding, and the investment of highly qualified staff time (notably that of the EBP Program Manager and Executive Officer) that is associated with this.

3.4 WHAT IS THE VALUE OF THE EBP TO THE BENALLA COMMUNITY AND TO GOVERNMENT?

The EBP is 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.

Through improving young people's outcomes, the EBP produces a broader return on investment to funders, of:

- A 16:1 return on every dollar invested in Early Years activities, and
- A 6.5:1 return on every dollar invested in Future Work activities for young people.

3.5 WHAT HAS BEEN LEARNT?

WHAT HAS BEEN THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON YOUNG PEOPLE'S EDUCATION OUTCOMES IN BENALLA?

While the impact of COVID on young people's learning and engagement in education is difficult to discern, NAPLAN results show a decrease in results from 2019 for Years 5, 7 and 9 for numeracy, while Years 3, 5 and 7 showed slight improvement in literacy before decreasing significantly in 2022. National COVID results in the same period were equally mixed, with the impact of COVID on learning hard to determine.

Post school pathways for young people showed a dip in the proportion of young people going on to further study in 2021, however these result bounced back in 2022, suggesting that the deterrent influence on commencing a tertiary degree may have been short lived or manifested as a 'gap year' for school leavers in 2021.

WHAT OPPORTUNITIES EXIST FOR EBP TO INCREASE ITS IMPACT?

While there are numerous opportunities for the Education Benalla Program to increase its impact, the evaluation did not identify inefficiencies or redundant activities., It is recognised that increasing impact is likely to require increased funding to the Program.

Opportunities to extend the work of the Program include:

1. Extend the reach of PEEP into Benalla's most disadvantaged families through PEEP champions, and working innovatively with parents with lived experience to build trust and engagement with more marginalised parents.

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2. Promote the messaging the PEEP is for everyone to the community and reinforcing this with referrers.
3. Consider programming for young people in upper primary or early secondary supporting engagement in education and community, and wellbeing.
4. Promote Connect9 and Full Impact directly to young people at Benalla P12, and encouraging staff and students to nominate young people for these initiatives, to circumnavigate a reliance on proactive parents to connect disengaged young people to these offerings.
5. Share the findings of this evaluation with the Benalla community, funders and government, as well as with other communities that are seeking to address disadvantage for their young people. This might include presenting on the success of the model at conferences and amongst philanthropic networks, both in Australia and internationally.