



Learning support programs

Education reform beyond the school

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Brotherhood
of St Laurence

Working for an Australia free of poverty

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Summary

This report presents the case for learning support programs (LSPs) and suggests that, in light of Commonwealth and state commitments to social inclusion, a serious policy and funding commitment to such programs is required as a key element of the implementation of the COAG National Plans for education reform.

Out-of-school-hours learning support programs (LSPs) provide valuable catch-up learning and assistance with homework. They have been found to increase student interest in learning and build self-esteem and study routines while reducing risk behaviours. LSPs can ease student transitions from primary to secondary school and into tertiary study or the workplace. They also have a social and relational aspect, both in terms of friendships and in increased access to role models and mentors who are available to discuss issues related to careers and life in general.

Students from low-income families are already disadvantaged in terms of their education. They are less likely to enjoy school and to complete Year 12, and more likely to be low academic achievers and to become unemployed. Low parental education has implications for the importance placed on homework and the capacity to assist or to pay for home computers and private tutors, while lower parental workforce participation limits the careers information and networks available to children. Low-SES students are also less likely to participate in academic or other activities like sport or creative arts, due to costs or lack of transport.

For these reasons, out-of-school-hours LSPs are even more important for disadvantaged students. This has been understood by policy makers in the United States, United Kingdom and New Zealand, who have developed firm policy and made a significant financial investment in programs.

However, while in Australia policy recognises the potential of LSPs to assist in learning for disadvantaged students, there is no consistent, long-term or coordinated approach to their provision. State funding has tended to be one-off grants, targeted to specific groups (e.g. Indigenous communities or refugees). In New South Wales it should be noted that equity funds for disadvantaged schools have been provided under the Priority Action Schools Scheme and these can be used for homework support as one option for schools.

While federal policy around the COAG productivity agenda and social inclusion has scope to resource LSPs as one component of a more flexible and inclusive education system, federal education spending to date has largely been directed at school reforms such as testing, professional standards, and school-based trade education. The irony, given the national social inclusion agenda, is that current policy treats educational reform as synonymous with school reform. This approach is unlikely to help the 10–15 per cent of young people poorly engaged in education.

In the Brotherhood's view, the goal of a 90 per cent student completion rate (Year 12 or equivalent) will only be achieved by addressing the tail of educational disadvantage. This requires a holistic and integrated approach that more effectively addresses the familial and environmental barriers which hinder full participation in learning.

LSPs represent one option for more flexible and alternate approaches to learning. They are a demonstrated and internationally recognised means of engaging disadvantaged at-risk students beyond the school gate to improve their commitment to education, enable catch-up learning and strengthen attainment. Learning support in Australia is far from a green-fields situation because programs are already being offered in disadvantaged areas by community organisations, who are eager to work more closely with schools.

This presents a strong case for governments to fund learning support programs for all disadvantaged students. Accordingly, the following recommendations are made:

Recommendations

Australian Government

- 1) That the Australian Government partner with state governments to jointly fund community-based learning support programs in disadvantaged areas.
- 2) That funding may be drawn from the Low Socio-economic Schools National Partnership Plan.
- 3) That the government establish a body for national coordination of LSPs in conjunction with the relevant state authorities and establish a clearing house for the dissemination of research and best practice information.

State and territory governments

- 4) That state governments implement the roll-out of learning support programs in disadvantaged communities.
- 5) That the state-funded component of programs be drawn from funding streams dedicated to increasing social equity in schooling, literacy and numeracy, and increasing Year 12 retention.
- 6) That state governments establish minimum standards for LSPs to ensure good practice and minimise risk.
- 7) That state education departments work through regional offices to foster collaboration between local schools and community organisations offering learning support programs.
- 8) That state and local governments seek to utilise local libraries as potential partners in the provision of community-based learning support programs.
- 9) That education departments establish state-wide networks (as has occurred in Victoria) for sector coordination and support, and reporting of best practice information to the proposed federal coordinating body.

Community organisations

- 10) That community organisations that deliver learning support collaborate to raise awareness of its benefits, contribute to research and share best practice information.

I What are learning support programs?

Definition and aims

Learning support programs (LSP) provide tutoring or homework assistance in an environment conducive to study. LSPs are overseen by paid staff or unpaid volunteers including teachers, qualified tutors and unqualified others. LSPs include some or all of the following aims:

- offer learning tailored to the needs of the individual student
- provide subject-specific learning, e.g. catch-up learning, improving understanding of key topics
- assist students with exam preparation
- model and develop effective study skills
- provide an appropriate physical environment and equipment, e.g. quiet area with desks, computers, internet access
- build self-esteem, enjoyment of learning and pride in academic achievement
- involve parents in their child's learning
- support the school/teachers, especially in academically diverse classrooms
- offer sports, art and other enrichment activities.

LSPs are intervention programs that aim to provide young people with the opportunity to develop the academic and social skills needed to ensure a positive school experience. Encouraging students to continue through the compulsory years and beyond to year 12 is a common goal, as this increases the chance of a successful transition into tertiary study or work (Horn & Fewster 2007; Horn & Parkinson 2004).

Access to learning support is arguably of greater importance in disadvantaged communities where students face significant barriers to their academic, social and personal development. These include interrupted schooling, for example as a result of the refugee experience, speaking English as a second language or having parents who cannot assist with homework due to their own education or language barriers. For others, interrupted schooling can be a consequence of unstable housing. Added to these barriers, income poverty prevents disadvantaged families from paying for private tutoring.

Models

Learning support programs operate under many different models. The key determinants of LSP models are:

- management (by schools, libraries, community organisations)
- location (in schools, libraries, private homes or churches)
- program content (homework assistance, subject tutoring, targeted skill-based assistance such as with essay writing, organisation and study skills, broader enrichment activities including educational games, sports)
- size (one child, small group, class size or large group)
- assistance ratios (one-to-one support with tutor–student matching, one tutor assigned to a small group, or large sessions with multiple tutors)
- student level (primary, transitional [i.e. years 5–9], secondary, tertiary)
- student background (recent arrivals, refugees, non-English speaking background, financially disadvantaged, rural/remote, underachieving students)
- time (before school, after school, holiday program)

- cost (nil, nominal or business rates)
- staffing (paid coordinator, teacher, library staff, pre-service teachers, volunteers)
- funding (one-off state or local government grants, philanthropic grants, corporate sponsorship, school or community organisation budgets, donations).

Information about these models is drawn from a study by Brisbane City Council (2005) and an interview with the Victorian Homework Help Network facilitator for the Learning Beyond the Bell Program (L Henstock [Centre for Multicultural Youth] 2008, personal communication, 19 August).

Costs

Budget plays a key role in determining program models and as this section shows, models vary considerably. For example a program run one afternoon per week by a volunteer that provides basic homework help has a modest cost compared with a program that operates more frequently, incurs rent, has paid staff and seeks to fulfil a broader role. For example, staff of the BSL Homework Centre (see Appendix) provide broader support to students from the housing estates and actively seek to link African families with schools and other services.

Hanover Welfare Services 2004 evaluation, Melbourne Citymission's 2008 evaluation and the BSL's internal review of its Homework Centre in 2008 provide some indicative costs. Together, these studies suggest LSPs cost \$1000–1500 per participant per year (Horn & Parkinson 2004; Pate 2008).

School-based versus community-centred programs

The distinction between school and non school-based programs requires further elaboration. While there are benefits of both models, non-school based programs offer some significant strengths for disadvantaged communities.

Many United States after-school programs are school-based, and are in this way similar to the United Kingdom's 'extended schools' approach. In Australia too, many schools house their own homework clubs. Some broad advantages of school-based programs, identified across the literature, include their ability to:

- capitalise on the infrastructure of schools, e.g. libraries
- be coordinated by qualified teachers
- utilise an easier referral processes
- receive funding from the school budget
- be covered by schools' public liability insurance
- offer a convenient location for children with no need to arrange transport to another venue.

School-based homework clubs can promote academic and broader school engagement (Mouton et al. 1996). Studies have linked academic achievement, support from teachers and peers, and belonging with overall school attachment:

Whether examining academic performance or involvement with a range of health behaviors, young people who feel connected to school, that they belong, and that teachers are supportive and treat them fairly, do better (Libbey 2004, p.282).

However, this means that the reverse is also true: young people who do not feel connected and do not experience teacher support, fare less well. Low school attachment can result from rejection or a strained relationship with teachers (Sampson & Laub 1997), or from bullying, low achievement and poor self-esteem. Students with low school attachment have been found to be less likely to participate in sports, cultural or youth groups (McGee et al. 2006).



Student and tutor at the BSL Homework Centre

Thus a major and obvious drawback is that school-based programs are less likely to attract students who dislike being at school. This issue is compounded by the link between school engagement and socioeconomic status (Fullarton 2002) with research indicating students from lower socioeconomic groups are more likely to ‘hate’ school (Williams 2007). A further challenge for learning support programs, regardless of their location, is that young people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are less likely to belong to organised groups and their parents place less emphasis on participation in sport or recreational, intellectual and cultural groups (McGee et al. 2006).

A further, logistical, disadvantage of school-based programs is that they do not suit students who live further away, for example in public housing. A case study analysis conducted by the Refugee Education Partnership Project observed that one program finished too late in the evening for some students to attend, particularly in winter (REPP 2007b). While public transport is more readily available immediately after school, it dwindles in the evening; and parents are reluctant to allow children to walk home after dark.

By contrast, community LSPs represent a place-based approach to the learning needs of disadvantaged students. Aside from the practical advantage of proximity to home, they allow young people to engage in local learning irrespective of the school they attend.

In the case of the BSL Homework Centre located in a library near public housing, this provides a fresh venue for learning which is more appealing to students who have already spent much of the day in a classroom. The library also gives disadvantaged students access to a wider range of free resources such as reference books and computers. At a practical level this is important given low-income families’ lower access to home computers, the internet and even basics like textbooks due to cost. Beyond this, libraries are potential sources of lifelong learning and access to cultural activities, so it makes sense to encourage young people to draw on this resource. An evaluation of four Melbourne LSPs similarly found library accommodation and resources a considerable advantage both in sustaining the program and benefitting students, at least one disadvantaged student having never been to a city library before (Pate 2008).

Study of the BSL Homework Centre showed that Community LSPs could be a source of support for students moving from primary to high school. Year 7 students were able to maintain friendships

with students now attending different schools, while building study routines that would help them throughout high school.

Community-based programs also permit a more intense focus on the specific needs of a defined community such as residents of a public housing estate. This is important for students facing one or multiple forms of disadvantage which are more difficult to address in universal school programs where the broad needs of all students must be considered. In disadvantaged communities, programs can address perceived needs such as access to after-school activities, computers and books. In the BSL Homework Centre, high attendance by refugee students from a variety of schools has permitted more intensive focus on the needs of newly arrived students and their families, facilitated by the appointment of a Community Liaison Worker (see case study, Appendix).

2 Benefits of learning support programs

Learning support programs offer a broad range of benefits to students, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds. A 2007 Melbourne Citymission survey of 33 LSPs in disadvantaged suburbs found that three-quarters identified significant benefits for students. The three broad dimensions of benefit were:

- academic outcomes (school retention, improvement in grades and/or engagement in learning)
- social and personal development outcomes (improved confidence, self-esteem, language skills and adjustment to their adopted country)
- family or community gains (improved relationships with parents) (Horn & Fewster 2007).

This section explores Australian and international research of LSPs according to the three dimensions of benefit identified above. It adds a fourth dimension, exploring the role that LSPs play in enhancing youth transitions.

Academic outcomes

Research indicates that participation in LSPs improves academic performance at school. In Scotland, the three-year longitudinal Study Support National Evaluation conducted by the University of Strathclyde examined the impact of out-of-school-hours learning on the academic achievement, attitudes and attendance of 8000 secondary students from 52 schools. The researchers found that participants performed better than expected on baseline measures of academic attainment, attitudes to school and school attendance. Students belonging to ethnic minorities particularly benefited from learning support, while voluntary attendance was found to be integral to effectiveness (DfES 2001).

There is evidence that the academic benefits are greater for disadvantaged students, particularly with regular and sustained attendance (Posner & Vandell 1994, 1999; Welsh et al. 2002). Mahoney et al. have suggested the reasons:

This seems to be a result of both the paucity of after-school enrichment and structured learning opportunities available in impoverished environments and the problematic outcomes associated with unsupervised arrangements for children in high-risk areas (Mahoney, Lord & Carryl 2005, p.820).

A longitudinal evaluation of 'The After-School Corporation' (TASC) based in New York compared 51,000 TASC participants with 91,000 students enrolled in schools where TASC operated. The program intentionally recruited large numbers of students at risk of failing school due to poverty, low achievement and other factors. Program participants had a higher rate of school attendance and achieved greater gains in maths than non-participants. High school students were found to pass more standardised, final year 'Regents' exams and earn more high school credits (Reisner et al. 2004; Russell et al. 2007).

Similarly, a decade-long evaluation of a Los Angeles–based after-hours program that provides homework assistance, library and other activities programs for disadvantaged students found that participants had higher rates of school attendance. They achieved higher results on standardised tests in maths, reading and language arts, even when the influence of gender, ethnicity, income and language status was controlled (Huang et al. 2000).

An evaluation of a Melbourne tutoring program run by Hanover for children in families with insecure housing found an improvement in students' attendance and performance at school. Assessment by their teachers found that half of the students had made some positive educational gains which could be attributed to their participation in the program. Tutoring enabled students to catch up with their peers in key areas such as literacy and numeracy and provided practical skills, for example using computers and libraries (Horn & Parkinson 2004). For refugee students, 'catch-up' learning is vital given their schooling has often been interrupted due to time in refugee camps. Cultural differences also mean that students may require more explanation about concepts that are unfamiliar.

Social and personal development outcomes

A recent evaluation of community learning support programs found that while academic improvement occurred with sustained attendance, more immediate improvement included increased student interest in learning, confidence, homework completion and learning skills (Pate 2008). Similarly, a study conducted by the Refugee Education Partnerships Project (REPP) of 51 learning support programs found that LSPs helped students to become more independent learners and develop study and organisational skills, and reinforced their commitment to learning (REPP 2005 unpublished). Both the REPP research and Hanover evaluation (Horn & Parkinson 2004) found that participation improved students' self-esteem and confidence in learning. Another review of 27 program evaluations linked participation to a broader set of important life skills such as effective communication, conflict resolution, problem solving, decision making and planning for the future. It also suggested that participation is associated with a sense of wellbeing, greater community involvement and a desire to help others (Harvard Family Research Project 2003).

LSPs are also considered to improve student social skills, particularly where students may have experienced social isolation such as that caused by the refugee experience or insecure housing; and they provide access to good role models and mentors (Horn & Parkinson 2004). The REPP project highlighted the cross-cultural significance of these relationships, noting that they may be the students' strongest relationships with people whose first language is English or who were born in Australia.

A US evaluation of its Extended-Service Schools Initiative (which commenced in 1997 and assisted the development of 60 after-school programs offering academic enrichment, sports and recreation activities) found that it improved participants' attitude to school and made them less likely to engage in risk-taking behaviours. They were less likely to report they had started drinking alcohol and more likely to deal with anger in socially appropriate ways (Grossman et al. 2002). Other US research suggests that after-school programs reduce crime, car accidents, sex, smoking and drug use (NIOST 2005; Newman et al. 2000).

That US programs have traditionally incorporated more than just academic support is significant. While research links participation in extra-curricular activities with school retention and (for tertiary students) a successful transition into work, it highlights equity issues since students from disadvantaged families are less likely to participate (Tchiboza 2005; Thompson 2005). While such families have been found to place less importance on such activities, lack of resources (money and equipment) has been identified as a cause (Bond & Horn 2008; McGee et al. 2006). Linking learning support to broader activities, sport and excursions has also been identified as a program

strength, because these attract students and fulfil unmet social needs, build confidence and help establish routines of study with components of leisure (REPP 2007b; Saledin 1991).

Family or community gains

A key finding from the REPP project was the role of LSPs in supporting refugee parents who were concerned about their children's education but often lacked the English language, numeracy or other skills to assist them. Often the home environment was too noisy or crowded or lacked necessary equipment like computers. LSPs provided this support in an environment where parents knew their children were safe (REPP 2005 unpublished; REPP 2007b).

LSPs also have broader community benefits as a result of volunteer engagement. Volunteers build cross-cultural relationships and this promotes social cohesion. The REPP project identified as benefits the development of links to community elders and the growth of trust and understanding across cultures (REPP 2007b).

Transitions

There is increasing evidence that failure to make a successful transition through critical periods of schooling and into post-compulsory further study and work has lifelong personal, social and economic impacts.

Primary to secondary school

The transition from primary to secondary school has been identified as a critical period during which disengagement and alienation can occur. Factors contributing to disengagement include difficulties with literacy and numeracy, falling behind on work, having limited access to help, limited opportunities for success and feeling negatively judged by teachers or peers. In making this transition, students require support from significant others, recognition of their individual needs and the opportunity to experience success (Butler et al. 2005). While student willingness to work is an important factor, Colcough (2004) emphasises the inclusion of humour and fun in learning.

School programs and extracurricular activities play an important role in providing additional support during this transition (Ganeson 2006). Children from disadvantaged backgrounds are at risk of not making effective transitions, and community organisations have noted the benefits of homework clubs, literacy, mentoring programs and extracurricular programs (The Smith Family 2007). Such programs provide valuable catch-up learning, promote resilience and self-development, and offer access to enrichment activities such as music or arts programs.

Transition to work or tertiary education

Improving youth transitions from school to work or further study was an agreed outcome at the 2006 meeting of the Council of Australian Governments. The Victorian Treasury's economic modelling suggests increasing the basic level of educational attainment could add 3.2% to the GDP by 2030 and this could be driven by improvements within school and transitions from school (DPC 2007, pp.8, 48).

However, there is evidence that considerable groups of young Australians are failing to make successful transitions. In May 2008, 13.3 per cent of all 15–19 year old Australians were neither in full-time education nor in full-time employment. In Victoria, the corresponding figure was 9.8 per cent (ABS 2008, in Lamb & Mason, table 5, p.11).

Failure to complete year 12 reduces employment prospects (LSAY 2000). Even trades organisations such as the National Electrical Communications Association and the Master Builders Association regard year 12 completion as desirable for apprentices; and recent research indicates that one in three commencing apprentices have completed year 12 (Misko, Nguyen & Saunders 2007).

OECD and Australian research links difficulties in transition to work or further study to low education and poor basic skills (OECD 2000; Fullarton 2002; Lamb & McKenzie 2001). People living outside capital cities, young women, Indigenous young people and those with parents in manual or low-skilled occupations are less likely to be engaged in study or work (McClelland, Macdonald & MacDonald 1998; Pawagi 2002; Spierings 2005).

Learning support programs have been found to assist student transitions into higher education or the workforce by offering workplace skills, opportunities to work in small groups and develop teamwork and leadership skills, and interaction with mentors to learn about different fields of interest. In the US, programs assist student transitions into college: one example is Citizen Schools and Upward Bound, whose focus is students from low-income families and those whose parents do not hold a bachelor-level qualification. An evaluation of Citizen Schools identified an improvement in student grades and oral communication skills after one year of attendance (NGA Center 2005).

An additional role of such programs, particularly those with a mentoring component, is building the cultural capital of students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. While family is considered a key determinant of cultural capital and decisions about tertiary education, such capital can also be built externally (Coleman 1990). Examples include programs that foster academic achievement, self-development and confidence and that provide role models (McLean & Holden 2004).

At a tertiary level, students coming from high school often lack skills in academic reading and writing, higher order thinking and problem solving, teamwork and managing their own learning. Universities emphasise the role of learning support in aiding student transitions (Muldoon & Pendreigh 2003; Trafford 2003; Yeo, Loss & Zadnik 2003). Evaluations indicate these programs aid student retention and participation, help address tertiary literacy deficits and improve academic achievement (Beasley & Pearson 1999; Dancer, Morrison & Smith 2007; Muldoon & Pendreigh 2003). The value of such programs for students from disadvantaged areas has also been noted, a University of Tasmania study indicating that they ease the transition into first-year university and are associated with later academic success (Abbott-Chapman 2006).

3 Challenges for learning support programs

Learning support in Victoria

While the exact number of out-of-school-hours learning support programs in Victoria is not known, records of CMY's Learning Beyond the Bell Program (LBB) indicate growth in recent years. As of May 2009, the LBB's database records the existence of 138 active out-of-school-hours LSPs, with 10 operating at more than one site. Of the 138 programs, 32 are coordinated by schools and 64 by community organisations, 11 are school/community partnerships and 8 are community/local government partnerships. The remainder are corporate/online programs or combinations of the above (R Tribe [Centre for Multicultural Youth] 2009, personal communication, 4 May).

Several recent studies provide valuable insights into learning support in this state. Melbourne Citymission conducted an audit of community-managed LSPs in 2006 ('MCM audit', Horn & Fewster 2007); and in the following year, Melbourne Citymission evaluated four of the programs, ('MCM evaluation', Pate 2007). The Refugee Education Partnership Project researched learning support programs for refugee students. In 2005 it surveyed 51 programs and later visited 30 programs, interviewing their coordinators, and developed five case studies (REPP research, 2007a and b). Another study was of the Hanover Welfare Services Tutoring Program, a three-year pilot supporting 20 children in families living in marginal housing or at risk of homelessness, for which a process evaluation was completed in 2004. This evaluation included the collection of pre- and post program data, satisfaction measures, evaluation of the program format and a stakeholder consultation ('Hanover evaluation', Horn & Parkinson 2004).

The 2006 Melbourne Citymission (MCM) audit of community-managed LSPs sought to document all operating LSPs in Melbourne's north and western suburbs. It recorded 33 programs which collectively had 43 staff, 1273 volunteers and assisted 1300 students. Findings indicate these LSPs' common features, including:

- Half of the programs catered for CALD or refugee students.
- Each program had 0–3 paid staff and an average of 10 volunteers.
- Sessions were held in a wide range of venues: neighbourhood houses (25%), primary schools (22%), libraries (19%) and community agencies (19%).
- Three-quarters of the programs ran one session per week, with around half having a flexible format of homework and/or study support, 37 per cent offering homework support only and the remainder offering group activities.
- While a 1:1 tutor–student ratio was the ideal, this depended on the number of tutors attending each week; so typically a mixed approach of individual tutoring and group activities was adopted (Horn & Fewster 2007, pp.6–7).

Six challenges facing Victorian LSPs

A review of the studies outlined above, together with the experience of the Brotherhood of St Laurence's Homework Centre (see Appendix) suggests that Victorian LSPs are facing six key challenges:

1) Resources and sustainability

The MCM audit found that less than one-third (30%) of the 33 programs received specific government funding, while most relied on funding from community organisations, philanthropic trusts and donations (Horn & Fewster 2007). The REPP research similarly identified lack of resources which meant that programs were continually applying for funding and lacked the resources to meet student needs such as operating more evenings per week, providing study snacks or occasional excursions (REPP 2007a).

The impact of poor resourcing is reflected in many of the other challenges identified. For instance, a lack of space or shortage of tutors has reportedly prevented many community LSPs from accepting more students (Horn & Fewster 2007).

The Hanover evaluation stated that such programs were not sustainable without the infrastructure and in-kind support of an established host organisation and a funded coordinator to manage volunteer support and training, participant recruitment and communication with parents and teachers (Horn & Parkinson 2004).

While the MCM audit found that while 79 per cent of the LSP representatives surveyed considered their LSP sustainable, this was often based on their own sense of commitment and tenacity in applying for grants rather than long-term planning or funding (Horn & Fewster 2007). Half the LSPs were relatively new, having commenced in the last 1–2 years, and around 80 per cent had operated less than six years. While the newness of programs may be merely an indication that this is a growth area, the relative absence of programs with a longer history and their low level of resourcing has implications for their long-term future. The MCM evaluation found that:

The LSP sector has emerged and grown significantly in recent years, but needs more support from government. Although much has been done without infrastructure support, this limits what can be achieved and is not sustainable. (Pate 2008, p.93)

Moreover none of the LSPs had recurrent funding, and reliance on internal and external philanthropic funding would not secure long-term viability. The author noted that while some state funding has been directed to programs for refugee students, support is required for other disadvantaged students.

2) Volunteers

LSPs employ relatively few staff and their dependence on ‘well-intentioned but untrained’ volunteers has been identified as an issue along with quality assurance (REPP 2007). The MCM audit found that 38 per cent of volunteers were university students and 15 per cent high school students. One-quarter of all volunteers in the same study held a teaching qualification (Horn & Fewster 2007 p.23); but their subject specialty might not match the needs of students. The recruitment of tutors qualified in maths and science was also problematic. This resulted in some programs being restricted to homework support and unable to provide more intensive assistance with numeracy and literacy skills.

While the MCM audit noted that ‘many programs would not survive without volunteers’, both the audit and the REPP research identified recruitment and retention of volunteers as an issue. Volunteers often cannot make a regular, long-term commitment and this impacts on the continuity of programs (Horn & Fewster 2007 p.23).

3) School contact and referral

The MCM audit found that the majority of programs were in contact with schools and three-quarters received referral from schools, but the nature and level of this contact varied (Horn & Fewster 2007). The REPP research observed communication between schools and LSPs and referral of students was sometimes ad hoc. It highlighted lack of formal referral procedures and the fragmentation of LSP provision (multiple providers and programs) as key issues (REPP 2007a). The MCM evaluation found that while school satisfaction with programs was high, lack of communication could limit student outcomes. For example, a program’s effectiveness was limited where information such as age specific standards, activities, social issues and ‘Individual Learning Plans’ was lacking (Pate 2008).

4) Parent engagement

The Hanover evaluation identified the need to better engage parents in their child’s education. Potential strategies included offering adult learning programs in reading to help them assist their children and increasing parental interaction at school through social activities such as BBQs. Programs could also assist low income parents by providing their children with pens, books and second-hand computers (Horn & Parkinson 2004).

5) Regional coordination

The REPP research highlighted lack of coordination of LSPs across regions as a major challenge:

Little or no planning and coordination across a school region, and varying levels of resourcing across programs, produces inconsistent levels of outcomes. A coordinated approach is needed to link local schools, communities and relevant service providers and to ensure programs provide quality services to students (REPP 2007a, p.29).

6) Student engagement

Engaging students was identified as a further challenge, owing to the perception that homework clubs were not ‘cool’ and the need to cater to the shorter attention spans of younger students (Horn & Fewster 2007). The Hanover evaluation suggested that complementary organised social activities would make such programs more fun and reward learning (Horn & Parkinson 2004).

4 International policy on learning support

The value of learning support is acknowledged through international policy and government-funded programs for at-risk and disadvantaged young people. While program goals, emphasis and model of implementation vary, these applied examples provide useful context for reflection on the place of LSPs in Australia.

United States

The US has a long history of diverse after-hours programs whose varied aims include promoting academic improvement, providing sport and recreational activities developing social skills, reducing risk behaviours and youth participation in crime, and providing a safe play environment. However such programs have had their limitations:

Out-of-school-time (OST) programs have existed in America since at least the 1880s, and although the discussion around providing improved or more accessible programs oftentimes seems new and urgent, such concerns have been part of a decades-long debate that has ebbed and flowed with little resolution (Bodilly & Beckett 2005, p.1).

In 2001, education reform via the *No Child Left Behind Act* sought to measure and address gaps in student achievement, by mandating a system of annual student assessment and measures for schools classified as ‘failing’. One outcome was the shift of the 21st Century Community Learning Centres program from federal to state administration, with states able to apply for some of the program’s one billion dollar funding to address the after-school needs of children (Grossman et al. 2002). As a result, in California, state funding for after-school care has increased tenfold since 1997; in 2006–2007 it was over \$500 million. US cities, districts and philanthropic organisations are also substantial drivers of such programs (Bodilly & Beckett 2005).

United Kingdom

In Scotland, the Prince’s Trust launched after-hours study centres for underachieving pupils in the 1990s. This raised the profile of study support, and led to a National Code of Practice, the development of resources and pilot professional development programs for teachers, and a three year evaluation project. These initiatives resulted in the government investing £300,000 during 1997–98 to support study centres nation wide using the national lottery’s New Opportunities Fund (DfES 2001; MacBeath 1999). In 2003 the UK government introduced ‘Every Child Matters’, a holistic approach to child wellbeing that seeks greater integration and collaboration from service organisations (DCSF 2005). The aim of its Extended Schools Program is for schools to act as services hubs, providing broader education, social support and care services in collaboration with other organisations (Department for Education and Skills (DfES 2006a). By 2010, schools are to provide all children under 14 with ‘dawn till dusk’ or ‘wrap around’ childcare. The program’s study support component includes a broad range of activities, provided either by the school or a third party, such as breakfast and homework clubs, ‘catch-up’ programs, sports, arts and special interest programs. The education department highlights the potential benefits for disadvantaged students:

Vulnerable and disadvantaged children and young people can benefit particularly from access to study support activities, as they often have the least opportunities for such enrichment out of school, for financial and other reasons. They might include young carers, looked-after children and young people, disabled children and young people, and those with special needs, pupils from particular community groups, such as traveller communities, and those whose parents are unwaged. Access to breakfast clubs, activities and visits which take account of their individual circumstances can make a significant impact on these pupils’ lives. It is important that children and young people in workless households should have some free access to study support, which might not otherwise be available to them, so that they can pursue their wider interests and get the support that they need to raise their attainment and achieve their potential (DfES 2006b, p.21).

While all schools are expected to provide some educational assistance outside of school hours, the government has made a considerable investment in ‘study support’: £160 million by 2005 with £680 million budgeted up to 2008 (DfES 2005, p.51).

New Zealand

In 2000, it was estimated that 55 per cent of secondary and 5 per cent of New Zealand primary schools already had homework centres (Gerritsen 2000) when the New Zealand Ministry of Education allocated more than \$47 million over four years for education support for at-risk children. This included alternative education, the innovations funding pool and teen parent support programs, as well as \$7.5 million in grants for Study Support Centres. The centres target primary and intermediate school students in low-income areas. Schools and community organisations must meet minimum standards including supervision by a registered teacher. Study support can also be obtained via free 0800 numbers and the internet (Ministry of Education 2008).

5 Australian policy and learning support

While learning support has a clear place in the education policies of the United States, United Kingdom and New Zealand, this is not the case in Australia which lacks a consistent, long-term or coordinated approach. As Pate notes:

State and federal governments across Australia have acknowledged the high social and economic costs of disengagement from education and have committed to increasing retention rates. However, there has been scant recognition (in policy or funding terms) of LSPs as a complementary social and learning support strategy (Pate 2008, p.6).

Recent federal programs have focused on Indigenous communities and broader remedial programs for failing students rather than preventative tuition.

- As part of the Whole of School Intervention Strategy (WoSI) within the Indigenous Education Programs funded under the Indigenous Education (Targeted Assistance) Act 2000, \$38.7 million was to be provided over four years (2005–09) for Homework Centres serving Indigenous students (DEST 2004). Guidelines state that funding is non-recurrent and should supplement, rather than replace, funding from other agencies (DEEWR 2005a). Funding for WoSI was continued in the 2008–09 budget (DEEWR 2008d)
- The Indigenous Tutorial Assistance Scheme (ITAS), funded with \$214 million between 2005 and 2008, provides in-class tuition for students failing years 3, 5 and 7 benchmarks, small group tuition for students in years 9–12 and tuition for students who leave a remote community to go to school (DEEWR 2005b). Funding for ITAS was continued in the 2008–09 budget (DEEWR 2008d).
- The National Tuition Program (NTP), piloted in 2005 by the former Howard government, provided remedial tuition for all years 3, 5 and 7 students who failed to meet writing and numeracy benchmarks. Parents could choose from school-provided or private tutoring in individual, small group or online settings; each student received \$700 or approximately 12 hours of tuition (DEEWR 2008a). The Rudd government phased out NTP at the end of 2008, with funding to be redirected to students and schools in most need of help.

While (as of April 2009) there is no dedicated federal program or funding for learning support programs for all disadvantaged students, recent policy directions look promising. Both the social inclusion objectives and the Melbourne Declaration of national educational goals are consistent with LSPs, while the COAG Productivity Agenda for literacy and numeracy and the Smarter Schools low socioeconomic school funding suggest ‘in spirit’ support for LSPs. In addition, recognition of the value of learning support or homework centres may be seen in various government documents. In other words, LSPs fit well as a programmatic response to government policy, though this has not yet resulted in their national implementation.

Social inclusion

‘Children at risk of long-term disadvantage’ were identified as one of the five focus areas of the National Social Inclusion Agenda (Australian Social Inclusion Board 2008, p.2). In addressing educational disadvantage, particularly among Indigenous students whose Year 12 completion rate is 30 per cent lower than that of non-Indigenous students, a stated aim is to raise Year 12 or equivalent rates for all students

to 90 per cent, halving the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students by 2020 and ending the era in which it this country has tolerated children from poorer homes being left to fall behind in education (Gillard 2008, p.3).

The Social Inclusion Principles for Australia include the following approaches:

- ‘giving high priority to early intervention and prevention’ – using universal services like schools to identify those at risk, and specifically children and young people
- ‘developing tailored services’ – having services work together to provide ‘deep, intensive interventions tailored at an individual, family or community level’ to address the multiple causes of social exclusion
- ‘using locational approaches’ – working in disadvantaged areas to help those ‘most in need and understand how different problems are connected’, and focusing on building social inclusion (Australian Government 2008).

These principles parallel the objectives and operation of community-based learning support programs, particularly those which operate as one component of a broader strategic response to the needs of disadvantaged young people.

Education and school reform

Goals of education

The new Melbourne Declaration on the goals of education, affirmed by all Australian education ministers, was released in December 2008. Unlike the earlier Adelaide Declaration, it does not state that ‘schooling should be socially just’ (MCEETYA 1999). However, recognising that ‘by comparison with the world’s highest performing school systems, Australian students from low socioeconomic backgrounds are under-represented among high achievers and overrepresented among low achievers’, the declaration’s first goal is that: ‘Australian schooling promotes equity and excellence’. On this basis, federal and state governments and the school sectors must ‘ensure that socioeconomic disadvantage ceases to be a significant determinant of educational outcomes’; and ‘promote personalised learning that aims to fulfil the diverse capabilities of each young Australian’ (MCEETYA 2008a).

In meeting these goals, a number of actions consistent with community-based learning support programs are proposed, including:

... partnerships with local community groups and other agencies to ensure that students have access to appropriate pastoral, health and welfare, employment and other services support

... facilitating school–community partnership agreements, especially for low socioeconomic status schools and schools with high numbers of Indigenous students

Also stated is the need to improve educational outcomes for Indigenous and other students from low socioeconomic backgrounds by:

encouraging a strong focus on the educational needs and well-being of individual students, including personalised planning for learning, provision of targeted support to address the

learning and development needs of disadvantaged students and the mobilisation of tailored services from outside the school (MCEETYA 2008b).

COAG Productivity Agenda

School reform has been initiated through the Council of Australian Governments' Productivity Agenda. Education is of strategic importance for productivity in the sense that children are viewed as future producers:

Education is the key to the Australian Government's agenda to support increasing participation and productivity and secure Australia's prosperity into the future (SCRGP, pp.293, 4.83).

Major reform areas include literacy and numeracy and greater funding for low socioeconomic status schools.

Literacy and numeracy

The importance of after-school homework centres was noted in the Australian Labor Party's National Action Plan on Literacy and Numeracy, which stated:

Labor will provide dedicated funding to the States and Territories and Catholic and Independent school sectors for additional literacy and numeracy support to schools to implement literacy and numeracy initiatives that begin in the first year of school. This funding will be available for initiatives such as:

...

[item 3] Providing homework centres for children who need extra support (ALP 2007, p.20).

In the 2008–09 Budget, \$577.4 million was allocated over four years to developing a National Action Plan for Literacy and Numeracy. However based on the available information, the \$40 million funding of pilot projects fails to include homework centres (DEEWR 2008b; DEEWR 2008c). This literacy and numeracy funding was noted within the Productivity Agenda at the November 2008 COAG meeting, with a focus on primary and Indigenous students and on Year 12 retention. Some \$150 million would be dedicated to 'reform initiatives' (COAG 2008a).

While this suggests scope for LSP funding, initial attempts to pursue support through this avenue have been problematic. For example, the Victorian Homework Help Network of the Learning Beyond the Bell Program was invited by DEEWR in August 2008 to submit a funding proposal, but as of November, DEEWR discretionary funding had been frozen. Given Labor's specific reference to homework centres in its pre-election National Action Plan on Literacy and Numeracy, it is a shame that tangible support for them is yet to eventuate.

The need is further shown by the Victorian Auditor-General, who described the state report card for the 10 years leading up to 2007 as 'disappointing'. The gap in literacy and numeracy achievement between low and high SES students was equivalent to 15 months learning at Year 9 level. Funding to address social inequity, however, was 'very low' at 3 per cent of total schools' budget. The report includes the following recommendations:

- Address the performance gap between high- and low-SES schools, including setting targets for reducing the influence that school socio-economic disadvantage has on student literacy and numeracy achievement (Recommendation 6.2).
- Identify and address the issues contributing to the declining literacy and numeracy achievement in some non-metropolitan regions, and identify and share across regions the successful approaches underlying the good results achieved by the low-SES metropolitan regions (Recommendation 6.3) (Victorian Auditor-General 2009).

Low socioeconomic status schools

A further avenue for LSP support is through the ‘Smarter Schools’ Low Socio-Economic Status School Communities National Partnership Plan (\$1.5 billion Commonwealth funding over seven years to be matched by state investment). This covers ‘within and out-of school reforms that will support the educational and wellbeing needs of students and schools in low SES communities.’ Approximately 1500 schools will be identified to receive funding of up to \$500,000 (COAG 2008b).

COAG has set out six types of reform with indicative actions to guide states in implementation. While this list is not exhaustive, three reform types coincide with the objectives of learning support:

- ‘provision of innovative and tailored learning opportunities’. Indicative actions include tailored ‘case management’ to meet student needs and ‘alternative pathways to attainment for students who would benefit from them’. This is because:

Low-SES students have particular learning and development needs. Programs such as individual learning plans, additional tutoring assistance and mentoring initiatives could be part of this intervention, as well as an explicit focus on student wellbeing (COAG 2008c, p.12).

- ‘external partnerships with parents, other schools, businesses and communities and provision of access to extended services (including through brokering arrangements)’. Indicative actions include partnerships that promoted parent engagement, links to the business community and potential employers, mentors, other welfare services supports.
- ‘school operational arrangements which encourage innovation and flexibility’. Indicative actions include after-hours onsite or co-located extended services, including after-hours study support / ICT / sports / arts programs for students (COAG 2008c, pp.11–12).

The states

Although the major responsibility for education in Australia rests with state governments, few major, state-wide programs for learning or homework support could be identified. A range of initiatives are in place and while the following list is not exhaustive list, the Victorian situation is given particular attention.

State education departments indirectly contribute to homework programs by providing accommodation for school-based programs. However, while many government schools house their own homework program, the decision to do so is made at a school level and sustained by the efforts of individual teachers. The resourcing of such programs is at the discretion of school principals. As such it relies on their perception of the need for learning support and their ability to allocate resources from already stretched school budgets and assign already busy teachers to coordinate the program.

A Brisbane City Council study of 15 homework programs indicated that funding comes from local, state and federal departments, the private sector, churches and library operational budgets (Brisbane City Council 2005). This minimal, ad hoc and non-recurrent funding has presented a significant challenge.

In South Australia, applications for homework centres can be made to the Aboriginal Program Assistance Scheme (DECS 2009).

In NSW, the Ethnic Communities Council advises prospective Homework Club coordinators to apply for grants from a range of government bodies (ECC NSW 2004). The state government’s Priority Action Schools (PAS) Scheme, first trialled in 2003, does fund some disadvantaged schools to provide extra programs tailored to their needs, and these may include after hours homework support (DET 2002). In 2009, it funded 101 schools as part of PAS with a further 586 schools given some funding for equity programs as part of the states commitment to social

inclusion (DET 2009). The extent to which community-based LSPs have been provided is not known. The Refugee Action Support (RAS) program (a joint project of the University of Western Sydney, the Australian Literacy and Numeracy Foundation and the NSW Department of Education and Training) was piloted in 2007 and expanded in 2008, involving 40 tutors and eight schools in western and south-western Sydney (Curriculum Corporation 2008). RAS aims to improve refugee transitions from language centres to mainstream schools by providing in-school and after-school tutoring from pre-service teachers. In addition, the NSW Department of Education and Training provides \$8 million per year for Links to Learning, which is an informal learning program for 12–24 year olds who are either early school leavers or at risk of leaving. The program funds diverse community initiatives that seek to attract young people into learning or training. These initiatives run both during and outside school hours.

Victoria

In Victoria, until recently state LSP funding has been largely via one-off grants, for example through the School Focussed Youth Service which is a joint initiative of the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) and the Department of Human Services (DHS). In the context of Victorian approaches to social inclusion and its Neighbourhood Renewal Program, the Department of Planning and Community Development writes a strong endorsement of LSPs:

Participation in the Homework Club provides the students with opportunities to learn; complete homework tasks; further their literacy and numeracy skills and develop friendships in a fun, safe and supportive learning environment. The community-run homework clubs are a vital early intervention tool. Without community support, the students are in danger of leaving school early and falling into low-skilled, part-time, insecure jobs with little prospect of future advancement (DPCD 2008, p.16).

In 2007, then premier Steve Bracks presented ‘Victoria’s plan to improve literacy and numeracy outcomes’ as part of the Council of Australian Governments’ national reform agenda. This document affirmed out-of-school-hours study support and proposed Action 20:

Victoria recommends targeted programs to support students outside of school with study assistance, including the establishment of homework centres covering clusters of government and non-government schools, which would also provide access to other support services for students with complex social welfare needs (DPC 2007, p.45).

While subsequent COAG documents do not specifically refer to LSP funding (see previous section) and broad-based funding has not followed, it is significant that the Victorian Government is supportive of LSP provision. In 2008 it made a substantial commitment to programs that assist refugees: a pilot project with funding of \$240,000 will resource five after-school hours support programs in Melbourne’s western suburbs (three school and two community-based programs) while one million dollars per year over four years will assist 20 model projects and the Learning Beyond the Bell program which is the support program for all out-of-school-hours LSPs in Victoria. The Centre for Multicultural Youth will deliver this support program which includes coordination of statewide and regional networks for LSP providers, recruitment and free training of volunteer tutors, program administration tools, assistance in developing partnerships with schools or community organisations, networking and professional development opportunities and program auditing (Victorian Government 2008; R Tribe [Centre for Multicultural Youth] 2009, personal communication, 4 May). While funding a limited number of refugee programs and some logistical support for all Victorian LSPs is an important first step, more is needed to ensure that all disadvantaged students have access to learning support.

There is scope to seek broader state engagement in LSPs on the basis of statements made in Victoria’s recent *Blueprint for education and early childhood development*. The blueprint states that education is one of the ‘most effective pathways out of disadvantage and social inclusion’ and emphasises the importance of students achieving their potential ‘regardless of their location or

cultural background, or other possible barriers to success'. It also emphasises the significant contribution of NGOs to education and the importance of capitalising on these partnerships:

Community groups and agencies, business and philanthropic organisations have a strong interest in improving outcomes for children and young people and helping them pursue academic excellence. It is important that schools and early childhood services make the most of these partnerships (DEECD 2008a, pp.28–9).

Libraries

There are many examples of state and local government support for LSPs through program accommodation in local libraries. For example, the Fairfield City Library Service in western Sydney operates its own Homework Centre in four branch libraries and was a partner in the *Live Homework Help for Refugees* program which has been expanded to allow all library members in years 4–12 access to online tutors (Bourke undated).

Libraries are in a unique position to support homework, to expand and solidify their role in the community by providing essential learning support and, ultimately to make a difference in young people's lives (Goodman & Bourke 2004, p.1).

Now called 'Your Tutor', the program is offered in many libraries across Australia and is available throughout South Australia and Queensland (SLQ 2009; Goodman 2008).

Community support

Aside from noted sources of government support, LSPs are largely driven by the efforts and internal resourcing of NGOs, philanthropic grant funding, corporate and community donations and in-kind volunteer contributions. From the survey of Melbourne Citymission LSPs it was noted that:

The rapid growth of these insecurely funded education support initiatives within the community sector raises questions about the capacity of the education system to ensure engagement and retention of children from disadvantaged backgrounds (Horn & Fewster 2007, p.11).

6 Discussion

We are yet to see learning support adopted in Australia as it has been overseas. Growth of the sector accompanied by supportive policy indications is encouraging. However, data on our current investment in public education and the school-centred approach to educational reform suggest we still have a long way to go.

Socially just education

LSPs in disadvantaged communities exist to address the unmet educational needs of the children who reside there. In reflecting on these unmet needs, the Adelaide Declaration of Australian educational goals, specifically the goal of providing socially just education, comes to mind. While the 2008 Declaration has shifted its focus to 'equity', social justice remains high on the government's agenda:

... the pursuit of social justice is founded on the argument that all human beings have the intrinsic right to human dignity, equality of opportunity and the ability to lead a fulfilling life ... Accordingly, government has a clear role in the provision of such public goods as universal education ... (Rudd 2009, p.25).

In his essay, the Prime Minister went on to state that the provision of socially just education requires significant investment and regulation by the state to 'reduce the greater inequalities that competitive markets will inevitably create'. Unfortunately, there is evidence that this kind of educational investment and commitment to social justice is not being made. OECD figures indicate that 16.4 per cent of Australia's total expenditure in 2005 on secondary and post-secondary non-tertiary education came from private sources. By way of comparison, United States' private

expenditure was 9 per cent (OECD 2008, table b3.2a, p.252). This suggests Australian education is guided more by a philosophy of ‘user pays’ than one of social justice.

In considering public education expenditure, it must be remembered that this is largely a state responsibility, with states providing 91.2 per cent of recurrent funding for government schools in 2006–2007. An observation of interest for Victorians is that its state government spent the least per full-time government school student, \$10,716. Compared with Australian average expenditure per student, it spent \$1158 less on each of its 537,646 full-time primary and secondary students (SCRGSP 2009, Table 4A.8, p.40, Table 4A.1, p.11).

Consequences of under-investment for disadvantaged young people

Failure to invest adequately in public education and a ‘user pays’ mentality are earmarks of the neoliberalism that the current government rejects. Underinvestment in public goods has contributed to the unmet educational needs that have profound consequences for disadvantaged young Australians and that LSPs seek to address. Socioeconomic comparisons of educational experiences and outcomes demonstrate this:

- Low SES students enjoy school less. The Healthy Neighbourhoods School Survey indicated that Victorian students from lower socioeconomic status quartiles were less likely to report high levels of enjoyment and achievement and more likely to say they ‘hated’ school (20.9% in the lowest quartile and 11.7 % in the highest) (Williams 2007).
- Students from low socioeconomic backgrounds achieve lower results across their schooling (Teese 2003). The 2006 Victorian On Track Survey findings indicated that almost two-thirds of all low achievers in Year 12 come from low to very low socioeconomic backgrounds and that low socioeconomic students are significantly less likely to go to university (37.6% of low SES students compared with 60.2% of high SES students) (Department of Education 2007, p.19). Vinson’s (2004) analysis of the distribution of social disadvantage in Victoria and New South Wales found that 25 per cent of all early school leavers came from just 5 per cent of postcodes.
- The Australian retention rate for Year 7–12 students in government schools was 68.3 per cent in August 2007, significantly lower than the rate for all schools (74.3%). Even in Victoria which has comparatively good retention rates, government schools had significantly lower rates than non-government schools (males 70.4% and 87.8%; females: 86.6% and 98.6% respectively) (DEECD 2008b, tables 10 and 16). Further issues with respect to social justice include the fact that non-Year 12 completers are more likely to be from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Nationally in 2007, 59 per cent of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds completed Year 12, compared with 64 per cent from medium and 77 per cent from high socioeconomic backgrounds (SCRGSP 2009, 4.73).
- Of 15–19 year olds in Victoria, 9.8 per cent were not engaged in full-time education or work in May 2008; and this varied significantly across the states, climbing as high as 24.8 per cent in the Northern Territory (ABS 2008, in Lamb & Mason 2008, table 3, p.6).
- National ABS Census data links non-engagement with socioeconomic status: of 19-year-olds living in the lowest socioeconomic areas, 39.5 per cent were not engaged in full-time education or full-time work compared with 19.2 per cent of those in the highest SES areas (ABS 2006, in Lamb & Mason 2008, figure 10, p.14).

School reform versus educational reform

In seeking to address the unmet educational needs of the young people that LSPs serve, the federal and state governments have committed to significant reform through the COAG productivity agenda and a 90 per cent Year 12 completion goal. However, the national education priorities have largely been conventional measures focused on traditional aspects of school education. Their relative merits aside, they have included:

- testing literacy and numeracy standards, together with some school-based support for disadvantaged students
- funding some school computers (the ‘digital education revolution’)
- promoting the study of Asian languages
- putting trade centres in schools (or perhaps more accurately, putting them back in schools)
- improving the professional standards of teaching (SCRGSP 2009, 4.83).

At a state level, Victoria has been a partner in some of these, as well as:

- helping schools conduct self-evaluations
- investing in much overdue capital works – renovating, extending or rebuilding all school buildings by 2016–17 (SCRGSP 2009, 4.85).

The irony, given the national social inclusion agenda, is that the current policy treats educational reform as synonymous with school reform. This approach is unlikely to help the 10–15 per cent of young people poorly engaged in education.

School reform is essential, but is of limited use for young people who do not attend school, or have low attendance or engagement. Too frequently, for the students who take part in LSPs, school has not been a place of success, belonging or positive relationships. The relationship between working class families and the school has been found to impact students’ ability to establish a ‘positive relationship to school work’ and:

the experience of low achievement relate[s] directly to daily life in the classroom and undermine[s] confidence in going to school. The erosion of learner self-esteem and morale is much more common amongst children from low socio-economic status than it is for their peers from well-educated homes (Teese 2003, p.135).

Some of the risk factors for early school leaving listed on the Victorian Education Department’s website are continual experience of academic failure, alienating school environments, family conflict, low self-esteem, poor student–teacher relations and student disinterest in education (DEECD 2009). While government thinking reflects the need for more integrated and joined up services that address the diverse learning and other needs of young people, this is not adequately translated into practice.

This is not to suggest that school reform is not essential, just that flexible and alternative (including non school-based) learning must be made available.

Flexible, alternative learning options

Inclusive education must reach beyond the school to embrace alternative learning opportunities and improve commitment to education, enable catch-up learning with the curriculum and strengthen attainment. Learning support programs have been found to be vital for disadvantaged students whose needs are unable to be met within schools and who are at risk of early school leaving, underemployment and low skilled, insecure work (Pate 2008).

The benefits of out-of-school-hours learning support programs are widely acknowledged. Australian and international research demonstrates they assist students academically, socially, personally, and assist their transition through education into work. These gains have been found to be greater for disadvantaged students, particularly when parental education or language reduce the importance placed on homework and school or the capacity to provide support, and low income is a barrier to accessing educational resources and private tutors. Lower parental workforce participation also limits the careers information or networks available to children. Low SES

students are also less likely to participate in academic or other activities like sport or creative arts due to costs or lack of transport.

International recognition of the value of learning support for disadvantaged students may be seen in the United States 21st Century Learning Centres, in the United Kingdom's Extended Schools Program and in Study Support Centres in New Zealand. In Australia, however, there is as yet no substantive federal program of learning support for disadvantaged students. At a state level, funding seems largely an ad hoc affair with non-recurrent funding via various departmental grants, some targeted programs (e.g. for Indigenous and refugee youth) or non-prescriptive equity funding for priority schools. There is little visible coordination of the sector. Victoria represents an exception having funded some sector coordination and refugee-focused programs.

The Brotherhood of St Laurence's achievement of 18 years operation of its Fitzroy Homework Centre suggests steady demand and records of the Homework Help Network / Beyond the Bell Program suggest there are a growing number of (largely non-government) organisations operating learning support programs. However, the success of these programs is jeopardised by lack of recurrent funding which has implications for management, operation and staffing and also limits relationship building with schools or activities to engage students and their parents.

Learning support programs are a demonstrated and internationally recognised means of engaging disadvantaged and at-risk students, extending beyond the school to improve commitment to education, enable catch-up learning and strengthen attainment. This alternative, flexible approach to learning is needed to help the 10–15 per cent of young people poorly engaged in education. Learning support in Australia is far from a green-fields situation because programs are already being offered in disadvantaged communities by community organisations, who are eager to work more closely with schools.

This presents a strong case for governments to fund learning support programs for all disadvantaged students.

7 Recommendations

In the light of the observed and potential benefits of learning support programs, the following recommendations for action are made:

Australian Government

- 1) That the Australian Government partner with state governments to jointly fund community-based learning support programs in disadvantaged areas.
- 2) That funding may be drawn from the Low Socio-economic Schools National Partnership Plan.
- 3) That the government establish a body for national coordination of LSPs in conjunction with the relevant state authorities and establish a clearing house for the dissemination of research and best practice information.

State and territory governments

- 4) That state governments implement the roll-out of learning support programs in disadvantaged communities.
- 5) That the state-funded component of programs be drawn from funding streams dedicated to increasing social equity in schooling, literacy and numeracy, and increasing Year 12 retention.
- 6) That state governments establish minimum standards for LSPs to ensure good practice and minimise risk.
- 7) That state education departments work through regional offices to foster collaboration between local schools and community organisations offering learning support programs.

- 8) That state and local governments seek to utilise local libraries as potential partners in the provision of community-based learning support programs.
- 9) That education departments establish state-wide networks (as has occurred in Victoria) for sector coordination and support, and reporting of best practice information to the proposed federal coordinating body.

Community organisations

- 10) That community organisations that deliver learning support collaborate to raise awareness of its benefits, contribute to research and share best practice information.

Appendix: Case study of the BSL Homework Centre

The Brotherhood of St Laurence's Homework Centre, which celebrated its eighteenth birthday in 2008, offers homework support in the Fitzroy library four days a week, 4–6pm during school terms. Information in this study comes from analysis of Centre documentation and interviews with staff and students.

Ethos

The way the Homework Centre operates is grounded in systemic and attachment theory. This means approaching the education needs of students in the broader context of the family and community in which they live. It also means considering the impact of relationships formed in infancy on self-esteem, trust and security in later life. One instance in which such relationships can be severed is through the refugee experience of conflict, sudden relocation and time in camps. Thus building relationships with students is a primary aim at the centre, in the belief that these are required before students with a fractured or marginal attachment to education can re-engage.

The students

Of the Centre's 50 students in 2008, many were refugees and most lived in the nearby Atherton Gardens and Collingwood public housing estates. Students attended eight different schools, four of them Catholic.

A study of regular attenders indicated they ranged from 12 to 22 years of age with a 60:40 ratio of males to females. Around half were born in Africa (Sudan, Somalia, Ethiopia and Egypt), with most overseas-born attendees having arrived in Australia between 1992 and 2006. Only four students spoke only English at home, because for most, English was not their first language. Students were most likely to say they attended to get help with maths or a science subject, followed by help with English, and said they planned to attend an average of 3 out of 4 sessions per week. While some students said they did not do any other out-of-school activities, the average student did one activity, although this could be casual work.

Paid staff and volunteers

The Centre is overseen by Brotherhood of St Laurence Community Services management and benefits from the Community Liaison Worker for Atherton Gardens who supports newly arrived students and their families, linking them with schools and other services. However, the main staff consists of the coordinator (0.5 EFT) and a paid tutor, employed 10 hours per week. Generally three volunteer tutors attend each session: these include staff from an engineering company that supports the Centre, professionals who work in the city, retired teachers and university students.

Funding and accommodation

The Homework Centre does not have ongoing funding, and has been resourced using 'one-off' grants from trusts and corporate partners for the last ten years. The program cost includes delivery of the basic homework centre program as well as some of the additional work of supporting young people and their families living in the estate. In this holistic model, young people are seen to have a broader set of needs which must be addressed to enable learning.

The Fitzroy Library houses the sessions rent-free, providing a large study room with a cabinet for supplies, a computer room and access to the kitchen.

Strengths

Educational

Students attend the Centre because they know they can obtain help with their homework and access a quiet space, with the resources they need (e.g. computers, books and equipment), which are often lacking at home. Staff report improvements in student literacy and in the competence and confidence of regular attendees. Transition and other support for poorly performing students has also been provided to reduce the risk of early school leaving.

Coordinator: I think it's a great comfort to the kids to have somewhere they can go to get help, because a lot of them live in homes where their parents are not literate in English or might not be educated themselves, or their home life has a lot of competing interests about domestic duties ... I think to have a place where they can come and concentrate on their study, they really do appreciate that.

Why one Year 10 boy attends the Homework Centre: Good equipment, good people.

Coordinator: ... the most marked changes are seen in some of the Sudanese kids. They're all at different degrees, some who have only been in Australia a very short time are doing very well considering. Some are reading at quite a basic level. I guess the most outstanding outcomes are to see some of the kids who fall in that boat form an attachment and keep coming back and progressing in their reading and comprehension. And getting more earnest in their study rather than edging towards disengaging from school.

Modelling and mentoring

The diligence and application of some students meant they functioned as positive role models for their peers. Corporate volunteers have made a major contribution by tutoring in high-demand subjects, as well as taking on mentoring roles, providing vocational and personal or life advice. Disadvantaged students have less access to information about vocational pathways and professions, and mentors help bridge this divide.

Social benefits

The Centre is a place where friendships are formed across different age groups, ethnic groups and sexes. Staff observe that attendees have a broader group of friends, and 'the older kids look out for the younger ones and help them sort out their life issues', with some leaders emerging. It enables students moving to different secondary schools to maintain old friendships and is a communal meeting place for some students. Where parents restrict out-of-school activities or, due to cultural gender norms, demand a high involvement in chores while at home, the Centre is a place to complete homework and have fun that is more likely to gain approval.

Other strengths

The proximity of the Centre to students' homes is an advantage. While a sizable group commute 30 minutes to school, having a Centre near home means they can be picked up by parents or walk the short distance safely in small groups.

Library accommodation is also a benefit because it includes access to IT equipment and is provided rent-free. According to staff, an added advantage is that the library already functioned as an informal 'neighbourhood contact centre' for local residents who originate from Africa, so students feel comfortable there.

Challenges

The refugee experience

For some refugee students who attend the Homework Centre, past exposure to violence, the trauma of sudden relocation and the loss of family and friends may impact their ability to learn. Some students also bear responsibility for both their own and their siblings' education. This includes liaising with teachers due to parental language barriers. Some parents place little importance on education due to its lower significance in their country of origin and their own level of education. This affects the completion of homework, consent forms and even applications for assistance with education costs. Some parents do not permit their children to attend the Centre; for girls this relates to safety concerns and cultural views about the role of women. Some parents limit out-of-school activities and assign considerable household roles. Cultural differences in education also present barriers: some students have been accustomed to punishment for incorrect answers, which makes them less willing to take risks.

Education environment

A major challenge for the Homework Centre is adequately responding to the learning needs of refugees and newly arrived students. Staff believe that there is lack of realism in the government's approach to new arrivals. An example is the relatively short period students have in English language schools before some commence VCE. While attending students have high expectations, linguistic and cultural barriers are likely to restrict their transition from school into further study or work. This is an issue of fairness and being given a reasonable chance at educational achievement.

Tutor: I just think there is more the government and the schools need to do to actually get a more realistic time-frame set up of what [students] can do ... [and] have a plan that will help them reach their longer term goals ... I think it's unfair to think you can dump someone in year 11 and expect them to perform.

A further challenge encountered by HC staff related to schools' lack of understanding of the refugee experience, cultural differences and the practical implications for students and their families. One worker stressed the need for greater links between the family and the school so that teachers have a better understanding of the home environment:

Community liaison worker: One of the issues that the teachers really don't understand is what happens back at home ... [Quite aside] from the interrupted education from where they came from, some [students] don't have a very supportive environment at home at all ... Their parents say: 'OK you have 10 minutes, can you do your homework?' That for me is a challenge and it's usually reflected in the results of the kids and how they progress at school.

Engaging students

Staff have become aware through dealings with local families that some students work part-time jobs to pay for private tutors, suggesting the need to better market the Centre and match students with a designated tutor. Another issue is reluctance by students to formally enrol (partly due to parents' difficulty with forms) or to sign in at sessions despite requests that they do so.

Spending some sessions on leisure activities is acceptable. However, some attendees do very little homework or turn up without homework to do; and staff are reluctant to exclude these attendees because their attendance is an important step. They hope that over time these students will build good relationships with staff and students who will act as positive role models for study. This will then encourage their engagement in learning. Already, some students who would most benefit from the program either do not attend or do not remain. Creative arts activities are being considered to engage these students in learning.

Managing student expectations and needs

Some students attend seeking ‘answers’, with the aim of completing homework due the next day. This can impede real learning. Some seek help with subjects at which they are already performing well, whereas English literacy is a more critical need and a barrier to overall success.

Managing volunteers

In recent years, volunteers have not attended formal training, but this has been reintroduced in 2009 to help them feel better equipped and prepared:

Coordinator: It’s not just about being competent in maths and physics. It’s about having the tutoring skills.

Sometimes tutors have provided too much assistance, reducing student autonomy and mastery over their own learning. At the other extreme, tutors receive no advance warning of the topics for the evening and thus have no opportunity to refresh their memory. This is problematic when students are studying for the next day’s exam.

A further challenge is maintaining an appropriate volunteer to student ratio, given fluctuating attendances by both students and volunteers. This has made it difficult to plan sessions in advance or to guarantee each student assistance with their chosen subject.

Coordinator: They like to have the stability of the same tutors every day so they know, ‘Tuesday, if I come, so-and-so is going to be here’. They really like that and some of the responses if a tutor isn’t there one day, sometimes they’ll boycott work ... Part of that is expressing that core need for an attachment. That sort of response is their way of saying ‘I really like stability, that’s what I want’.

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