

Fair Education in New South Wales

Final Evaluation Report

Report prepared for the

Vincent Fairfax Family Foundation

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Executive summary

Despite policy focus centred on equity and excellence, educational inequality is proving to be highly durable across Australian school systems as well as others internationally. Children and young people from the most disadvantaged backgrounds consistently make the least progress at school and have the poorest outcomes (see Lamb et al., 2015). More than ever there is a need to support disadvantaged schools and their communities identify and implement effective solutions for improving outcomes for children from disadvantaged backgrounds who currently fall behind or miss out.

Fair Education is a major initiative introduced to help participating schools in disadvantaged areas of New South Wales achieve better outcomes. Fair Education is funded by the Vincent Fairfax Family Foundation and delivered by Australian Schools Plus. The initiative includes funding and support over three years to help schools and school leaders improve family and community engagement and enrich student learning.

The Fair Education Program

Fair Education has four broad goals:

1. To build strategic capability of school leadership teams to promote family and community engagement
2. To improve family and community engagement in student learning
3. To improve the capacity of low SES schools to work together to generate real world learning environments, and
4. To enhance student learning outcomes.

Underpinning these goals is the view that school leaders in low socioeconomic status areas are best positioned to engage families and communities in student learning. Fair Education is designed to build on the knowledge and experience of school leaders who work with families and students within disadvantaged communities. It does not aim to impose a model of reform onto schools, instead, it seeks to help empower school leaders to realise their own ideas and set their own objectives. The logic is that additional support is delivered in a way which is sensitive to each school's community and context drawing on the experience and knowledge of leaders and staff members at each school site.

Schools were selected into Fair Education on the basis of an application where they had to propose a project. Each project represents a distinct method to achieve school improvement and notionally the projects were to be centered on an improvement in family and community engagement. School leaders committed to implementing and developing their initiative over three years. Two cohorts of schools commenced in 2016 and 2017, mainly comprising Government schools, but with a select few from the non-Government sector. Schools undertook Fair Education as either an individual project or a project which involved a group of schools working together as a 'cluster'. Fair Education was undertaken by primary, secondary, combined and special schools. In the first two Cohorts, 23 projects were established in various urban, inner regional and outer regional areas across New South Wales.

There are two distinct inputs associated with Fair Education. The two inputs are interlinked and mutually support one another. Schools receive support through:

1. Coaching and mentoring for school leaders and school staff, and
2. Funding of a school-focused project

There is also an annual forum which brings schools and school leaders together to discuss progress and share ideas.

Evaluation of Fair Education

The Centre for International Research on Education Systems at Victoria University was commissioned to conduct a multi-year evaluation of Fair Education. The evaluation aimed to assess whether the following three outcomes were being achieved:

1. School leadership teams develop and display the capacity and motivation to drive an outward looking school culture that is responsive to the community
2. Families and communities are willing to support student learning in and out of school[†]
3. Schools in low-SES areas work together to make communities into learning environments where students access substantive learning

A mixed-methods approach to conducting the evaluation was adopted in order to draw on a variety of data sources and methods, qualitative and quantitative. The different data sources included a mix of evaluation-specific online surveys (of teachers, parents and school leaders), interviews conducted during site visits with participants in Fair Education schools (principals, teachers, parents), telephone interviews of school leaders from all projects, documentation provided by Schools Plus on Fair Education schools, and administrative data including attendance rates and school results on student skill tests (NAPLAN).

An important part of the evaluation was visiting a number of schools and conducting in-depth interviews with school leaders, designed to gain detailed insight into the implementation of projects and the circumstances at selection of participating schools. Phone interviews were conducted with all other school leaders associated with different projects, including those not in lead schools but part of a cluster. Throughout this report individual schools and school leaders have not been identified, in compliance with ethics requirements. Pseudonyms have been created and applied to maintain anonymity.

It is important to note that the measurement of impact of any educational intervention is a very challenging task but even more so for Fair Education due to the confounding nature of participation of schools in other programs and initiatives, as well as the role of sometimes considerable additional funding schools already receive which is designed to improve

[†] The terms 'family' and 'parent' are sometimes used interchangeably. According to the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) both terms refer to adults who have 'a significant caring responsibility of a child or young person, including a parent, carer, grandparent or other relative, or other adult' (Barker & Harris, 2020. p.9).

educational outcomes, such as needs-based equity funding (for socioeconomic background, indigenous students, disability, and language proficiency), location funding (rural, remote, isolation) and targeted funding (for new arrivals, refugee students, and integration) that is part of the NSW Resource Allocation Model for government schools. In recognition of this, school leaders were asked to reflect on the impact of Fair Education separately from the effects of other measures or funding that the schools have available to them. There is no way of standardising this or knowing if it is possible or meaningful to do. The evaluation also does not have a control group of schools, such as a matched sample of equivalently funded schools that did not participate in Fair Education, to be able to compare change. Therefore the self-reported evidence used in this final report is largely subjective.

The report is the final report in the evaluation of the impact of Fair Education. The evaluation framework was designed to take into account the implementation of Cohort 1 and Cohort 2 projects.

Six projects are featured in the appendix as case studies. The case studies illustrate the discrete nature of each school's Fair Education 'journey'. Each case study draws on the various sources of evidence collected over the evaluation and presents an outline of project development, impact and sustainability. The case studies contain considerable detail and provide portraits of the Fair Education experience for schools. They are offered as a way of putting 'flesh on the bones' of the more empirical evaluation results and make for important reading in their own right as part of the evaluation. Examples from the case studies are used in relevant sections to illustrate or highlight particular points.

Main findings of the evaluation

Key areas of impact

The final evaluation has been able to draw from the extensive materials collected from Cohort 1 and Cohort 2 schools. The results, outlined in detail in this report, point to the following findings using the information collected in the 2019 school leader interviews and the ratings of impact.

Impact on strategic capability of school leadership teams

- All schools developed and implemented a strategic project of their own design.
- The coaching was viewed by nearly all school leaders as critical to Fair Education and the development of leadership capability
- Twenty-seven school leaders reported in the interviews that they had engaged in additional professional learning to support improvement
- Schools in two cluster-based projects had difficulties in establishing processes that adequately engaged all school leaders to support leadership development
- Ten school leaders in the interviews reported that turnover of school leaders worked against developing leadership capability

Impact on families and communities

- Evidence from the qualitative materials suggest that 25 schools established new ways to communicate with families, out of the 63 schools participating in 2019.

- Twenty-nine school leaders described improved family engagement in student learning through parent-focused events and activities.
- Not all of the projects that schools implemented directly relate to parent or family involvement in school or student learning.
- A challenge for Fair Education coaching was to encourage school leaders to take responsibility for what they could do to engage parents, but this was not successful with all school leaders.

Impact on schools working together

- In some communities, various schools worked together to pursue improvements related to their projects.
- School leaders reported having developed relationships with other school leaders.
- 78 per cent of school leaders indicated that they had learnt from other school leaders, with 38 leaders explicitly mentioning that they had gained through ideas transfer.
- Some schools recorded little or no impact of Fair Education on relationships with other schools.
- Single project schools, particularly those which implemented projects that did not involve partnering or engaging with other schools, rated the impact on improving relationships with other schools as lower than other areas of impact.

Impact on student learning outcomes

- One cluster of schools successfully re-engaged at-risk students so that they could maintain a formal pathway towards certificates of higher learning.
- A cluster of special schools developed a shared framework for teaching and learning which was rated positively.
- Across the period of Fair Education, average increases in NAPLAN reading and numeracy achievement were recorded in Fair Education schools which were above the average increases recorded state-wide for low SES schools, particularly in reading. It is important to note that it is not being claimed that the gains are due to Fair Education, as many other factors and other initiatives may have contributed. It is simply being noted that improvements in NAPLAN occurred in Fair Education schools over the course of the Fair Education evaluation.
- Nearly two-thirds of school leaders rated their school's improvement in student learning at or above eight out of ten.
- Approximately one in six schools rated Fair Education as having little impact on student learning, and a further one in five rated the impact as modest.
- Measuring progress and impact on student learning was a challenge in some schools.

Results by project

Table 1 provides a summary of the perceived impact of every funded project on six areas of school improvement—(1) strategic capability of school leadership, (2) relationships with other schools, (3) family and community engagement in student learning, (4) family and community engagement in school, (5) student outcomes, and (6) quality of teaching and

learning. The perceived impact was an assessment provided by school leaders of the impact they experienced for their project and school. This assessment was gathered as part of the 2019 interviews with 72 school leaders from Cohort 1 and Cohort 2 schools. The ratings were on a 1 to 10 scale with 1 being little or no impact and 10 being high impact. This method of assessing impact does not invest ratings with any objective meaning, but it does give an indication of how school leaders weight one dimension compared with another.

Table 1: Perceived impact of Fair Education on different aspects of school improvement: based on results from the 2019 school leader interviews

Cluster or not	Cohort	Project type	Strategic capability of school leadership	Relationships with other schools	Family and community engagement in student learning	Family and community engagement in school	Student outcomes	Quality of teaching and learning
Cluster	1	Develop student social-emotional skills	7.3	6.5	6.7	7.0	8.0	9.0
Cluster	2	Develop student social-emotional skills	8.6	7.4	6.8	7.3	7.1	7.3
Single	1	Develop student social-emotional skills	8.5	6.0	8.0	7.5	7.0	8.0
Single	1	Develop student social-emotional skills	8.0	8.0	8.0	9.0	8.0	8.0
Single	1	Develop student social-emotional skills	8.0	10.0	8.0	10.0	10.0	9.0
Cluster	2	Develop student social-emotional skills	7.1	9.6	8.5	7.2	8.9	9.4
Cluster	2	Establishment of mentoring	6.7	7.7	5.3	5.3	5.7	6.0
Single	1	Applied/project-based learning	7.5	4.0	6.0	6.5	7.0	6.5
Single	1	Applied/project-based learning	9.0	6.0	7.5	8.5	6.0	7.0
Cluster	2	Applied/project-based learning	8.3	7.5	7.6	7.6	9.4	8.8
Single	1	Applied/project-based learning	8.0	6.0	8.0	7.0	7.0	7.5
Single	2	Applied/project-based learning	5.0	7.0	8.0	8.0	7.0	7.0
Cluster	2	Applied/project-based learning	8.5	8.8	8.4	8.3	6.3	8.3
Cluster	2	Improving communication with families	7.9	9.8	7.0	5.0	8.4	8.6
Single	1	Improving communication with families	8.5	7.0	9.0	8.5	7.5	7.5
Single	1	Improving communication with families	10.0	5.0	10.0	9.0	9.0	8.0
Cluster	1	Improving transitions	6.5	8.4	4.9	4.2	7.4	7.4
Cluster	2	Improving transitions	8.3	9.4	7.5	8.8	6.5	8.7
Single	1	Involving parents in school life	na	na	8.0	7.0	7.0	6.0
Single	1	Involvement of parents in school life	na	8.0	8.5	8.0	8.0	na
Single	2	School leadership structure redesign	8.0	7.0	7.0	7.0	7.5	6.0
Single	1	Whole-school approach to teaching and learning	10.0	10.0	8.0	8.0	9.0	9.0
Cluster	2	Whole-school approach to teaching and learning	8.0	9.0	8.5	5.5	5.5	7.8
Overall			8.0	7.6	7.6	7.4	7.5	7.8

Overall, each area of impact on average received scores ranging from 7.4 to 8.0. But, the results show that there was considerable variation across projects and areas of impact. Some projects, such as one focused on developing social and emotional skills, recorded high impact for Fair Education on almost every area (most scores at 10). While others, such as the one

focused on implementing student mentoring, recorded low impact for most areas (most scores between 5 and 7), apart from relationships with other schools. On average, family and community engagement in school was rated as the lowest area of impact (7.4 out of 10) when compared to the other dimensions, despite family and community involvement in school being a goal of Fair Education.

There are some patterns in the school improvements according to project type. The majority of projects recorded a high score on at least one area of improvement. For two projects the impact was not rated above 8 on any dimension. The associated perceptions of impact from school leaders are linked to the type of project they implemented. Projects that involved the development of student socio-emotional skills were rated fairly positively by school leaders across all dimensions, and particularly in improving family and community engagement in student learning. Projects with an emphasis on applied learning and project-based learning, on average, were rated positively by school leaders in terms of improvement in engaging families and communities in student learning. Leaders in schools that implemented projects with a transition focus rated the strongest improvement in their ability to work with other schools. Those projects that had a direct focus on involving parents in school life perceived that their school had improved in engaging families in their children's learning.

Broader application

Fair Education is but one intervention in schools which, as disadvantaged schools, are often implementing a range of Departmental policies and, with additional equity funding, managing their own approaches to addressing the additional needs of disadvantaged students. It was not conceived as an all-encompassing strategy to combat the major complexities and challenges schools in disadvantaged communities often face. Rather, it was designed to complement, and supplement, rather than replace, the efforts of government. Some schools will continue improvements made through Fair Education by using other sources of funding, including available equity funding. Although the evaluation does not track schools as they transition into life beyond Fair Education, the decision to continue certain Fair Education initiatives was discussed by a number of schools.

School leaders pointed to several ingredients of Fair Education which were perceived as providing schools with something different to what they have received in the past through formula-based equity funding. During interviews school leaders often spoke in favourable terms about their engagement in Fair Education and what they were able to achieve with the flexibility to design and pursue their own project in conjunction with support through independent coaching seen as key features. The importance of the coaching, particularly to early project development but also in maintaining impetus, was mentioned by many school leaders as a critical component. The independence of coaches from the Department was viewed as important to schools leaders. Not being connected to the Department meant, according to school leaders, that they could 'view their coach more as an impartial critical friend than as a line supervisor'. School leaders also talked about the flexibility they were given to design a project specific to their school, but also the capacity to change and grow as the project unfolded. High impact projects sometimes evolved into different things than originally designed, and sometimes achieved more than originally expected. As one such school leader remarked

‘the project wasn’t confined to our initial parameters. We were encouraged to take it as far as we possibly could. That allowed us to do that. I don’t think if it was government money, or straight from my budget, we would have had license to do that’.

Any broader application of Fair Education needs to take into account the fact that its key benefit is derived from its independence from government. School leaders sometimes reported enjoying being able to work outside the constraints of the Department. Even though the actual amount of project-funding could be regarded as small when compared to other grants and system allocations, the sense of accomplishment that many school leaders derived through Fair Education was apparent. This is attributed to the fact that they were supported to work towards their own improvement agenda.

Although disadvantaged schools face many challenges, the contributions they make to their communities and the roles that they play cannot be underestimated. It has been suggested that it is often disadvantaged schools which are ‘condemned to innovate’ on marginal resources (Teese, 2006). It may therefore be wise to look to these schools to gain a perspective on effective practice. The evaluation framework adopted for Fair Education provides an opportunity for researchers, schools, policymakers and philanthropists to come together to tackle persistent educational inequality. There are important key findings from this report which should be shared more widely. The findings from this multi-year evaluation are important in being able to make a direct contribution to school and community research. It is also important to communicate the results from Fair Education more widely across the educational community.

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1. Overview of Fair Education

Across Australia, and in nearly every other country around the world, there are large gaps in the educational outcomes of children from different social backgrounds (OECD, 2017). Because education is so fundamentally linked for communities to a wide range of social and economic gains and for individuals to better career outcomes and better quality of life, the drive to find ways to reduce the gaps in learning has given rise to various efforts to identify and implement effective solutions for improving outcomes for the disadvantaged. Fair Education is a major new initiative funded by the Vincent Fairfax Family Foundation (VFFF) and delivered by Australian Schools Plus (Schools Plus). Its broad objective is to reduce educational inequality by improving the relationships schools have with parents and families in socially and economically disadvantaged communities.

Fair Education has now been in place in NSW for three years. This report presents the findings of an independent evaluation of the impact of Fair Education, undertaken by the Centre for International Research of Education Systems (CIRES) at Victoria University. Progress reports on implementation and initial impact have been prepared at the end of each year. This report is the final evaluation report and draws together the findings over the life of the evaluation period from 2016 until the end of 2019.

This chapter provides an introduction to the final evaluation report. The first section draws on Australian and international literature on the specific educational challenges that disadvantaged schools face and the reasons for the additional support they need. Fair Education provides support to disadvantaged schools through two interrelated components—(1) coaching to develop the capacity of school leadership, and (2) targeted funds to implement a school-specific project focused on improving family and community engagement in student learning. To provide a foundation for the subsequent discussion, the Fair Education model and theory of change are discussed.

The second part of the chapter provides information on the schools that have been involved in Fair Education since either 2017 (Cohort 1) or 2018 (Cohort 2). Fair Education was implemented in the context of other types of support available to NSW schools and policies put in place by government. To look at the particular role and impact of Fair Education, the broader policy context in NSW is discussed with a brief outline of some of the supports and reforms operating concurrently for schools participating in Fair Education. The chapter concludes by setting out the structure of this report.

Why the need for Fair Education?

The Melbourne Declaration on Goals for Young Australians sets out the key objectives for Australian education systems that all young Australians are given the opportunities to become successful learners, confident and creative individuals, and active and informed citizens (MCEETYA, 2008). The importance of education is articulated in this document as a collective endeavour, vital to Australia's future as a nation. Fair Education provides the opportunity to improve the quality of education specifically for young people and their

families in disadvantaged communities. The evidence showing ongoing social, economic and educational inequality, and the need to find solutions, requires urgent attention.

The Australian education system provides opportunities for most young Australians to grow into confident and successful citizens, who achieve success at school. There are signs, however, that the school system is not working as well for all. Average levels of student achievement across Australian schools have not improved over the past few years, according to international assessments. The regular assessments by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) suggest that since 2006 there has been little or no improvement, even decline, in average skills of 15 year-olds in maths, science, literacy and technology (ACARA, 2018; Gonski, 2018; Thomson, Bortoli et al. 2017). More concerning is the evidence that student achievement differs greatly according to student social background. PISA finds significant gaps in skills between rich and poor students (Gonski, 2018; Thomson, Bortoli et al. 2017). Educational inequality is a feature of Australian education systems, including New South Wales.

Student achievement is but one measure. There are various other indicators which highlight 'the health' of our education system when it comes to how well it is working, particularly for disadvantaged students. Educational inequality occurs as a result of various cumulative factors, and social patterns are apparent across a range of other important measures. Students from disadvantaged homes more often start school already behind others and are more likely to continue to fall behind (Lamb, Jackson, Walstab and Huo, 2015). They are less likely to complete their senior school certificate, less likely to enter tertiary learning or further post-school education, and more likely to be unemployed, underemployed or be in low paid work in early adulthood (Lamb, Jackson et al. 2015). Young people from poorer homes typically take more precarious pathways which lead to a significant earnings and income deficit that persists throughout their lives (Lamb and Huo, 2017). More targeted interventions are required to support disadvantaged students who fall behind in order to provide them with an equal opportunity to do well at school. If we fail to do so, we fail these young people (Lamb and Huo, 2017).

Another important factor to consider when addressing educational inequality is the uneven nature of effort required from schools in addressing need for the most disadvantaged students. Imbalance is evident. Enrolments of students from disadvantaged families are not evenly spread across schools. Some schools, thanks to the effects of school choice and competition, have much higher concentrations of students from disadvantaged backgrounds, even higher than suggested by the profiles of their own communities (Lamb, 2007). The challenge of producing the same environments and the same outcomes as for students in other schools is enormous, and the evidence suggests prone to failure (Masters, 2016). Results from PISA 2015 found that students who were enrolled at a school with a low average socioeconomic cohort, no matter their own socio-economic background, performed at a lower rate than students who were enrolled in a school with a relatively advantaged cohort (Thomson, Bortoli et al. 2017). The social segregation apparent in the Australian education system contributes to the challenges faced by disadvantaged school communities.

Schools located in areas of high disadvantage tend to have a different school climate from those schools with more advantaged families. Thrupp (1998) has detailed the various ways in which the contextual circumstances lead to differences in teaching and learning and school organisation. One attribute he identified was that teachers in disadvantaged schools typically had less time to spend on teaching and learning. School leadership may have to concern themselves with discipline or student welfare, which may, Thrupp argued, take time away from their focus on strategic planning or curriculum development within disadvantaged schools. Therefore, providing staff within these schools with additional support to be able to undertake these deeper thinking activities may be a worthwhile strategy to realise school improvement.

Parental involvement has also been identified as particularly beneficial to improving student academic achievement (Jeynes, 2012; Jeynes, 2003). Yet within disadvantaged communities in particular, parents are not clear about their role in relation to schools and may feel unable or ill-prepared to take an active part in their children's learning (Woodrow, Somerville, Naidoo, Power, 2016). The term 'family' or 'parent' is used interchangeably through this report and in no way do we wish to convey the archetype of a traditional 'nuclear family'. Instead these terms are used acknowledging the conceptual definition set out by ARACY where they mean any adult who has 'a significant caring responsibility of a child or young person, including a parent, carer, grandparent or other relative, or other adult' (Barker & Harris, 2020. p.9). Schools working with our most vulnerable communities are often unable to rely on their families to support the practices of teaching and learning at home, and educators may be hard-pressed to find the time to be able to connect with families and understand the barriers. One school leader involved in Fair Education summed up,

'for disadvantaged children who don't have that network around them, including their family and the home life which are going to guarantee their success, it is really only schools that can help them on that journey to being successful and realising their potential'.

The Fair Education program

Fair Education is a major new initiative to help schools in disadvantaged areas of New South Wales achieve better outcomes. Fair Education has five broad goals:

1. To build strategic capability of school leadership teams to promote family and community engagement
2. To improve family and community engagement in student learning
3. To improve the capacity of low SES schools to work together to generate real world learning environments
4. To enhance student learning outcomes, and
5. To provide an evidence base to support broader system change.

Underpinning these goals is the view that school leaders in low socioeconomic status areas are best positioned to engage families and communities in student learning. Fair Education builds on the knowledge and experience of school leaders who work with families and students within disadvantaged communities. It does not impose a model of reform onto

schools; instead, it aims to help empower school leaders to realise their own ideas and set their own objectives. This is to ensure that additional support is delivered in a way which is sensitive to each school's community and context drawing on the experience and knowledge of leaders and staff members at each school site.

Figure 1-1 presents the program logic underpinning Fair Education and its associated theory of change. The two distinct inputs in the Fair Education program model include the coaching and the project-specific funds. These two key elements are conceptualised as working together to help create change in schools. The Fair Education program provides these dual supports for individual schools or for clusters of schools to help create an environment in which multiple outcomes are possible. Changes are expected to be realised in leadership capacity, school practices, the quality of teaching and learning, partnership establishment and enhancing family engagement. The expectation is that all of these factors work together to develop the capacity of school leaders in high needs schools to better engage families and communities in student learning.

The Fair Education program places particular emphasis on supporting disadvantaged schools in their efforts to improve family and community engagement, which may include various formal and informal activities. The logic is notable for its multi-dimensional objectives and targeted outcomes. A critique of some major philanthropic efforts previously undertaken within the United States is that sometimes adopt a one-size-fits-all approach, unable to take into account the specific context of schools and their complexities (see Schneider and Menefee-Libey, 2018). The Fair Education program logic, at least in design, articulates a less singular or uniform input-output approach to realising educational change.

Design of the Fair Education program

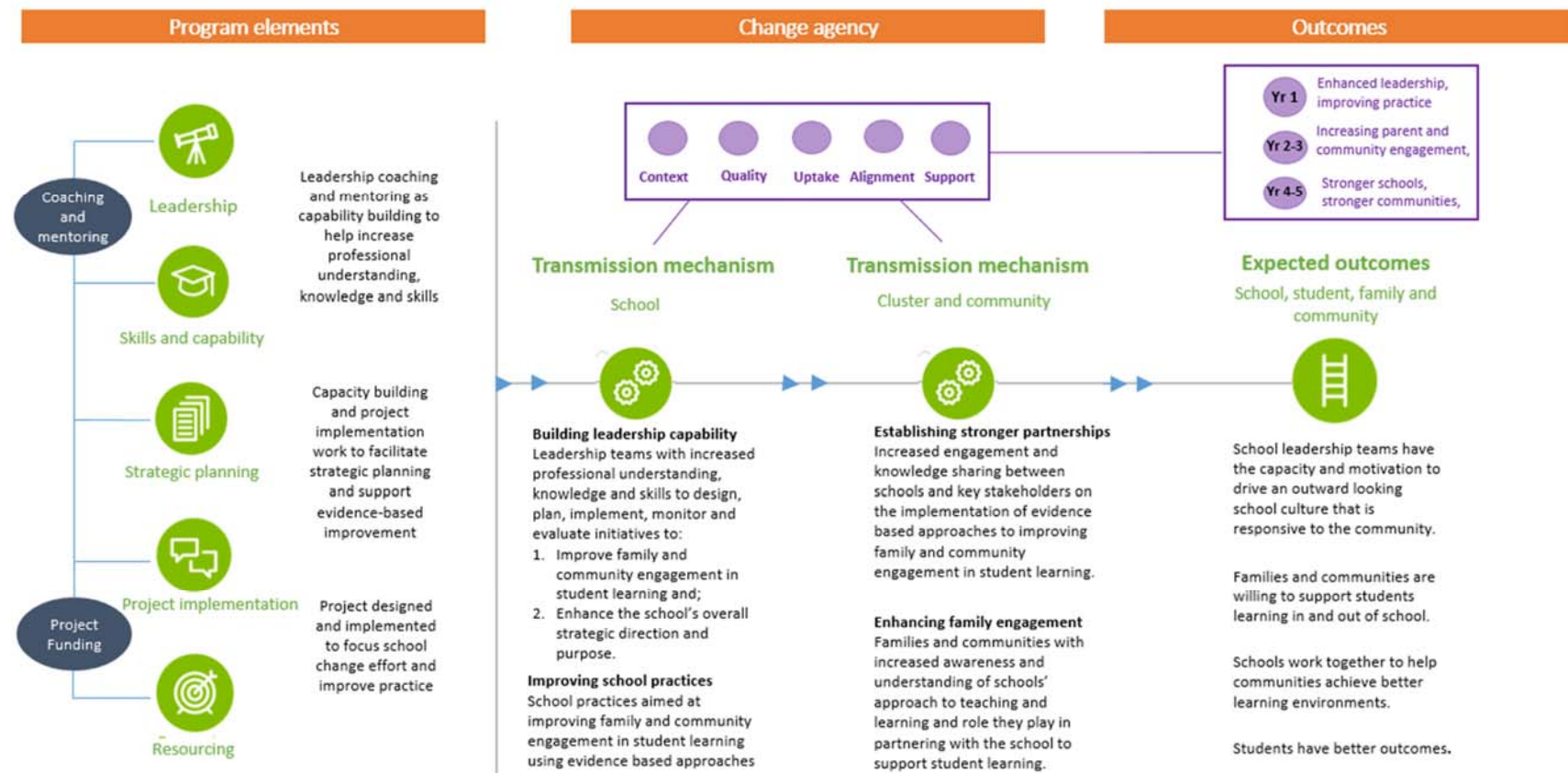
VFFF and Schools Plus worked collaboratively on the design of Fair Education and the selection of participating schools. A key design feature of the Fair Education program in NSW is that it was only made available to schools with concentrated disadvantage, measured by a school's Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA) score. Fair Education also targeted funding to provincial, remote and rural communities in New South Wales, where remoteness and indigenous communities compounded the challenges for schools.

All rounds of funding followed similar application processes. Interested school leaders wrote an application that outlines how they intend to develop and implement a project which is designed to enhance family and community involvement in their school or within their school cluster. The applications were assessed by a review panel. Many subsequently underwent peer review and revision following advice by a selection panel.

The support provided to schools through Fair Education has two associated components, which are interlinked. Schools receive support through:

1. Coaching and mentoring for school leaders and school staff, and
2. Funding of a school-focused project

Figure 1-1 Fair Education program logic



The Fair Education program provides funding and support to schools over three years. Schools Plus administered both aspects of support. In some instances schools were able to suspend or delay implementation of their project or their participation in the coaching when an unforeseen circumstance arose.

Coaching

The school leadership development and coaching delivered by Schools Plus are key components of Fair Education. The main purpose of the coaching is to build the capacity of leaders in order for them to develop capacity for innovative, high order strategy, systems and practices for school improvement to effectively lead communities to flourish, grow and connect, within and beyond the school community engagement. In addition, the Schools Plus coaching team provided mentoring for school leaders and structured support around project management. School leaders were provided advice and support in the planning and creation of project milestones and measurement of progress.

The School Plus coaching team represents an important component of the Fair Education model. Coaches were expected to visit each school or the lead school in every cluster every term. Schools can make the decisions about who attended the coaching sessions, based on their own needs and judgements. The coaching team comprised professionals drawn from various backgrounds, some with extensive experience in school leadership, and others from senior levels within the NSW Department of Education (the Department).

A key role in the organisation of the coaching is the Schools Plus program manager. This is a significant role, requiring a range of administrative, educational and personal skills. The manager was responsible for both scheduling school visits and in keeping schools on track in terms of reporting and acquittal. Given the significant variation in cluster school arrangements, whereby some schools started involvement late or dropped out, the manager also had to maintain oversight of the arrangements. Over the course of the evaluation, there were various changes in program manager.

Funding

Fair Education provides schools with funding (maximum \$70,000 per school, or \$250,000 per cluster) to implement projects driven by their own strategic thinking. Fair Education starts with the premise that schools know their own communities best. The program logic is one which aims to empower schools by enabling schools to devise or tailor their own intervention to build parent and community engagement. It is consistent with a view expressed in the second Gonski review which claimed that 'fit for purpose school-community engagement undertaken to respond to identified student needs is an effective way to improve the relevance of learning' (Gonski, Arcus et al. 2018). Improving the quality of learning is another important aspect associated with the broad goals of Fair Education.

The funding to implement a project was aimed to provide school leaders with an opportunity to consolidate and build on their own ideas about what is needed to strengthen community and parent engagement and quality of student learning. The projects were designed to offer schools, outside of the normal channels of Departmental requirements, the chance to

develop their own particular vision or activity. It was also designed to enable them to give practical application to what they wanted to take away from the coaching sessions.

The project funds were to be used in support of project implementation and therefore could vary with schools able to spend on things such as extra professional development, employing staff, engaging external consultants, providing time release, or purchasing some resources.

Another component of Fair Education was the annual conference in which all schools involved were invited to participate. Schools were able to use their project funding to attend these conferences, if required. The Fair Education conferences brought together participants to discuss progress and take part in professional development. It also gave schools the opportunity to network, recognise common interest and build new connections independent of established school partnerships.

Project information on Cohort 1 and 2 schools

Information on schools involved in Fair Education is provided in this section. There are two cohorts of schools, one cohort of schools beginning in 2017 (Cohort 1) and a second cohort commencing in 2018 (Cohort 2).

Table 1-1 shows the number of Cohort 1 projects and associated schools. The table is divided into two panels. The panel at the top was the number of projects and schools as they were identified on original Fair Education project applications, as successful applications. The second panel of Table 1-1 provides the number of Cohort 1 projects and associated schools still engaged in Fair Education in 2019, derived from the most recent lists provided by Schools Plus and supplemented by CIREs contact with schools.

Table 1-1 Cohort 1 – original project applications and numbers of schools involved and those still participating in 2019

School type	Project applications	Schools involved
<i>Original projects and schools</i>		
Primary	8	11
Secondary	6	16
Other	2	2
Total	16	29
<i>Projects and schools in 2019</i>		
Primary	7	7
Secondary	5	13
Other	1	1
Total	13	21

Schools in the 'other' category include a school with students from Kindergarten to Year 12 and an alternative learning setting. The school with an alternative learning setting has since left the Fair Education program.

The second panel of Table 1-1 indicates that three projects were no longer included in Cohort 1 by the end of 2019. One was a school that closed down. Another Cohort 1 school reapplied for funding as part of a cluster of schools, and its project is now included in Cohort 2. The third project involved another school cluster which moved from Cohort 1 to Cohort 2 due to setbacks in their project implementation. In comparing the original and surviving projects and schools it is apparent that the number of schools involved in Fair Education also changed. The difference in numbers of participating schools between original and 2019 was due to project changes and also to the fact that certain schools named in school cluster applications did not proceed with participation and other schools joined clusters over time.

Table 1-2 Cohort 2 – original project applications and numbers of schools involved and those still participating in 2019

School type	Project applications	Schools
<i>Original projects and schools</i>		
Primary	4	29
Secondary	4	11
Other	1	7
Total	9	47
<i>Projects and schools in 2019</i>		
Primary	4	28
Secondary	5	12
Other	1	2
Total	10	42

Table 1-2 identifies the number of original projects and schools engaged in Fair Education as part of Cohort 2 commencing in 2018. The original project total includes the Cohort 1 project which moved into Cohort 2 when they reapplied as a cluster lead school. There are various anomalies with these numbers which are worth mentioning. A few schools that are involved in Fair Education under cluster arrangements are not formally included, as their ICSEA values exceed 1000. Schools which are regarded as educational centres without a regular student enrolment are not included. Another group of schools which are not classified here are special school annexes associated with three primary schools and two secondary schools. These schools joined a cluster arrangement in their second year of involvement as a network of remote schools. Representatives of these schools attended the Fair Education conference in 2019, but they are not noted individually in the available Schools Plus list of contacts.

Table 1-2 reveals changes where some schools withdrew from projects or were added. Arriving at the exact number of schools involved in Fair Education can be problematic. There is sometimes variation, particularly within the cluster participant schools, with some schools dropping out of the program. Various schools have also collaborated with pre-schools, early learning centres and other schools over the course of their Fair Education project. Therefore it is difficult to be exact about the number of schools with active engagement in Fair Education at any one time.

The involvement in Fair Education projects in Cohort 1 and Cohort 2 by school type and individual school or cluster is outlined in Table 1-3.

Schools awarded a Fair Education grant as part of a cluster were mixed fairly evenly by whether they were a primary or secondary. Three clusters contained primary schools only and three clusters contained secondary school only. Three further clusters included a mix of primary and secondary schools together. One cluster comprised a group of special schools.

Table 1-3 Fair Education projects by school type and cluster type

	Number of projects
Cluster school	
Primary schools	3
Secondary schools	3
Combined schools (primary and secondary)	3
Special schools	1
Individual school	
Primary	9
Secondary	4

Nine individual school grants were awarded to primary schools and four were granted to secondary schools as individual project sites.

Geographical spread of Fair Education projects

In line with the levels of disadvantage and challenges communities and schools face in rural and remote areas, under the terms of the Fair Education program, funding was targeted towards provincial, remote and rural schools in New South Wales (VFFF, 2019). Table 1-4 shows that just under half of the Fair Education projects were in schools which are located in non-city areas, in inner regional and outer regional communities. In terms of the distribution of funds, half of the Fair Education grants for Cohort 1 and Cohort 2 went to inner regional schools and 10.5 per cent to schools in outer regional areas. This meant that about two in five (39.5 per cent) grants were awarded to schools in major cities.

Table 1-4 Characteristics by projects, by regional characteristics and proportion of Fair Education funding received

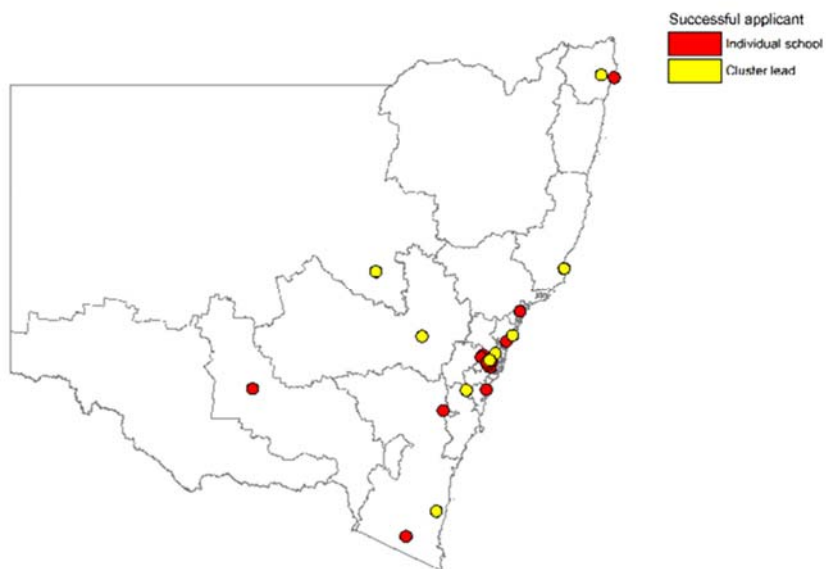
Location*	Number of projects	% Projects	% Fair Education funding**
Major Cities	12	52.2	39.5
Inner Regional	8	34.8	50.1
Outer Regional	3	13.0	10.5
TOTAL	23	100.0	100.0

Notes: *Location derived using the Australian Statistical Geography Standard.

**Funding figure taken from 2016-2020 cohorts budget from Schools Plus calculations provided to CIRES.

Figure 1-2 uses information from VFFF and Schools Plus to identify how the Fair Education funding has been distributed amongst communities in the state. It is apparent that many communities outside of the Greater Sydney area have been supported through this initiative. The geographic reach of Fair Education is important to recognise. Schools in the regional and rural areas typically have challenges with staffing, may have limited breadth of program/curriculum on offer and may also be restricted in the amount of funding they can raise from their local community (Lamb, Glover et al. 2014). These challenges are on top of those they already face in working within disadvantaged communities.

Figure 1-2 Fair Education funding recipients in New South Wales



New South Wales policy context

Fair Education is but one intervention in schools which, as disadvantaged schools, are often implementing a range of Departmental policies and with additional equity funding managing their own approaches to addressing the additional needs of disadvantaged students. It is not possible, therefore, in any rigorous and precise way, to disentangle the impact of Fair Education from that of other policies or programs in place within a school. However, principals, while recognising the difficulty in identifying the independent effects of programs, still report a sense about 'what works'.

This section provides a short summary of related Departmental policies and support for disadvantaged schools which were being applied in NSW schools during the time of Fair Education. While this list is not all-encompassing, it provides a brief guide to some recent Department initiatives and policy directions which may intersect with Fair Education.

Some key NSW Department educational policies and initiatives potentially operating in Cohort 1 and Cohort 2 schools during the course of Fair Education include:

- The School Leadership Strategy. This strategy is a commitment by the Department to invest in a leadership institute, and systemic induction of new leaders and scholarships for new principals. There is provision for stronger collegial support through the establishment of new school principal leadership positions to provide coaching and mentoring (NSW Government, 2017).
- The Resource Allocation Model (RAM). RAM is a needs-based funding allocation method that aims to allocate funding based on student and school needs. In addition to a base loading allocation, schools receive specifically targeted equity loadings for students from low socio-economic backgrounds, Indigenous students, students with low-level disability adjustments and students with a low English-language proficiency (Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation, 2018). The amount of equity funding can be substantial, depending on the numbers and types of disadvantaged students, far in excess of the funding for Fair Education. Using the additional equity funds provided for students from disadvantaged backgrounds, schools can implement a range of programs or initiatives to help address need. The initiatives and programs make it difficult to single out any independent effects of Fair Education.
- The Wellbeing Framework. This framework was implemented to ensure that all schools have a planned approach to improving wellbeing (NSW Government Education & Communities, 2015).
- Literacy and Numeracy Strategy 2017-2020. The NSW Literacy and Numeracy Strategy (NSW Department of Education, 2017) is a four-year plan to support the quality teaching of literacy and numeracy across all NSW schools, both government and non-government. The plan includes an aim to improve the performance of the lowest achieving schools by focusing on quality instructional leadership, combined with an emphasis on the needs of individual students and early intervention.
- Local Schools, Local Decisions (DECS, 2013). Is a policy of giving public schools more authority to make local decisions about how best to meet the needs of their students, including giving them greater capacity to make decisions about how to use the money spent on public education.
- The Rural and Remote Education Blueprint for Action. The blueprint is a detailed plan to improve student learning in rural and remote public schools across New South Wales (DECS, 2013). It aims to do this by improving early childhood education in rural and remote communities, providing incentives to attract and retain quality teachers and leaders to rural and remote schools, offering coordinated interagency health and wellbeing in rural and remote areas, and expanding curriculum opportunities for students in rural and remote areas.

It is apparent that in many areas the objectives of Fair Education and the current policy direction within NSW have some common features, such as drawing on local school knowledge to decide what are the best initiatives to address student and community needs, and recognising the importance of school leadership. Yet it is important to note that Fair

Education was not conceived as an all-encompassing strategy to combat the complexities of schools in disadvantaged communities. It fits into, and supplements, rather than replaces the efforts of government.

Purpose of this report

The aim of this final evaluation report is to draw together the findings from across the evaluation period, 2016 until the end of 2019, to assess the implementation and impact of Fair Education.

The report begins in Chapter 2 with a summary of the scope of the Fair Education evaluation and findings from previous reports. It outlines the methodology and the approach to analysis. It gives particular focus to the latest set of qualitative interview data collected from Cohort 1 and Cohort 2 schools. This is a new source of evidence from which this report draws extensively.

Chapter 3 examines the key learnings which can be identified through this multi-year study of Cohort 1 and Cohort 2 projects. The role of coaching for success is addressed. The projects undertaken by schools are discussed using a thematic approach which is designed to capture the similarities and differences between schools as they seek to realise educational change. The characteristics of high-impact projects are reflected upon. The chapter concludes by identifying the challenges or barriers to school participation and success in Fair Education.

Chapter 4 addresses the broad impacts of Fair Education across various dimensions. In separate sections of this chapter, each dimension identified in the program logic is considered in relation to the impact of Fair Education on the strategic capability of school leaders, family and communities, on schools working together and on student learning outcomes. Finally, the broader application and sustainability of Fair Education beyond the life of the initial grants is explored.

Chapter 5 summarises the key findings and provides some conclusions.

An Appendix is provided which contains detailed case studies of selected Fair Education projects and schools, charting the whole journey from development through implementation and associated outcomes.

2. Evaluation design and scope

The Centre for International Research on Education Systems at Victoria University was commissioned to conduct the evaluation of Fair Education in New South Wales to examine the implementation and impact of the program and whether it was meeting its goals and objectives. This chapter describes the approach to evaluation and the data sources and data collection methods.

Evaluation framework

A diagrammatic outline of the evaluation framework mapped against the implementation of projects in Cohort 1 and Cohort 2 schools is presented in Figure 2-1. The timing of the final evaluation places it at the point where Cohort 1 schools had completed their formal involvement in Fair Education (after three years), while Cohort 2 schools still have one more year of participation. The current report draws together evidence collected over the last three years to help assess the impact of the program.

Figure 2-1 shows the staggered approach that was planned for the evaluation and data collection activities. The three-year span of the evaluation provided scope to assess short, medium and longer-term change. Unlike the previous reports, this final report can address the outcomes defined as medium to longer-term. However, educational change and assessment of impact can often take longer than intended. As Andreas Schleicher, the coordinator of the OECD's PISA, noted the effects of education reforms often take years to realise (Schleicher, 2018). In his view, 'there is often a substantial gap between the time at which the initial cost of the reform is incurred, and the time when the intended benefits of reforms materialise' (p.221). Therefore, a more long-term or longitudinal scope may be required to fully assess the deeper impact of Fair Education within the participating schools and their communities. Furthermore, Fullan's work suggests that the effects of reforms on school performance can vary across types of schools, tending to be quicker in primary schools than in secondary schools (Fullan, 2001). Therefore the realisation of school improvement through Fair Education is also explored according to whether the school is a primary or secondary setting later in the report.

The evaluation of Fair Education was informed by a framework which contained nine key questions each relating to a specific program objective. The objectives and questions are presented in Table 2-1. Each of the questions aligns to key components in the program logic (see Figure 1-1), where various outcomes were identified. From the start of the evaluation, the expectation was that the different outcomes might be realised over different timeframes—short, medium, longer term. This is in recognition that schools may be able to change certain practices more easily than others, and this might vary across schools and communities.

Figure 2-1 CIRES evaluation time frame and reporting structure aligned with Fair Education implementation in NSW

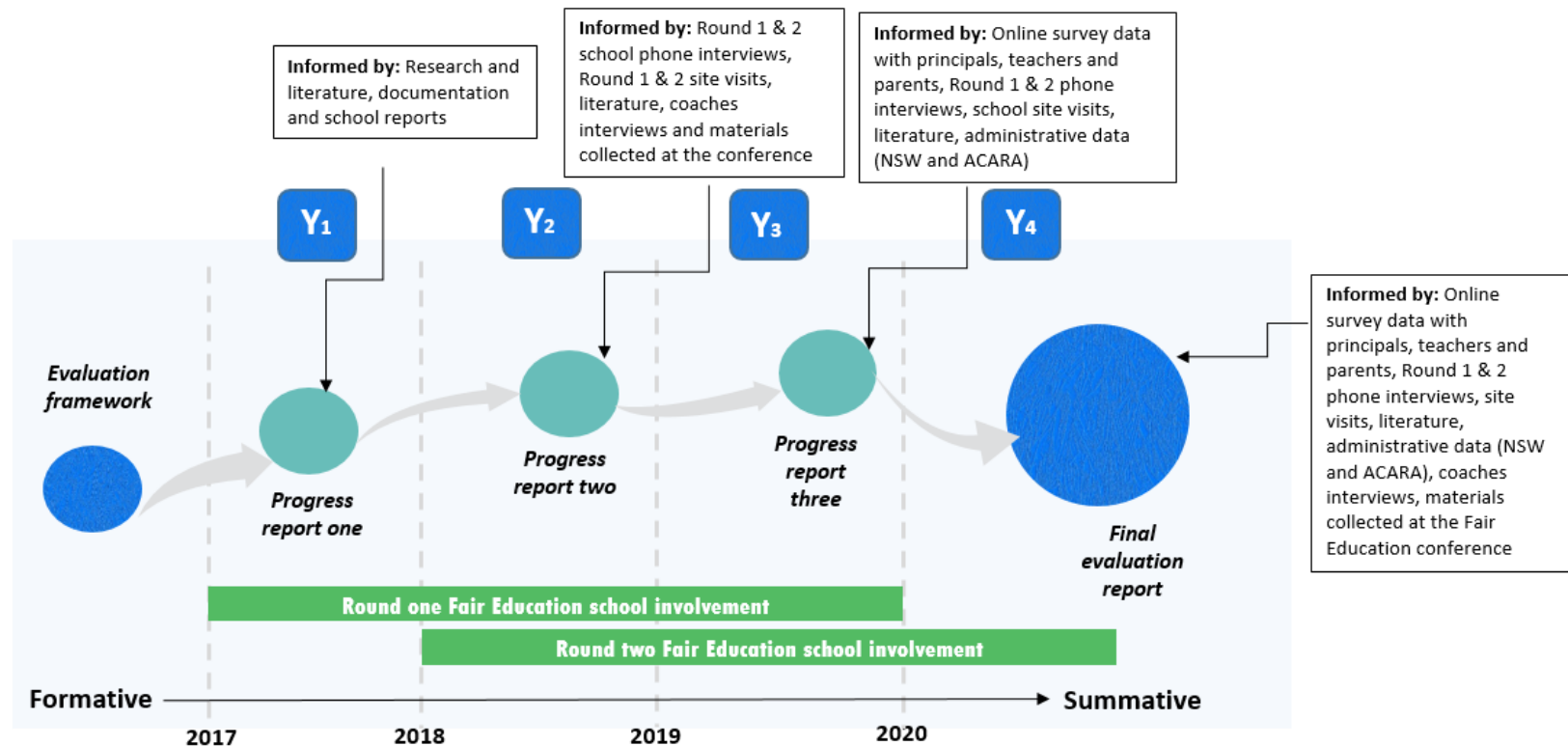


Table 2-1 Fair Education evaluation framework

Program objective	Evaluation questions	Timeframe	Outcomes
Build strategic capability of school leadership teams in promoting family and community engagement	1. Has Fair Education supported leaders in disadvantaged schools to be more effective in engaging families and their community? 2. To what extent has Fair Education contributed to the capacity and motivation of leaders to drive an outward looking culture that is responsive to the community?	Short to medium	Improved leadership practices/ processes
Improve family and community engagement in student learning	3. To what extent has Fair Education contributed to families and communities' willingness to support students' learning in and out of schools?	Medium	Improved community and family engagement in student learning
Improve low SES schools' capacity to work together to generate real world learning environments	4. To what extent has Fair Education supported schools in low SES areas to work together to make communities into learning environments where students access real world learning?	Short to medium	Improved school cooperation practices/ processes
Enhance student learning outcomes	5. To what extent does the improvement of leader effectiveness in involving parents and communities correspond with improvements in student learning outcomes? 6. To what extent has improvement of leader effectiveness in involving parents and communities led to other positive student outcomes (for example, in areas of attendance, behaviour, retention, aspirations, engagement and wellbeing)	Long-term Medium to long-term	Improved student learning outcomes Improved student engagement and well-being outcomes
Provide evidence base to support broader systemic change	7. How cost effective are Fair Education initiatives delivered in Low SES Schools? (At program and school/cluster levels) 8. To what extent are successful strategies scalable and/or transferable to other contexts? What are identified preconditions for success? 9. What are the risks to sustainability of successful initiatives and how might they be mitigated?	Medium to long-term	System change and improvement

In general terms, Table 2-1 suggests that cultural shifts associated with the various outcomes differ from one another (for example, supporting school leaders to improve their

effectiveness in engaging with families and communities takes less time than shifting student outcomes). This is reflected on in the final chapter, where schools reported different perception of impact associated with the various outcomes.

Data sources

Table 2-2 lists the different type of data collected from 2016 to 2019 to help inform the evaluation of Fair Education. The source of the data is also provided. Data were obtained from various sources including ACARA (school profile data, ICSEA data, NAPLAN data, attendance data), Schools Plus (school progress reports, background document materials, project applications) and CIREs (project-specific designed instruments, surveys, interviews).

The different types of data collected reflect the evaluation methodology which was devised as a mixed-methods design. A mixed-methods approach combines collecting, analysing and integrating quantitative (e.g., surveys, administrative records and data such as student achievement scores) with qualitative (e.g., focus groups, interviews) research. This approach to evaluation is used because the integration of methods provides better insight into the way things work than just using one approach and also the results from one method can help inform the analysis of the other. Combining qualitative and quantitative collections can provide a more comprehensive picture of implementation and impact.

Table 2-2 Fair Education evaluation data collections

Source	Data type	2016	2017	2018	2019
CIREs data collection	Interviews with school leaders	20	25	68	72
	Interviews with Schools Plus coaches			4	6
	Online survey data - Parents		114		
	Online survey data – Principals		31		
	Online survey data – Teachers		73		
Schools Plus documents	Progress reports	All projects	All projects	All projects	All projects
School self-assessments	Project plans, project milestone documents and documentation	All projects	All projects	All projects	All projects
ACARA	School data	All schools	All schools	All schools	All schools

Quantitative data used for the evaluation include publicly available ACARA school-level data such as NAPLAN scores, school attendance and ICSEA data. Sources of administrative data made it possible to undertake comparative analyses between the Fair Education schools and similar or matched low SES schools in New South Wales, and between Fair Education Schools and all New South Wales schools. Such comparisons make it possible to measure changes in Fair Education students and schools against students and schools in New South Wales more broadly to evaluate the impact of Fair Education.

The administrative data sets are complemented with evidence drawn from specifically-designed online surveys for school principals, teachers and parents who were involved in Fair Education. The questionnaires asked school principals, teachers and parents about their experiences with Fair Education and represent a key source of evaluation data. Open-ended text fields in the surveys were included to help capture more expansive information provided by respondents. Basic descriptive analyses, including frequencies, percentages, and means, were combined with more complex statistical techniques, such as mixed effect modelling, to estimate change and impact in different ways.

More fine-grained methods, particularly the use of in-depth interviews, were employed to provide more elaboration and detail on the specific contextual circumstances of Fair Education school and project objectives, progress and change. Annually, in-depth interviews were conducted with school leaders participating in Fair Education, both through site visits and telephone interviews. Each year, the interviews followed a semi-structured design aimed to gather detailed descriptions of what was occurring within each school, while also providing the opportunity to gain a better sense from school leaders of the experiences related to Fair Education at their schools.

Online surveys were designed specifically for Fair Education schools (teachers, principals, parents) and administered in the second year of the evaluation (2017).

Annual interviews with school leaders were the largest source of information collected in the evaluation. All in all, across the years of the evaluation, over 185 interviews were conducted with school leaders involved in Fair Education. At the start of the evaluation, the interview questions were designed to gather information about the school project, to gauge how the initial phases of implementation were progressing, including any challenges. As the Fair Education program evolved, so too did the questions, seeking school leader views on change in parent and community engagement associated with Fair Education, changes in quality of students learning, program impact on schools and how impact was being measured by the school and views on sustainability of the program.

For the final report, all previous data collected through the in-depth interviews were examined again for confirming themes and for gaining a perspective of the Fair Education school 'journey'.

From Table 2-2, it is also clear that CIRES had access to all of the Schools Plus reporting materials collected from schools, including progress reports and acquittal statements. These were regularly reviewed as they provided useful updates on school participation and experience in Fair Education, particularly for the cluster projects.

Another source of data informing the evaluation were the in-depth interviews with the Schools Plus coaching team conducted in 2018 and 2019. Ten interviews were conducted over two years. The interviews were important to gain the perspective of coaches on school involvement in Fair Education and where coaches felt improvements were being made. As part of the evaluation, coaching sessions conducted by Schools Plus, were observed to develop a tangible understanding of what the coaching support looked like.

2019 data collection

The final report draws from reporting and analyses conducted in previous years of the Fair Education evaluation as well as from the most recent and final sets of interviews conducted with school leaders in 2019.

The interviews in 2019 were conducted towards the end of the year when most Cohort 1 schools were finishing participation in Fair Education and provided opportunity to focus on overall impact. The interviews were conducted from August to October 2019. All interviews were conducted either by phone or face to face during site visits. Leaders from all Cohort 1 and Cohort 2 schools, including each school in a cluster, were initially approached to participate in the final stage of the evaluation.

Table 2-3 reports the number of interviews conducted in 2019, by characteristics of schools and Fair Education involvement. Interviews for six projects, covering a mixture of individual projects and clusters, were conducted as part of site visits. The schools which were visited on site in 2019 were written up in the six case studies that feature in the appendix. Their presentation in this format showcases the rich qualitative data collected over the evaluation. The case studies draw on interview materials collected from 2016, including in some cases materials from their initial application for funding, as well as their reflections in the final 2019 interviews. Reference to the case studies are made throughout the report in appropriate sections.

Phone interviews for all other projects and schools generally took around 40 minutes to conduct. In 2019, every school participating as part of an individual project offered a participant interviewee, whilst for schools involved in cluster arrangements, a project member from at least one school per cluster took part in an interview. The intention was to achieve more than one interview per cluster so as to gather wider perspectives on school experiences of the cluster arrangements. Participation in the evaluation was hardest to obtain from cluster schools which were not lead schools. In some cases this was due to schools having disengaged from their cluster project altogether.

Table 2-3 Number of school leader interviews in 2019, by school characteristics

	Number
All participants	72
Cohort 1	34
Cohort 2	38
Individual school	21
Cluster school participant	51
Primary schools	35
Secondary schools	34
Special schools	1
Other*	2

*Other schools leaders are those responsible for specific educational programs within a network

Schools were invited to nominate an interview participant whom they felt could best reflect their experiences with their project and the coaching. This meant that in many schools, more than one interviewee took part in the interview, whereas in others multiple one-on-one interviews were scheduled. One school nominated three interviewees from the one site to discuss their experiences of Fair Education. Multiple interviews from one school occurred most frequently during the site visits when various school leaders over the course of the day were interviewed. Visits to cluster schools often involved interviews at multiple sites and multiple schools. Interviewees were most commonly the school principals, or in larger schools the leader responsible for the implementation of the school's project. In some instances interviews were held with key community leaders, teachers, and Indigenous elders who were actively involved in the program.

Overall, in 2019 72 interviews were conducted with educators involved in leading their school's involvement in Fair Education. More Cohort 2 than Cohort 1 schools took part in the 2019 sample, reflecting the greater number of Cohort 2 schools participating. Thirty-five primary schools and 34 secondary schools took part, and in addition one school working with students with special needs participated. Two other interviews were conducted with school leaders who were not directly responsible for students per se, but were responsible for educational programs which had direct involvement in Fair Education.

Data analysis and methodology

Interviews conducted in 2019 focused on the following:

- benefits/challenges of the Fair Education project
- benefits/challenges of the Fair Education coaching
- relationships developed with other schools through Fair Education
- improvement in parent and community engagement
- improvement in student outcomes
- sustainability of Fair Education initiative at the school.

Interviews with Cohort 1 schools took into account that they were completing their formal involvement in Fair Education. The questions for Cohort 2 schools were positioned differently, as they still have one more year of involvement remaining. Additional questions were asked of schools which were part of a cluster.

All interviews were fully transcribed and coded according to the key discussion points for this final report. Coding involved condensing meaning, in part to identify relevant themes, to facilitate the interpretation of findings. A grounded theory methodology was applied to the interpretation of qualitative data, which follows the approach by Glaser and Strauss, where meaning can only be generated inductively from the data (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). This is a commonly used qualitative data method of analysis, used to codify and make sense of the data. The overall objective of the grounded theory methodology is to approach qualitative data with an openness. It encourages researchers to seek out insights from data, rather than

fitting theories to it. In other words, this evaluation builds on the insights of schools about their experiences of Fair Education and their perspectives on project success.

Throughout the report, quotes and materials taken from the interview transcripts have, at all times, been anonymised and attributed to the 'school leader'. To protect the identity of participants, they are at all times de-identified and no individual is referred to personally. School names are also de-identified.

Previous reporting

Three reports were submitted previously as part of the evaluation:

1. A baseline report in 2017 outlined the features and elements of schools and clusters selected for Cohort 1, together with their nominated projects.
2. The second progress report in 2018 presented some initial findings and early insights on the development of Cohort 1 Fair Education projects and coaching.
3. The third progress report delivered in early 2019 provided an overview of Cohort 1 and 2 schools, giving an insight into their implementation and progress towards their Fair Education objectives.

Ethics compliance

As a research centre within Victoria University (VU), CIRES is required to comply with all university policies and procedures for conducting research in an ethical manner, including adherence to the Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research. Human research is governed by Australian law that establishes rights for participants and imposes general and specific responsibilities on researchers and institutions. The evaluation activities set out in the framework received approval in early 2016 from the Victoria University Human Research Ethics committee (HRE16-191). The ethics committee at VU operates to review all research involving people to ensure compliance of research with research protocols and standards, and to oversee research to ensure the appropriate management of research data, as well as ensure that publication and dissemination of research findings are consistent with research protocols (including protecting confidentiality and managing intellectual property).

3. Key lessons from implementation of Fair Education

This chapter looks at what some of the key lessons that we learn from the implementation of Fair Education in NSW for Cohort 1 and Cohort 2 projects and schools. The chapter has a focus on both dimensions of Fair Education support: the coaching and the funding provided for a school-designed project. Each dimension is addressed separately. The discussion draws substantially from the evidence collected in the most recent set of interviews conducted with school leaders in 2019. The second part of the chapter identifies characteristics of success for the projects which met or indeed exceeded their own Fair Education objectives. A number of challenges or barriers to project implementation are also identified. The chapter ends with recommendations for improving the Fair Education model.

Role of coaching

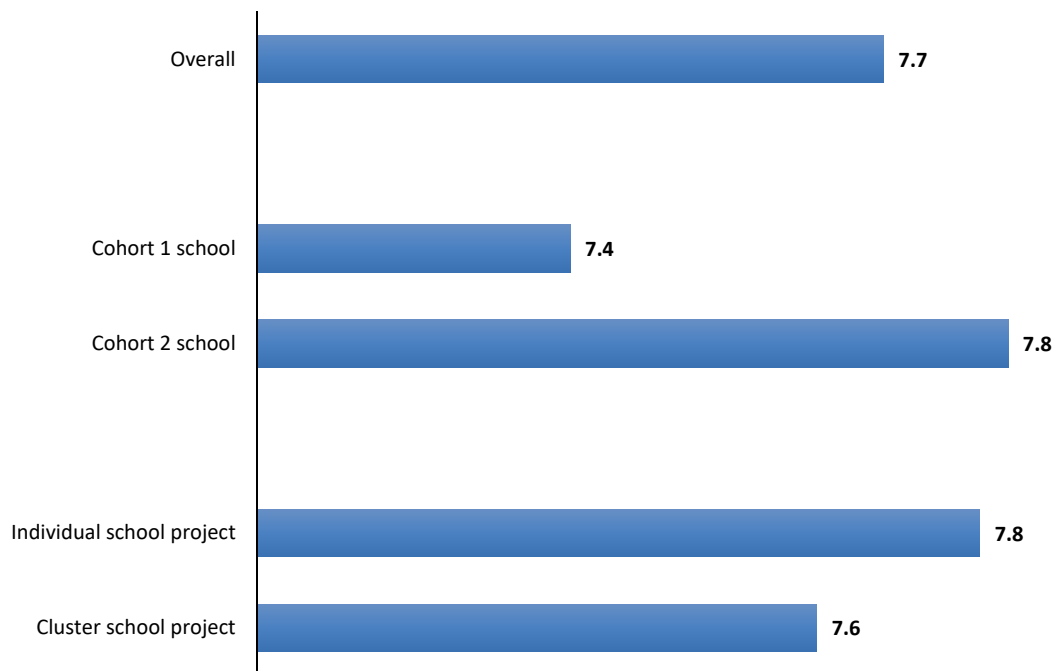
Coaching is a critical component of Fair Education. According to the Fair Education model of educational change, school improvement can be supported in part through the role of a coach or mentor to assist school leaders in planning, building, implementing and reflecting on their projects. The role of a coach is supported by research on leadership and school improvement which shows that school leaders perform better when they are supported by peers and additional resourcing including time-release, professional learning and coaching (Darling-Hammond, 2012; Hay Group, 2013). One essential aspect of coaching within an educational setting is that it 'encourages, stretches and pushes others to take responsibility for their development, set goals, take action and grow' (Hay Group, 2013).

Fair Education is in part based on the belief that supporting disadvantaged schools to develop more effective leaders will help build the school culture and practices needed to better engage families and communities in schools, and by doing so, better support student learning. As part of the approach to helping build leadership capacity at the schools, coaching and mentoring from an expert coach was to be provided to School Leadership each term throughout the life of the project. Coaching was to focus on building strategic leadership capability and providing support to schools to successfully implement the particular school designed project that aims to improve family and community engagement in student learning.

In the most recent round of interviews, school leaders were asked to rate, based on their experience, how well the coaching had worked overall. Schools leaders rated the coaching on a scale from 0 to 10, where 10 was the highest. Figure 3-1, which presents those results, shows that overall their rating of the coaching achieved an average of 7.7, varying by school and project characteristics.

The coaching support was rated more highly by Cohort 2 schools (7.8) than by Cohort 1 (7.5). One factor which could explain the stronger impact of the coaching amongst the second cohort of schools, was that for Cohort 2 the practices and administration of the coaching were more developed by Schools Plus. Personnel changes and program growth meant that the coaching model evolved from delivery by one coach into delivery by a 'panel of coaches' (Australian Schools Plus, 2019). The evolution of the coaching model, which is discussed later in the chapter, contributed to the way that Fair Education was experienced by schools.

Figure 3-1 School leader rating of how well the coaching worked overall, by Fair Education characteristics



Coaching was rated more positively in schools that participated in individual projects (7.8) than in schools that participated as part of a cluster (7.6). This may be because coaching—a key mechanism of Fair Education support—is more diffuse when operating across a wider range of settings. Individual schools may have been able to realise greater impact through the coaching support, arguably because it was focused on only their school.

In the course of the interviews, school leaders were also asked to reflect on the perceived benefits and limitations of the coaching. Roughly two-thirds of the remarks about the coaching and the role of the coaches in assisting schools to achieve their objectives were positive.

The relationships that coaches form with school leaders can be important to the way coaching and the value of coaching is perceived. This in turn can affect perceptions of impact. One school leader observed that *‘if the coach didn’t have a good relationship with the group, I think that would be difficult for the entire project’*.

Different coaches brought their own individual style to their work with schools. Although there was standardisation, sessions were also tailored by the various coaches to fit their expertise and professional background. Each coach ran their sessions differently and adjusted the delivery methods and/or stimulus materials. The points below provide analysis about what the school leaders valued most about the coaches and the support they provided in an aggregated and non-identifiable format. Rather than focus on coaches as individuals, the

qualities of coaching team as a whole are addressed. Overall, the positive qualities of the coach and ability to support schools encompass the following dimensions:

Where school leaders reported that the coaching had been valuable, most made mention of the following aspects in particular:

- Expertise of coaches
- Mutual trust
- Instilled confidence
- Independent voice

Expertise

'X was an excellent coach. X knew what he was doing'.

Virtually every school leader interviewed described the coach they were connected with as having a high level of expertise. For example, one leader commented that, *'(The coach in our project) has an exceptional capacity to see what is happening now, in real time, and to always keep people on track. But at the same time makes us feel like we are owning the ideas'*. Some coaches were already known to particular schools or were described by principals as having a strong reputation amongst the wider educational community in NSW, a factor which school leaders reported was important to establishing trust and confidence. In some schools, despite the coach not being known to the school leadership, some leaders reported having strong connections with the coach from the outset while in other schools where the coach was unknown, leaders reported establishing strong relationships over the course of the school's involvement in Fair Education. The high regard for the expertise of coaches amongst school leaders, meant that the leaders felt more comfortable in using their coach as a critical friend. One school leader reflected that a key benefit of the coaching was *'just having that expert colleague to rely on and bounce ideas off and to challenge us. (It) was an incredible benefit'*. Many school leaders described being confident enough with their coach to discuss the application of new ideas and strategies to improve their school in various ways, because of the expertise of the coach.

Mutual trust

Mutual trust was mentioned by school leaders as important to obtaining value from coaching. School leaders needed to trust their coach, which made them more likely to take on board the feedback or advice provided to them during their coaching sessions. Furthermore, school leaders had to sense that their coach trusted them as well. School leaders reported positively about how the coaching team treated them as professionals who were able to engage in school improvement on their own terms. One leader said, *'I liked the fact that the coach did not pressure us, but that they respected us to do a good job'*. With the trust of their coach, some schools reported that they felt empowered to work towards their Fair Education objectives.

Instilled confidence

A number of school leaders described how they felt a sense of validation and affirmation provided to them by their coach, particularly about their perceived 'progress' as part of Fair Education. Coaching gave confidence to some of the school leaders. As one leader described it: *'The benefits of the coaching were part of the project; without that we wouldn't have been brave enough to take the leaps and bounds that we did take in the end'*. Another school leader said that *'the coaching gave me the confidence and assurance to know that I was doing the right thing. It was important for me'*. One school leader reflected *'The wonderful thing was that we felt that we were allowed to fail, which probably meant we felt confident we were not going to.'*

Some leaders who were new to their position commented that their coach validated their vision and allowed them to *'think larger'*. The importance of building confidence for school leaders has the tendency to be focused on leaders who were new to the role. However, the interviews gave insight into the importance of the coaching for experienced school leaders. One educator in the latter stages of his career mentioned that the relationship developed with the coach was especially important. He had been a leader for so long that it was an unexpected affirmation when the coach recognised his contribution to the school and made him feel valued. He felt buoyed and re-energised by the coach's feedback.

Independent voice

The independence of coaches from the Department was raised as an important element to schools leaders. Not being connected to the Department meant, according to school leaders, that they could view their coach more as an impartial 'critical friend' than as a line supervisor. The independence of the coaching support was described by some as a new experience, as school leaders were more accustomed to Departmental initiatives with more rigid frameworks. It meant that school leaders could tailor the coaching support to suit their school's context and need, and set their own objectives, rather than have to adhere to the requirements associated with the Department. Several coaches, some of whom had once worked in the Department, also noted that they could support schools in a different way. One coach said, *'The relationships I've built with the schools are very different from those that the Education Directorates build with the schools.'*

Challenges with coaching and coaches

Feedback and the rating of the value of coaching was not universally positive. Some school leaders identified challenges they had encountered in terms of the support that they received from the coach, which diminished the benefit in certain school contexts. From the perspective of school leaders, the key challenges were:

- Lack of connection
- Different coaching styles
- Misplaced target audience

Lack of connection

Due to the interpersonal aspect to coaching, coaches and school leaders were not always able to connect. Some school leaders related more easily to their coaches than others did, and some coaches potentially felt greater traction with some leaders. The interpersonal aspect to the coaching role is one which cannot be controlled for, yet it can be planned for. Therefore, the decision to allow the shifting of coaches between schools when required was one way to remedy some of the challenges when interpersonal tensions were an issue. The development of the Schools Plus coaching panel, where coaches could transfer from school to school, was raised by some school leaders as important in instances where things had not worked as desired. The transition of coaches in some instances mitigated the identified challenge allowing things to get back on track.

Changes in coaches and coaching styles

Reviewing feedback from different school leaders, it was clear that coaches tended to have different styles and approaches to how they engaged with schools and structured their coaching sessions. The differences were also made apparent in the interviews with coaches where there were differences described in how coaches framed their role, approach to coaching sessions and responsibilities. Initially, for Cohort 1 schools, there was a single coach covering all projects and schools. When a panel of coaches was established, and there was a change in coach for particular schools, it could lead to inconsistency in styles and expectations. One example was in a school which went from sessions which were led by the coach to sessions that school staff were expected to lead themselves. The school leader, in that situation, described how the school leaders involved were caught by surprise: *‘So we would get sent the agenda, but we were expected, with the coach, to co-design the day. I did not realise this until I explicitly asked “Who ran that day just then?”’*. It seemed to take some schools longer than others to adjust to new coaching styles. Different coaches rotating through the one school also led to inconsistency in the relationships. New coaches had to familiarise themselves quickly with the school, the leadership dynamics and the particular Fair Education project. With the departure of a coach, schools in turn also lost someone with a historical understanding of their involvement in the Fair Education program, which at times unsettled their own sense of coherence.

Misplaced target audience

Some school leaders felt that the coaching was directed to the wrong audience: *‘People who were actually working on the program weren’t the ones benefitting from the coaching sessions’*. This viewpoint was particularly prevalent in cluster projects. Leaders of schools in one cluster of secondary schools described the coaching as ‘low-level’ and indicated that participants in the coaching sessions gradually dropped off over time. Over time, as a result of their dissatisfaction, many school leaders failed to attend the coaching sessions or did so with limited enthusiasm. Some of the school leaders from this cluster stated in their final interviews that more emphasis should have been given to teachers who were actively engaged in their project attending the sessions as well.

This was not raised during the interviews with school leaders from individual project schools. Leaders at these schools often reported that their coaching sessions included a mix of school

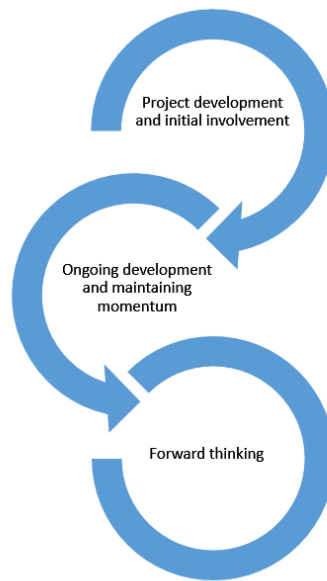
leaders, teachers and other important stakeholders relevant to the project. This suggests that it was easier for individual schools to tailor the coaching sessions to suit them and their objectives, which also meant that the appropriate people received the coaching support.

Importance of coaching to the success of the school project

While the coaching and the project are two separate components of the Fair Education model, they are designed to work in an interconnected manner. Because the projects were proposed by the schools themselves as part of their applications to participate in Fair Education, the coaching component was the aspect of Fair Education which schools were less familiar with when they began their involvement in the program. Yet by the end, the coaching was identified by some schools as their main derived benefit. One school leader said, *'The coaching has to be a mandatory part of the program. Without it, we would not be where we are today.'*

School leaders articulated the importance of the coaching differently, according to whether they came from Cohort 1 or Cohort 2 schools and according to how their project had developed over time. Projects that had evolved smoothly often had a different view of coaching compared with projects where implementation had suffered setbacks.

In the next section, the importance of the coaching as a support to the success of projects is discussed in relation to the 'life cycle' of the project, as depicted in Figure 3-2. The cycle comprises three broad stages: (1) implementation of project for improvement, (2) ongoing project development, and (3) thinking forward. Early on, the coaching supported the initial stages of the project implementation. During the mid-point it served to help keep the project on track and provide momentum. Finally, coaching advanced strategic thinking and forward planning, as school leaders negotiated their formal withdrawal from Fair Education after three years of support.

Figure 3-2 Project life cycle and alignment with coaching support

Importance of coaching to the project development and initial involvement in Fair Education

The importance of the coaching, particularly to early project development, was acknowledged by many school leaders. The initial coaching sessions, as well as participation in the first conference, gave many schools a sense of the vision and objectives of the Fair Education program. The early coaching served an important role to give school leaders an understanding of what would be required of them in the short to medium term. It also set the parameters for their ongoing involvement in Fair Education. Early coaching sessions also helped schools broaden their objectives beyond those they had initially conceived at the point of application. As described by one school, the initial coaching session *'enabled us to situate the project within the bigger picture, not just of our school, but what is happening internationally in terms of schooling and education and the way that parents engage with that'*. For schools in a cluster, the early coaching provided the forum for schools to come together and discuss their objectives. One school leader in a cluster described how *'the early coaching shaped a common agenda'*.

Early on, there was an emphasis on schools situating their specific project as part of the strategic thinking articulated in their school plan. Leaders spoke positively about this. One school leader described how this process made their school plan tangible. Another school leader said, *'It's probably the first plan I've ever written that is real and authentic.'*

Importance of coaching to ongoing development and maintaining momentum

Not only was the coaching seen as vital in the initial stages for many schools, coaching sessions which happened mostly every school term were also described as important check points for many for monitoring progress. Schools were able to transition from the implementation to the growth phase in their projects, by using the sessions as an impetus to progress from one stage to the next. Particularly within cluster projects, coaching was described as a key

collaborative activity that brought leaders together, especially in instances where they did not already have an established collaborative network or forum.

Some leaders suggested that without the coaching it would have been easy to lose focus.

‘(The coach) coming into the school regularly has meant that (they have) encouraged us and given us the motivation to keep moving forward, to be prepared around those meetings, but also to further engage with those discussions and reflect and plan’.

Others described the coaching session as a beneficial mechanism of soft accountability:

‘The good thing about it (Fair Education), is that it provided a structure and accountability without being too in your face. We have had direction and time to reflect but we haven’t had the formalities to make it a headache’.

Schools that reported being successful in meeting and even exceeding their Fair Education objectives often described used the coaching sessions as an opportunity to build traction. School leaders felt that *‘having the cycle of coaching has been very important...It is also nice to get validation from someone who can see projects across the broader scheme and let us know where we are’*. Another said, *‘it is nice to get some positive feedback and encouragement which has also been helpful in keeping us moving forward’*.

Importance of coaching to thinking forward

Towards the final stages of participation in Fair Education, some Cohort 1 school leaders described the coaching at this point as helping the school to focus their own thinking and reflecting on what they would do after Fair Education finished. One school leader said that

‘the money was really great to resource our school but the coaching is what gave us the time and the space to think about what was important and to keep us working towards that vision. To re-energise us as well’.

Limitations to impact of coaching on projects

The challenges to the coaching generally presented after the first year of the project, when projects moved from the setup to the implementation phase. In the course of the interviews, school leaders provided commentary about some of the challenges with the coaching and how it could be have better supported the Fair Education project.

This section summarises their views, which were around three main points:

1. Length of each coaching session
2. Structure of the coaching sessions
3. Being fit for context

Length of each coaching session

Although the coaching framework stipulated that the coaching sessions provided each term were to be of two to three hour duration, some school leaders reported sessions that exceeded this. In some cases, the lengthier coaching sessions restricted school leader involvement because of competing commitments. In some instances when coaching sessions exceeded the stipulated time, school leaders became reluctant to attend or their participation in the coaching dropped off as time went on, particularly for leaders in cluster projects. In the interviews with Schools Plus coaches, an observation was made that some school leaders failed to recognise that the coaching sessions were a mandated part of involvement in Fair Education.

It is sometimes difficult for school leaders, as some commented in interviews, to attend every coaching session. The scheduling of times and dates is complicated, especially for time-poor school leaders. Some school leaders reported being unable to attend coaching on a particular day as the timing of the session conflicted with demands that required their urgent attention. In other instances, school leaders described an unforeseen event at the school which prevented their attendance on the day.

One school leader stated how, *'coaching felt at times like an imposition. It was stressful for us to organise work for classes when it was coaching time'*. The opportunity cost to schools to attend the coaching was of particular concern within individual schools where a number of teaching staff participated in the coaching sessions at the one time. It highlighted an ongoing challenge reported by these schools, namely the limited pool of substitute teachers. School leaders described how it was problematic at times for them to organise substitute teachers, particularly when they required multiple teachers for the same day. This suggests that it may be important to take into account the ability for schools to resource and staff their schools during coaching sessions.

Structure of the coaching sessions

According to some school leaders, the objectives and intentions for each coaching session were not made explicit enough. One leader felt that the coaching needed to be structured so that there was a clear outcome after every session, as opposed to what they regarded as merely 'a philosophical discussion'. Another principal said, *"after the two coaching sessions I have walked away wondering what the purpose was for (the last) two to three hours? The meetings seemed to me as just general chit-chat."* One preferred, *"really targeted sessions where we are asked to bring one thing we were focusing on. I would like short meetings. I think we are skilled operators. I would like specific 'take-aways,' for example advice on how to collect data better"*. Some school leaders, it would seem, would prefer more structure built into the sessions to make the sessions more useful to the leaders.

School leaders acknowledged that schools should be accountable for their Fair Education funding, yet they felt that the coaching sessions should not involve too many additional tasks which do not add value, either to its project or to the school's strategic direction. One explained: *'We would get readings that were never used. It became something we have to do but we lost the commitment and the faith in the coaching. We felt the self-interest of the coach*

was being met rather than our interests’. One example of a task that schools were progressively asked to do by Schools Plus was the ‘*Evidence in a Frame*’ documentation. These resources were clearly not taken up by all schools in a meaningful way. Some schools felt that *Evidence in a Frame* enabled them to track progress, while others did not see it as a useful tool to define their own accomplishments. These types of materials may need greater refinement for certain schools, or in some cases new materials may be required to ensure that schools gain value from the work that they undertake for the sessions. The coaches reported in interviews that they were conscious of the limitations around the evaluation tools and strategies used within schools and discussed the need to work on more structured and consistent rubrics and documents. The in-school evaluation processes had different degrees of effectiveness across projects. Some schools took up the evaluative tools developed in conjunction with the coaches and other schools found them less viable. The coaches acknowledged this as an area that they intend to work on in future years.

Being fit for context

Coaching sessions needing to be more cognisant of the school context in which they are delivered, was also raised by some school leaders. This issue was raised particularly in relation to how much coaching was needed and available. Although the regularity of the coaching sessions on a per-term basis was viewed as beneficial for many schools (‘once a term is perfect, it’s do-able. It’s not too much’), others wished that they had the opportunity to have more coaching sessions at other times, particularly if they were encountering difficulties with their project implementation and development:

There were times when we needed more, when we were running thin or didn’t know what we wanted to do. This is all about scheduling. It’s next to impossible to do.

Coaching should be more regular and at least twice a term.

A few schools discussed how they facilitated their additional need for coaching support by using their own budgets to pay for extra sessions with their Fair Education coach. Some mentioned that they would consider this as an ongoing option once they ceased formal involvement with Fair Education.

Project funding

The next section addresses the mechanism of the project funds to support disadvantaged schools as part of Fair Education. The funding was designed to provide school leaders with the opportunity and flexibility to undertake an intervention of their own design. Three-year project funding for individual schools or school clusters was meant to help facilitate the establishment of an approved project focused on improving family and community engagement in student learning. For purposes of analysis, the projects implemented by schools in Cohort 1 and Cohort 2 were grouped thematically according to the intent of their original objective.

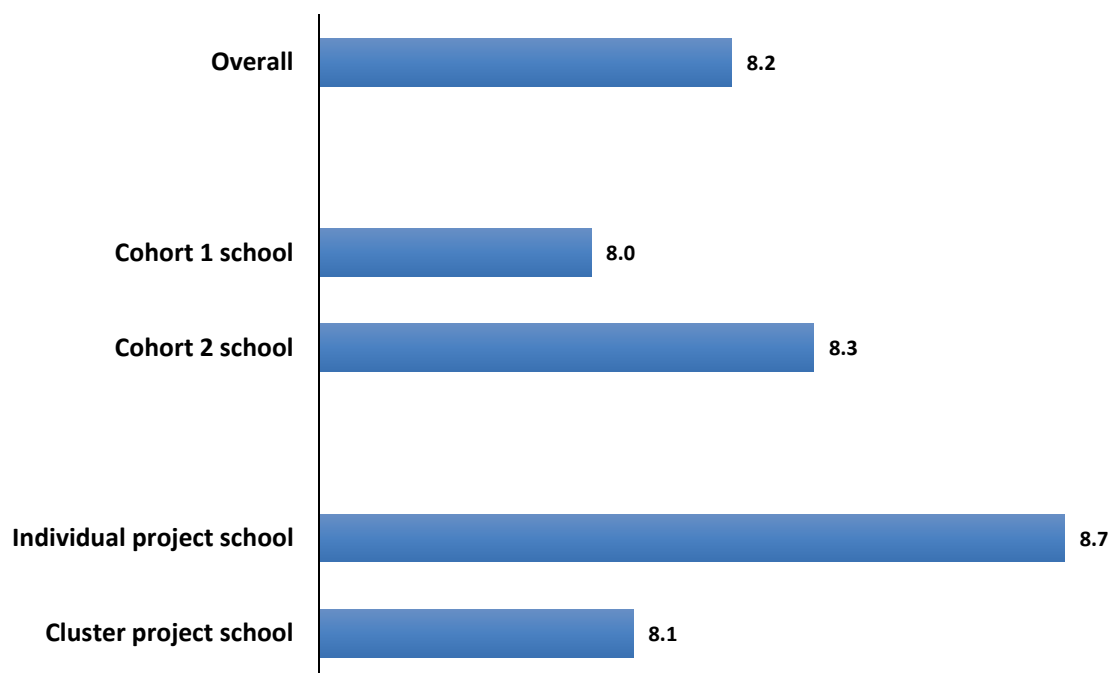
Fair Education provides schools with the opportunity to be able to design their own unique project, with a clear fit to their specific context and the challenges that their communities face. The application process was designed to ensure that projects align to the objectives of

Fair Education, particularly in the intent to improve school relationships with the community in order to lift student learning outcomes.

In the final interviews, school leaders were asked to rate how well they felt their project worked overall on a scale from 0 to 10, where 10 was the highest positive score (see Figure 3-3). The overall perceptions of how well the projects have worked (8.2) were slightly higher than the rating of the coaching support (7.7). There was a small difference between Cohort 1 (8.0) and Cohort 2 (8.3) schools in their assessment of the project suggesting that Cohort 2 schools are more positive. However, Cohort 2 schools have had one less year of participation and may deliver a different result if asked to rate the project in a year's time.

One result to note from Figure 3-3 is that individual project schools rate how well their project has worked much more positively (8.7) than do cluster project schools (8.1). This means that for both coaching and project, cluster schools do not feel that things have worked as well as do schools participating with individual projects.

Figure 3-3 School leader rating of how well the project worked, by school and Fair Education characteristics



Schools developed a range of projects as part of the Fair Education program. To capture the variation in a useful way for comparison, and for analysis, the projects have been grouped into themes according to the principal project objective as stated in the original applications for funding. The themes reflect what was initially proposed for each project rather than what transpired, recognising that some projects changed or evolved over time moving away from the originally conceived project. Thematic groupings of the projects have been used in previous evaluation reports. The advantage of grouping projects according to themes is that

it is possible to compare groups of like-projects, while being cognisant of different school settings.

Table 3-1 presents the number of projects from Cohort 1 and Cohort 2 schools classified according to eight themes:

1. Implementation of applied/project-based learning
2. Development of student social-emotional skills
3. Communicating with families
4. Whole-school approach to teaching and learning
5. Involvement of parents in school life
6. Improving transitions
7. Establishment of mentoring
8. School leadership structure redesign.

The themes and the associated projects are discussed in the ensuing section. Only the projects and schools which were involved in Fair Education up to the end of 2019 are included here; those schools which have withdrawn from Fair Education are excluded in this analysis and subsequent discussion.

Table 3-1 shows that projects with a focus on applied or problem-based learning, or those seeking to develop student social-emotional skills, were the most commonly implemented by schools. Each area was the target of six projects. Aside from these, a further three projects had as their core focus improving communication with families. Two projects involved transforming teaching and learning across the whole school. Other projects sought to involve parents in school life, improve student transitions, establish mentoring and redesign school leadership structures. It is important to note that the themes are not mutually exclusive. In practice, there was considerable overlap. Particularly for Cohort 1 schools, by the end of the three years, some schools had changed their practices in ways which encompass aspects from several of the themed areas.

Table 3-1 Number of projects undertaken by Cohort 1 and 2 by initial objective

Theme	Number of projects	Number of schools*
Implementation of applied learning/project-based learning	6	15
Development of student social-emotional skills	6	17
Improving communication with families	3	7
Whole-school approach to teaching and learning	2	2
Involvement of parents in school life	2	2
Improving transitions	2	12
Establishment of mentoring	1	7
School leadership structure redesign	1	1
<i>Total projects</i>	<i>23</i>	<i>63</i>

**Number of schools per project reflects current Cohort 1 and 2 participation numbers*

Each project represents an intervention by a school to improve and better meet the needs of its community (parents, students, staff etc.). The themes provide an insight into how

disadvantaged schools sought to improve and change. Some of the themes have a more immediate link to the Fair Education objective of improving parent and community engagement. For instance, the projects which were about involving parents in school life, or improving communication, link explicitly to the work undertaken by Epstein on family involvement in schools (Epstein, 2001). Some projects did not have improving community engagement as a clear or immediate goal. For example, schools which implemented projects initially aimed at encouraging applied learning or project-based learning did not have overt family involvement or improving community engagement in the project design. It remained to be seen whether or not projects aimed at developing a more interactive, purposeful curriculum also increase student and family engagement.

The effects of the projects across a range of outcomes are discussed in Chapter 4.

Implementation of applied/project-based learning

Six projects, inclusive of both individual schools and clusters, involved using the Fair Education grant to undertake an applied-learning initiative. Applied learning is a common educational intervention to make the school curriculum more relevant. Pridham and Deed (2012) describe applied learning as ‘a holistic approach to education that encourages the learner to make connections to what is characterised as ‘the real world’, as opposed to the traditional school-based classroom’ (p.36). Another educational term commonly used to describe a curriculum-based intervention with a similar intent is Project Based Learning (PBL). As with applied learning, PBL is sometimes adopted to help strengthen academic skills alongside other more generic skills which are valued such as critical thinking, problem solving and the ability to use critical feedback.

In six projects, schools (as individual project schools or in clusters) used Fair Education funding to implement or enhance applied learning. The projects included schools covering students in primary schools as well as in secondary schools. Examples of Fair Education projects described under this theme included schools that used their Fair Education funding, sometimes in conjunction with other funding, to:

- build a collaborative learning space, to support project-based learning and multi-disciplinary learning in a non-traditional classroom context
- re-design the curriculum aligned to PBL principles including new units such as playground investigation and engineering design
- design a garden to engage students in horticulture
- continue to develop project-based learning around potential career pathways
- develop curriculum units around STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) based applied learning
- provide targeted students with different curriculum opportunities, including behaviour and life skills workshops as well as a work placement.

Each of the projects sought to create opportunity to make learning more applied and relevant for young people. As one school leader commenting on the benefit of projects built on applied learning principles remarked such projects *'gave our young people some chance to feel good about themselves and what education can offer them.'*

Many of the projects involving project-based learning initially targeted specific groups of learners: either those who were disengaged or a specific year level (e.g. Year 9). They were not school-wide.

Development of student social-emotional skills and capabilities

Another group of Fair Education supported projects was aimed at improving student social-emotional skills and capabilities. There were two different sorts of approaches apparent across the projects: (1) those where schools used their project funding to develop their own initiative for upskilling students, and (2) those that purchased external services in support of skill development. The main example of a package schools purchased externally was *Advancement via Individual Determination* (AVID). AVID is a program designed to develop student academic, social and emotional skills, in support of aspirations for university entry.

AVID is a model adapted from a long running program in the United States, with a reputation for supporting university-oriented students through structure, mentoring and specific teaching of study techniques. From their study of AVID in the USA, Llamas, López & Quirk (2014) identified that students involved in the program were more likely to build resilience, self-awareness, problem solving and self-esteem. To date, no such independent studies have been conducted on the program in Australia. Although AVID is growing in popularity, there is limited evidence concerning its effectiveness and long-term advantage for students.

A tension for the Fair Education program, and for the evaluation of Fair Education, is that if projects involving AVID do gain benefits and improvements then it may have nothing to do with Fair Education and everything to do with AVID. Or conversely, if the benefits are not realised for targeted students it may be due to AVID rather than Fair Education. This tension applies to a number of the Fair Education projects.

Four school clusters used their project funding to establish AVID. Primary schools tended to run a more inclusive model by adopting AVID strategies across all year-levels. Secondary schools initially used AVID in select-entry classes only. Of six detailed case studies of projects provided in the Appendix, Deer Valley College describes how AVID was adopted in a regional secondary college. Deer River Public School cluster describes how it was taken up across a cluster of primary schools.

There are also examples of projects aimed at improving student social and emotional skills which did not purchase external services. One high school used funding to develop an integrated approach to embedding four critical skills—critical thinking, creativity, collaboration and communication—into strategic planning of the curriculum in a multi-disciplinary way. Another school implemented a project which encouraged the explicit development of student emotional language, soft skills and a sense of self.

Improvement in communication with families

Although disadvantaged families can sometimes be typecast as ‘hard to reach’, some researchers suggest that it may in fact be schools that are unapproachable for many families (Crozier and Davies 2007). In some schools, leaders and teachers may well see the students as their primary focus and often do not have the time to build regular and personal connections with families. Schools often use traditional styles of communication with parents and families—newsletters, reports etc.

To improve the way in which schools communicate with families, some schools used their Fair Education funding to integrate technology into the communication with community. Technology is viewed by some as a powerful tool, particularly in more geographically dispersed communities, for transforming the way that information and resources are shared between home and school. Some schools used their project funding to purchase applications such as *Dojo* or *See-Saw*, which are designed to facilitate strong parent engagement in learning. One school leader described how this tool enabled the school to segment and target specific parents, as opposed to posting information on Facebook that effectively treats ‘the community as one whole entity’.

Each of the three projects seeking to improve the communication between school and family also developed three-way conversations (school, student, parent) as a standard practice. Three-way conversations bring students into the teacher-parent exchanges, in part to facilitate a greater ability for young people to talk about their own practices and experiences of learning.

One project in this category used Fair Education funding to engage an external consultant to run focus group meetings with parents. From these meetings it emerged that many parents did want to engage with the school in order to support their own children’s learning. The consultant then provided training to teachers on developing a language of meta-cognition for students. The idea is that as students became familiar with the language, they take more responsibility for their learning and are then better able to communicate with teachers and their families.

Change to whole-school approach to teaching and learning

Adopting new approaches to teaching and learning is sometimes proposed by schools in the search for making programs and teaching more effective for students, particularly in disadvantaged schools which have histories of poor student outcomes. This was the approach of two projects in Fair Education which involved schools using their funding to develop a more integrated whole-of-school approach to teaching and learning. Such an undertaking can take considerable time and resources to implement. The approaches adopted in the two projects were quite different, in part due to differences in students and context.

One school chose the Fair Education opportunity to reframe and redesign their approach to teaching and learning by restructuring their curriculum into modules where students could pick what they were interested in within subject domains. The school leader reported that as

a result, the school has 'changed the way things are done as a school. Teachers now work differently'.

The other project involved a cluster of schools serving students with high and additional needs. The school leaders felt that their students were not being served well by the current Australian Curriculum Framework or the NSW curriculum, as many of their students, thanks to disabilities, were falling below standard. The schools used their project funds to develop their own curriculum framework that recognised ways 'to be able to teach and assess students with moderate to severe intellectual disabilities, many of whom have additional disabilities as well.

The point of commonality is that both schools changed their approach to teaching and learning for *all* students. A curriculum redesign of this nature requires significant work, and the schools used their Fair Education funding in part to free up time for teachers to be able to redesign their curriculum.

Involvement of parents in school life

Two schools used their Fair Education funds to develop projects that sought to increase the level of involvement in school of the families in their school community. One developed a community hub, designed to be a welcoming space for new families, particularly from a migrant background. Another was initially going to offer families the opportunity to become sporting coaches and officials, but they subsequently employed a community liaison officer (CLO) to work with families. Both projects began with the view of school leaders that disadvantaged families often want to support their children but often do not know how to engage with schools. The two projects sought to address this issue and promote opportunities for families and schools to come together.

Improved transitions

Two school clusters focused their efforts on improving transitions at the nexus between primary and secondary school, in recognition that the middle years of schooling, particularly between primary and secondary, are regarded as a high-risk phase (MCEETYA, 2008). One project involved a cluster of only secondary schools while the other project involved a mix of a primary school (the lead school) and several secondary schools. The mixed cluster of schools worked together to develop a more coordinated approach to support a smoother transition for students moving between the primary and secondary schools. The other project (secondary school cluster) supported transitions through an emphasis on technology, each school taking a different approach to strengthen the connection for incoming students by engaging them in specific tasks that developed ICT skills.

Establishment of student mentoring

One project involved the implementation by a school of an indigenous mentoring program to help build stronger relationships between students and members of the community. The mentoring program was designed to target specific students and provide them with appropriate supports to improve their engagement at school. Through the mentoring

program the school also sought to give members of its community experience in working with young people and the benefit of volunteering.

Student leadership program development

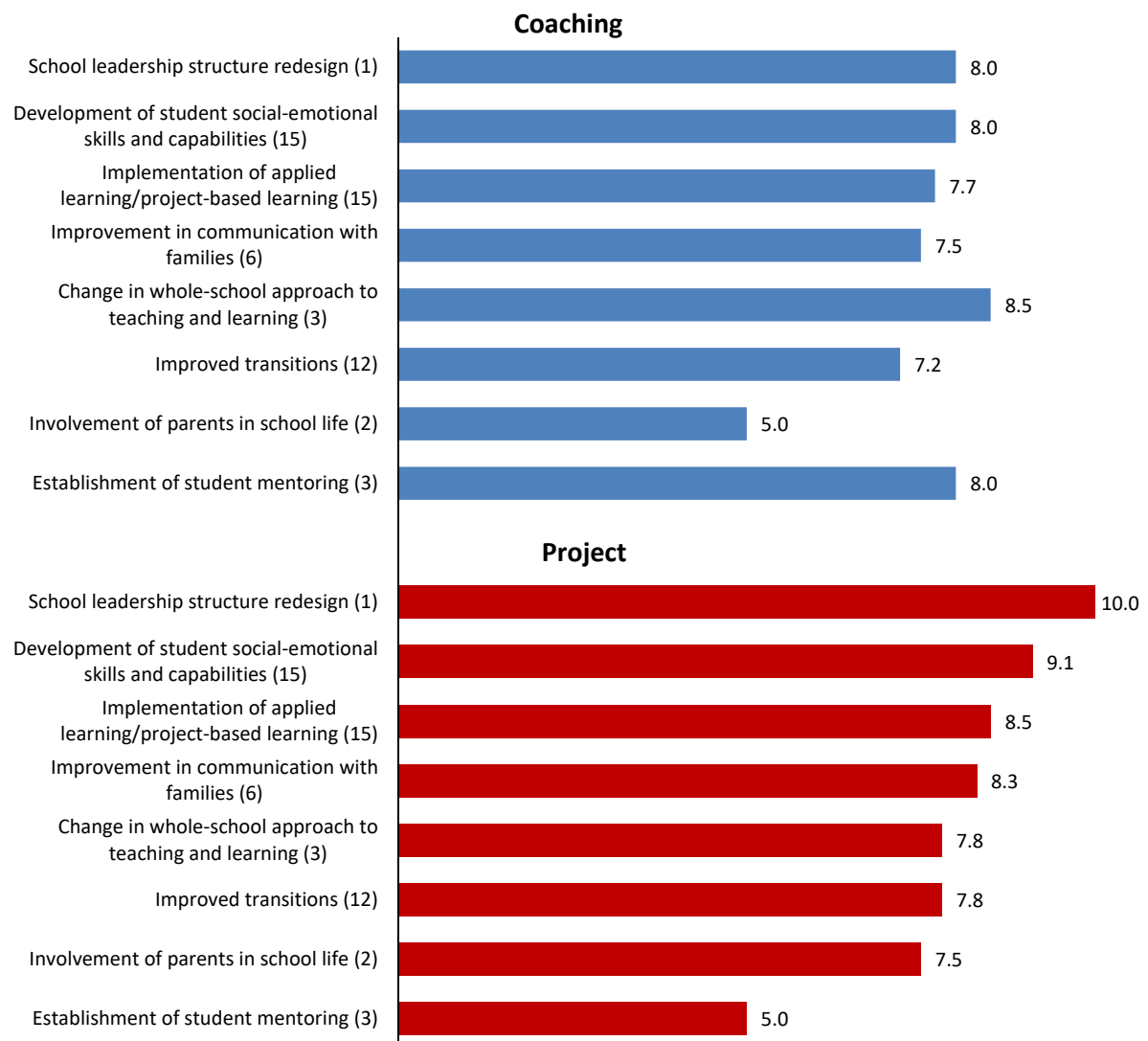
One high school, influenced by the evidence that the development of leadership among students is considered to be a positive means of increasing personal, academic, and wellbeing outcomes for students (e.g. Hallinger, 2003; Leithwood, 1992; Marsh, 2012), used their funding to develop a student leadership program. The school sought to develop ways to feed 'student voice' into the school's overall direction. As one school leader commented, *'It's the peer influence, the discussions around student voice, the engagement with the student body through the leadership initiatives we have put in place that are getting the buy-in from the students, and connection from them to the school'*.

Views on implementation by type of project

The previous two sections illustrate that there was considerable variation in Fair Education projects and how they developed. However, despite the variation, common themes emerged in how school leaders in disadvantaged communities viewed the success of Fair Education.

School leaders were asked as part of the evaluation to rate how well the project and the coaching had worked at their school. The results are displayed in Figure 3-4 by the type of project. It must be kept in mind that there are variations in the numbers of projects and schools across the different types of projects. To recognise this, the numbers of school leaders who provided a rating according to project type are displayed in brackets alongside each project type.

Figure 3-4 School leader rating of how well the project and coaching worked, by type of project



For the project with the objective of building student leadership, the rating by the school leaders indicated that their project had a very strong positive effect (10 out of 10). Projects with the core objective of developing student social-emotional skills and capabilities were also rated as being effective (9.1). The next highest rating by school leaders were for those involving projects with a primary focus on applied learning/project-based learning (8.5), followed closely by projects that improved communication with families (8.3), and those that established student mentoring (8.0).

A key exception among the projects was the project involving the establishment of student mentoring. It was rated as only 5 (out of 10) in terms of how well the project had worked. This project involved pairing up students with indigenous mentors. It encountered a range of

challenges, particularly at the start when adults who initially signed up to the program to become a mentor believed that they were going to be remunerated. After clarifying that this was a voluntary position and relaunching the initiative, the lead school has successfully engaged two mentors for over two years. They have successfully built good relationships and trust with indigenous students. Nevertheless the cluster has not developed the mentoring project as they had expected, which is a contributing factor to their low rating.

There were other types of projects that also didn't rate at the top for having worked well. These included those that focused on involving parents in school (7.5), improving transitions (7.8) and whole of school change in teaching and learning (7.8).

Alongside the school leader rating of projects, Figure 3-4 also shows how school leaders rated the coaching by the type of project. One thing to note is that some schools which didn't rate their project as having worked well, did rate the coaching more highly. This is evident for the project involving the introduction of student mentoring which was rated quite poorly in terms of the project having worked well (5), but rated the effectiveness of the coaching support more highly (8.0). This is a reminder that there are two components of the Fair Education program—project initiative and coaching—and it is possible for one to work better than the other. School leaders who felt that they did not gain the outcomes they had hoped for through the project, nevertheless viewed the coaching support positively, and vice versa. One school leader described how *'even when we were getting to the point where we'd had a few obstacles and we were getting weary ourselves, the coaching sessions really kind of gave us that extra boost that we needed to say, okay we can do this.'*

Characteristics of 'high impact' projects

This section of the chapter discusses the features of projects that met or exceeded their Fair Education objectives. By reviewing the initial Fair Education applications, and comparing these with what school leaders identified as having worked, it was found that while some schools were unable to fully realise their project goals, many achieved the stated objectives for the project. Of these it was clear that several projects, which are here termed 'high impact' projects, exceeded their initial objectives and delivered a wider set of school improvements than originally scoped or anticipated. Key characteristics of these projects are summarised and extrapolated. Initially the section begins with two case studies, one of an individual school and another of a cluster, both exemplifying 'high impact' projects.

Project-based learning at a Secondary school

One secondary school applied for Fair Education as an individual school to develop a project-based learning opportunity interconnected with student career aspirations. They had already piloted the program at the school with Year 7 students and their intention with Fair Education was to be able to grow the practice of PBL across classes from Year 7 to 10. As well as Fair Education, the school has also been involved in Big Picture Australia, a curriculum-based initiative which is centred on mentoring and work placements linked to each student's own interest.

Following support provided to them in their first coaching sessions, school leaders quickly realised their intention to integrate more PBL into their school's strategic plan. One leader described this integration into school strategic planning as an initial first step for success. The second step which he attributed to their success in Fair Education was "having the right people there" who wanted to play an active part in planning and working towards their school's direction.

The school leader believed that parent engagement in the school had improved as a result of the specific PBL project. The initiative encouraged students and their families to have conversations about aspirations and what they would like to achieve over the course of their schooling. Parents particularly enjoy coming to the presentations on their child's specific project.

Through the relationships developed at the conference, school leaders connected with other schools and identified at least two schools which "influenced our thinking in some respects about what we are doing here". As a result, they have integrated three-way conferences into their school's practices. The school aspired to work towards a model devoid of year groups but where there was "student choice, mentoring and improved student engagement".

Improving transitions in a cluster of schools

A cluster consisting of primary and secondary schools came together to improve student transitions. The cluster benefited from the skilled cluster organiser, one of the primary school principals, who took a lead role in organising the coaching and ensuring that the project stayed on track. One school leader acknowledged that "I don't think the project would have been as successful without XX in the driver's seat for us". The school leader described how the lead school organiser developed software platforms through which they could share information, constructed clear expectations around planning and project goals, and sent regular reminders to all schools in the cluster. Fair Education provided schools in the cluster with additional resources to enable them to have regular meetings. Each of the seven principals involved in the cluster attended the coaching sessions and when they could not "they always sent an executive member of staff which gave validity to the decision making".

The primary and secondary schools undertook reciprocal visits. One of the leaders felt that having "a diversity of schools from primary to high school has aided an understanding of transition: what transition means in each of those settings". Another said that "historically, it has been hard to engage with high schools, but this project has allowed us to get past a lot of these previous barriers and issues around the way we each do things". Some secondary teachers reportedly said that the opportunity to visit the primary schools gave them some of the best professional learning they had experienced.

One initiative, which grew out of the work of the cluster, was that primary school students in Grade 6 developed portfolios which profiled who they were as learners. These portfolios were presented at the end of the year, at their intended high schools, to an audience which consisted of their parents, high school peers and staff. The primary school student portfolio presentations took place at three secondary schools in the cluster as well as at the local Catholic school. The cluster lead principal said, "the value of [the portfolio presentation] exceeds our greatest dreams because this is where we want the work to go".

The cluster's work was not only focused on between-school transitions. Schools also worked on strategies to improve within-school transitions, with an associated focus on family and community engagement. One example of this engagement was a secondary school which had recently started to work with the parents of Year 10 students to support their child's transition into the senior years. The school provided information sessions for families on how they could support study skills in the home.

A governance structure has been developed to continue what the schools have achieved together after they conclude their involvement in Fair Education.

The diversity of project designs posed challenges to the evaluation in articulating and applying a clear and uniform measure of success. The following analysis provides an understanding about the characteristics of high-impact projects where schools reported things having worked so well that the projects exceeded the original goals and delivered more.

Common characteristics for successful Fair Education projects included the following factors:

- scope for evolving
- 'right' staff involved
- integration into school strategic planning
- sharing a common interest in cluster schools

Scope for evolving

'High impact' projects tended to be those which evolved and expanded beyond their original design. In other words, the range and reach of activities implemented during the project were considerably more than were expressed in the initial application. Furthermore, the project became a vehicle for more systematic and bigger picture thinking. Project leaders borrowed and adapted new ideas to drive various mutually-supportive initiatives across their school. One example of 'evolution' is the school where the original project goal was to use problem-based learning to improve family-school connection. In the final year of implementation the school also instigated three-way parent conversations. Examples of the evolution of project design are provided in the case study of the Ti Tree Secondary College Cluster, which is included in the appendix. Ti Tree Secondary College Cluster grew and developed a program for disengaged learners that became much richer than the objectives expressed in their initial application. They reported having so much success with their current program that they plan to extend into working with disengaged students from upper primary schools in the community.

From this example it would seem that success in Fair Education cannot simply be treated as a linear thing. Projects which evolved from their original design and grew or changed tended to realise more developed outcomes and achievements. Indeed, some projects accomplished different objectives and outcomes from the ones originally intended. Schools leaders expressed a sense of pride and, at times, surprise at how their school had progressed during the life of their project. The emphasis on the initial coaching sessions to expand their vision for school improvement at the start was beneficial to one school which had devised a strategy to embed PBL, *'it's been wonderful to see the development, it hasn't been stagnant. It has taken on a life of its own if you like. Onto the next and the next and the next. I don't know if we had planned and said we are just going to do it this way.'* They now undertake goal setting workshops with teachers, students and families around student learning which they did not do beforehand.

Schools with high-impact projects seemed to be able to leverage the support provided to them through Fair Education coaching to reorientate their direction and adapt new initiatives, at least based on school leaders descriptions of what happened. One school leader said that

the Fair Education coaching has '*changed the way that the school operates*'. The small school has only 21 students and never had any challenges in ensuring that families attend assemblies. However, as a result of discussions had during their involvement in Fair Education, they now increasingly look for other opportunities to bring families into the school and now encourage families to come into the classrooms once the assembly is complete. The school leader reported that families are taking up the opportunity to enter the classroom and develop an understanding of what their children are learning. Families have proven to be especially keen in playing a part in the school's science, technology, engineering and mathematics challenges.

At one site, it was reported that the coaching had given school leaders an opportunity for '*time and space to have deep conversations about learning and education*'. The high impact projects were all those where leaders reflected more positively on the coaching sessions and that coaching at their school had worked well to assist the school develop and build their project more fully. This suggests that success in coaching begets success in the project and vice versa. One school leader of a high impact project said:

The money was there in the background to enable the project, but you can't enable anything if you don't have the coaching and the long term nature of the project to get the thinking right to use your money well.

Some school leaders attributed their project's broadening and evolution to participation in the Fair Education conferences. They claimed that involvement in the annual forums enabled them to learn from what other schools were doing and to adopt or adapt ideas. One leader described how the forum was a positive environment of '*cross pollination*.'

One feature identified in high impact schools as important to the building and transformation of their project beyond initial goals was the flexible approach to governance of Fair Education. The Schools Plus management of Cohort 1 and Cohort 2 schools, including the coaching and acquittal process, gave schools scope to re-orient projects from their original scope. School leaders were not required to adhere strictly to what they had proposed in their original application; instead, many felt supported when they adapted and evolved their approach to school improvement. One school leader described this in the following way, '*the project wasn't just confined to our initial parameters. We were encouraged to take it as far as we possibly could. That allowed us to do that. I don't think if it was government money, or straight from my budget, we wouldn't been able to have the license to do that*'. Initially the school had a focus on their own PBL project which involved the development of flexible learning spaces. As a result of their success, they have now turned their focus onto becoming a hub of professional learning for other schools in the community which are seeking to integrate similar school improvements.

Another contributing factor according to school leaders in high-impact projects was that the support was for more than a year (over a three-year span). The extended time frame provided space for schools to realise broader outcomes and reorient their objectives. The longer time frame meant that projects that lacked a realistic initial design were able to use the coaching to shore up their planning and objectives, which contributed to their eventual success. In

other cases, high-impact projects came into Fair Education with a strong sense of what they wanted to accomplish.

‘Right’ staff involved

A key characteristic shared between ‘high impact’ projects was having and being able to utilise the right staff. One leader said, ‘the number one thing is getting the right staff, doing the right job.’ Obviously, the ‘right’ staff is contextually specific to each school. The skills required of educators involved in a student re-engagement project in the secondary years may be different to those required of educators in special needs settings. In addition to the contextual considerations, the ‘right’ staff were also described as those with an eagerness to lead and drive school improvement.

Integration into school strategic thinking

It has to be part of the whole-school direction and plan. If what you do is an add-on... that doesn't work.

It is embedded in the remaining part of the current school plan to the end of 2020. We have already had early discussions about continuing with the 3 strategic directions... At this stage I am anticipating that our next school plan 2021-2023 will continue to embed the work that has already been done and we will continue to make further improvements.

We are not going to reflect in a few years' time and say, we are still Fair Ed-ing. We don't even do that now. Our discussions aren't about Fair Education now. We don't look at it that way; {cultural} change is fundamental to success.

Another feature of high impact projects is that the schools embedded or integrated the initiative into the broader strategic plans of the school. This was described as being beneficial in several ways. Firstly, it incorporated the Fair Education funded project into existing structures and frameworks already in place within the school. Secondly the inclusion of Fair Education initiatives and objectives in school plans, articulated to their broader community what the school wanted to change and why. It institutionalised the Fair Education project and promoted a broader understanding amongst teachers, parents and students. Effectively, this worked to raise the profile of the initiative and bring others in the community on board.

Sharing a common interest

High impact cluster projects tended to be those that were developed around common interests and a shared educational challenge. Successful clusters which already had shared values and interests had the tendency to be able to sustain engagement, in contrast to situations where schools might form partnerships on the basis of pre-existing relationships or because of their close proximity to one another.

It was common for schools working in cluster arrangements to require extra time to get their project off the ground. Many high-impact cluster projects tended to be those which emanated from a pre-existing idea, so that they were less likely to be de-railed in the initial stages. Such projects also tended to be those where the coaching sessions had consistent participation from all involved schools. One school cluster facilitated participation through the use of video

conferencing and Skype. In less effective clusters, a common complaint was that the travel to coaching sessions and the time taken up to meet with one another imposed a burden on schools, rather than the cluster attempting to work towards a solution.

The common interest which brought the schools together played a part in insulating the project and/or cluster from challenges later on. One pertinent example is where the lead school and some of the other participating schools within one cluster had to cease their formal involvement in Fair Education. This was unexpected and not associated with any aspect of Fair Education. As the remaining schools had developed such a strong sense of purpose, a new lead school was appointed and they were able to grow the reach and impact of the project despite this significant setback. Common interests led to high-impact projects which forged strong partnerships between schools. One assumption is that these clusters with common interests have greater likelihood of retaining their partnership once the Fair Education support has ended.

Challenges or barriers to Fair Education success

This section discusses some of the challenges or barriers to project implementation, which resulted in less successful outcomes. It is important to reiterate that many schools met the objectives as defined in their initial Fair Education applications and some exceeded their expectations. For some projects, however, schools did not achieve all that they had hoped for through their involvement in Fair Education. According to the school leaders in such projects in Cohort 1 and Cohort 2 schools, the following challenges or barriers to success were identified:

- staff turnover
- challenging cluster relationships
- insurmountable challenges

Staff turnover

The difficulties in staffing particular schools has been noted in many school systems, particularly for schools in disadvantaged communities (Halsey, 2018). Staff turnover is not only problematic to the operation of schools, it can set back attempts to realise educational change. Fullan (2001) agrees that school improvements can be undermined when two or three key school leaders leave, while Hargreaves and Fink (2004) identified that ‘leadership, leadership sustainability and leadership succession’ are vital forces influencing the capacity of a school to change and improve.

At times, the revolving door of school leaders and teachers affected schools participating in Fair Education. The Emubush Public School case study provides an example of staff turnover and instability, which influenced the outcomes the school was able to derive through Fair Education.

The Schools Plus coaches commented that leadership changes caused a setback in their relationship building with several schools and impeded the ability for some projects to gain traction. Newly appointed school leaders, for example, were often unfamiliar with the project

and the operation of the coaching support. Sometimes a new principal, or temporary principals, were trying to simply steady the school rather than engage in change. Projects which were not yet embedded into the school's overall strategic direction were particularly susceptible to the impact of staff turnover. Sometimes projects were hindered by staffing changes because project involvement had not been expanded to include a larger group of teachers in a multi-level distributive model.

Staff changes also derailed progress, most of all within cluster arrangements. According to Fair Education guidelines, the lead school has primary responsibility for coordination but in some instances it was difficult for the lead school to keep abreast of all of the staffing changes in participating schools and to brief new leadership about Fair Education. Furthermore, when school leadership changed in non-lead schools the new leaders sometimes failed to attend the coaching sessions and consequently had insufficient information about project funding requirements. The lack of accountability within some cluster arrangements, meant that some schools disengaged from Fair Education involvement.

Staff changes within clusters did not always detract from their Fair Education experience. Over a two-year period in one cluster, there was turnover at principal level in every one of the participating schools. Nevertheless, the new school leaders embraced the Fair Education support structures and within this specific cluster, the coach came to play a significant role in supporting the new leaders. One school leader commented: *'Despite the huge turnover in principals, the momentum has continued, and I would say it has amplified because everyone is so excited by the journey that has started'*.

Staff turnover also resulted in the loss of institutional knowledge, as reported in interviews with some school leaders. Schools which limited the knowledge of Fair Education to a small leadership team, were highly vulnerable. When key members of staff left, it meant that the knowledge of their involvement in Fair Education went with them. More recently appointed staff did not always have a clear sense about why their school applied for Fair Education in the first place. Sometimes the loss of staff resulted in schools making wholesale change to the direction of the project. One school leader confided that because of repeated setbacks to their project they had moved away from their focus on parent and community engagement to a complete re-scoping of their project.

Challenging cluster relationships

It's hard enough to make a commitment within our own school let alone making it across schools.

Because more people are involved, the cluster arrangements can be more dependent on the quality of relationships and the extent to which all partners share in the same commitment. In the 2018 evaluation progress report for one cluster project it was noted that *'not all partners in the cluster share the same vision, goal or priority, so difficult negotiations needed to be managed'*. This view was also articulated by the Schools Plus coaching team (2018) who

described how some coaching sessions for clusters could be hijacked by different off-topic agendas and perspectives and uneven levels of interest in the program.

The complications of scheduling the coaching were particularly amplified in the cluster schools. School leaders in cluster schools, some of whom were located at great distance from one another, needed to travel to a common destination at a mutually agreed time. This might take some leaders away from their schools for a whole day in order to attend. In such instances, Skype or other virtual technologies may have worked well, but there needed to be a willingness amongst schools to develop a range of ways to communicate with each other.

One school leader explained the processes by which they disengaged entirely from their cluster:

After one year of the cycle, I was feeling we were on a different path, so we didn't really attend very often after that. The coaching, I probably went to two coaching sessions, I found it really valuable but then I didn't feel like it was moving on from there for me. I think, because there were so many people in the same group, the coaching as a whole became difficult because we were all at different points... I honestly didn't try (to mitigate the group dynamics), I just stopped attending because it was a time issue as well. The amount of time it would have taken to unpick things, really the time wasn't available. Although I didn't attend, I still took the initial, what I felt was the coaching direction and we continued to follow that in our school plan, I just didn't attend the meeting.

The distribution of project funding amongst schools in a cluster also became an issue for certain principals. The grant amount, when divided up between cluster participant schools, became smaller. School leaders came to regard their allocation as too small to support their ongoing project activities. The grant allocation was also divided up in different ways within each cluster, according to the nature of the project they had devised and implemented.

It became evident in the final year of the evaluation that there were changes in the number of schools regarded as 'active' in terms of their involvement in Fair Education. Despite affirmation from the lead school that certain schools were still involved, the evaluators were unable to confirm this for some schools, and other schools indicated that they were no longer involved. Some participating schools in clusters had not attended coaching sessions, received project funds, or taken part in the annual forum for some time. This occurrence was particularly apparent in the clusters with no central leader. Although it was incumbent on the lead school to coordinate cluster school relationships, it is apparent that at times communications became fraught within some school clusters. While some schools did provide formal notice of withdrawal, there is evidence to suggest the some schools withdrew from clusters without providing a formal notice that they were ceasing involvement in Fair Education. In the cases where responses from certain schools to requests had not been forthcoming, it is reasonable to assume that the unwillingness to participate in the coaching, the conference or any evaluation activities at all is a clear sign of disengagement from Fair Education.

Insurmountable challenges

The challenges faced by some schools described as disadvantaged can be immense, and they can vary. There were some instances of Fair Education projects where the challenges faced by the schools impeded progress leading to situations where the goals of a project were unable to be realised. One school, for example, struggled with gaining access to members of their indigenous community, which significantly impeded the progress of the project. Despite their best attempts, the obstacles they encountered concerning cultural barriers could not be overcome.

4. Fair Education impact

This chapter presents evidence on the impact of Fair Education on school practices, family engagement and student learning. It is in the style of an ‘outcome evaluation’ that assesses the effectiveness of the program in producing change. The chapter reports results obtained from interviews with school principals as well as results from surveys of principals, teachers and parents conducted at different stages of the evaluation. Other sources of data, such as NAPLAN results, are also used.

The Fair Education program logic specifies that Fair Education, through the combined effects of the coaching, project implementation, forum participation, and funding, will help lead to school improvements in the following areas:

- strategic capability of school leadership
- schools working together
- parent and community engagement
- quality of student learning and student outcomes

In the final interview, school leaders provided a rating of the impact of Fair Education on each of the above dimensions, as well as on quality of teaching and learning. The ratings, along with a range of other types of evidence, are used to assess the impact of Fair Education across projects and schools. Each of the four dimensions is looked at in a separate section. The final part of the chapter examines the sustainability and potential broader application of the Fair Education model.

Overview of Fair Education impact

At this stage of the evaluation, it is possible to step back to obtain a high level reflection on what was achieved in the Fair Education Cohort 1 and Cohort 2 projects and schools. This section relies on what school leaders reported about school improvement through Fair Education.

The measurement of impact of any educational intervention is a very challenging task but even more so for Fair Education due to the confounding nature of participation of schools in other programs and initiatives as well as additional funding designed to improve educational outcomes, such as the NSW equity funding (for socioeconomic background, indigenous students, disability, and language proficiency), location funding (rural, remote, isolation) and targeted funding (for new arrivals, refugee students, and integration) that is part of the Department’s Resource Allocation Model for government schools. In recognition of this, school leaders were asked to as best as they could report on the impact of Fair Education treating the impact separately from the effects of other measures or funding that the schools have available to them. There is no way of standardising this or knowing if it is possible or meaningful to do. The evaluation also does not have a control group of schools, such as a matched sample of equivalently funded schools that did not participate in Fair Education, to be able to compare change against. Therefore the self-reported evidence used in this chapter

(other than student outcomes data) is largely subjective. The results still provide a useful guide to reported impact and for comparing across the different types of projects within the Fair Education schools.

In the final interview with school leaders in 2019, they were asked to rate the impact of Fair Education across various dimensions. Figure 4-1 presents the results of school leader ratings of the impact of Fair Education on six areas of schooling relevant to Fair Education influence:

1. Strategic capability of school leadership
2. Relationships with other schools
3. Family and community engagement in student learning
4. Family and community engagement at school
5. Student outcomes
6. Quality of teaching and learning

The results provide the average score from school leaders of their rating of the impact of Fair Education on school improvement across the various dimensions. Leaders were asked to rate the impact on a scale from 1 to 10, where 10 is high impact and 1 is little or no impact. This method of assessing impact does not invest ratings with any objective meaning, but it does give an indication of how schools weight one dimension compared with another. Figure 4-1 disaggregates the average score from school leaders according to whether the school participated in Fair Education as part of a cluster or as an individual school, and an overall score across all projects is provided.

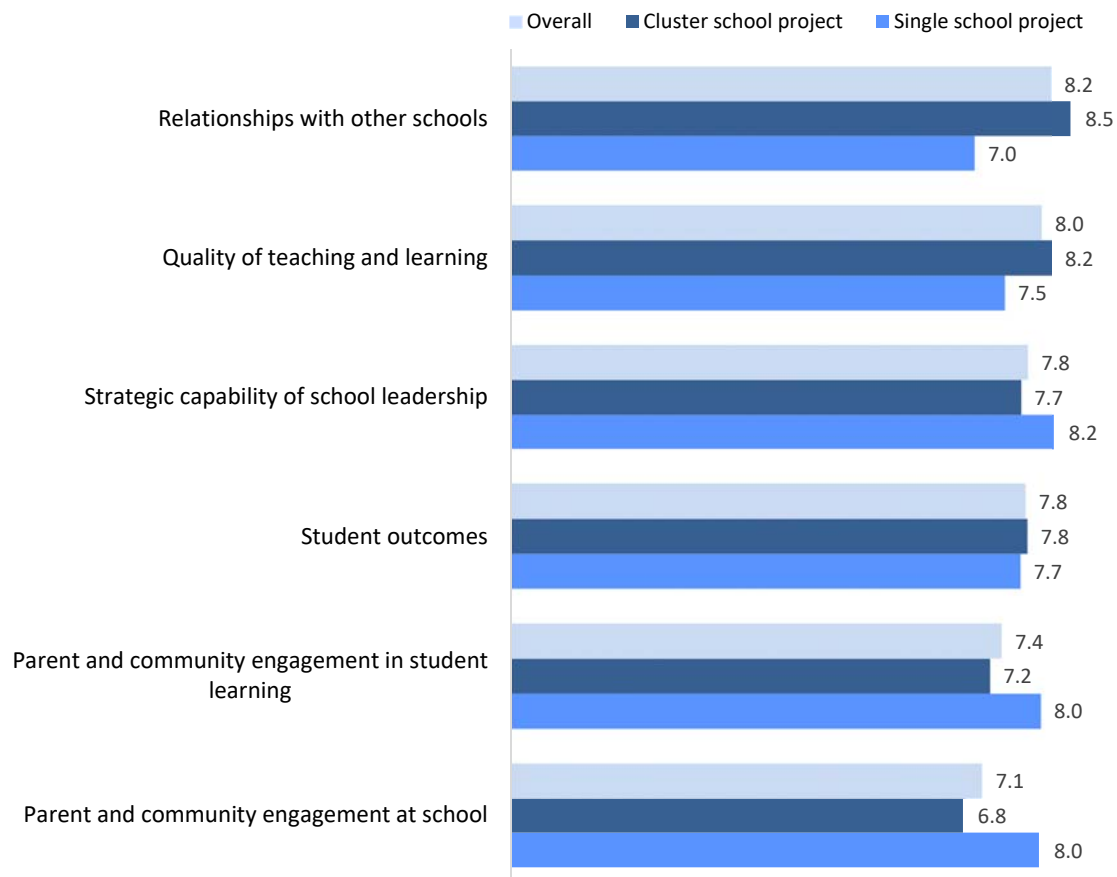
For overall scores, combining both cluster projects and single school projects, the highest average rating was 8.2, which was associated with the relationships that schools developed with other schools through their involvement in Fair Education. The next highest overall rating was impact on the quality of teaching and learning (8.0). Improvement in student outcomes (7.8) and the strategic capability of school leadership (7.8) received a similar overall rating for impact by the school leaders who took part in the interview. The two dimensions which scored lowest for Fair Education impact were family and community engagement in student learning (7.4) and family and community engagement at school (7.1).

There were some differences in perceived impact depending on whether the school was participating as part of a cluster project or as a single project school. The area of highest impact for schools that were part of a cluster was in the development of relationships with other schools (8.5). Quality of teaching and learning (8.2) was the second highest rating among cluster schools. Schools in a cluster signalled that they had to be more oriented towards their work with each other as a first step. Establishing their relationships within the cluster provided the context for their development and improvement in other areas.

Figure 4-1 shows that school leaders of schools involved in single school projects felt that their schools made the most significant improvements in the areas of strategic capability of school leadership (8.2), family and community engagement in student learning (8.0), and family and community engagement at school (8.0). The lowest rated dimension of improvement was relationships with other schools (7.0). Single schools did not have to manage relationships

with other schools as part of their involvement in Fair Education, which meant they could focus on their own school's objectives. Although they were able to collaborate with schools in other aspects of Fair Education, they do not attribute this to be their most significant outcome.

Figure 4-1 School leader rating of school improvement across key areas: cluster projects and individual school projects compared



It is important to restate the point that the data collected from schools in a cluster, particularly the non-lead schools, did not cover all schools and may not be a representative assessment. The unwillingness of some non-lead cluster schools to participate in the evaluation, coupled with the signs that many had withdrawn from formal activities such as the coaching, are indicative of a disengagement from Fair Education in general. It is possible that the response from the disengaged non-lead schools in clusters would affect the results for cluster schools and may likely lead to lower and not higher ratings

The differences between the results from cluster and non-cluster schools are roughly consistent with the findings on implementation presented in Chapter 3 (see Figures 3-1 and 3-3). Figure 4-1 shows that non-cluster schools tended to rate the impact of Fair Education differently compared to cluster schools. Non-cluster schools rated stronger impact of Fair Education on the strategic capability of leaders and in family and community engagement,

areas cluster schools rated lower on impact. Cluster schools rated as greatest impact their working relationships with other schools. This, after all, was their primary focus in coming together as a collective of schools to work on a particular educational issue. Non-cluster schools were given opportunities to network and meet other schools, particularly at the annual forums, but it was not their primary focus.

Despite it being a major, even overarching, goal for Fair Education, cluster schools reported lower levels of impact of Fair Education on family and community engagement in school and in student learning, with the gains they perceived occurring more in relationship building with other schools and on quality of teaching and learning.

Differences in perceptions of impact also appeared depending on whether the school was a primary school or a secondary school. Figure 4-2 presents the mean ratings for each dimension of impact according to whether the school leader was from a primary or secondary school. The strongest impact according to primary school leaders was the building of relationships with other schools (8.2) and improved strategic capability of school leadership (8.0). Secondary school leaders felt the impact of Fair Education most in terms of improving relationships with other schools (8.0) and improving student outcomes (8.0). Primary schools felt that they had improved the engagement with children's learning through Fair Education (7.7) more than secondary schools (7.1). Primary and secondary school leaders rated improvement in family and community engagement more or less similarly (7.2 and 7.1).

Figure 4-2 School leader rating of school improvement across key areas: primary school and secondary schools compared

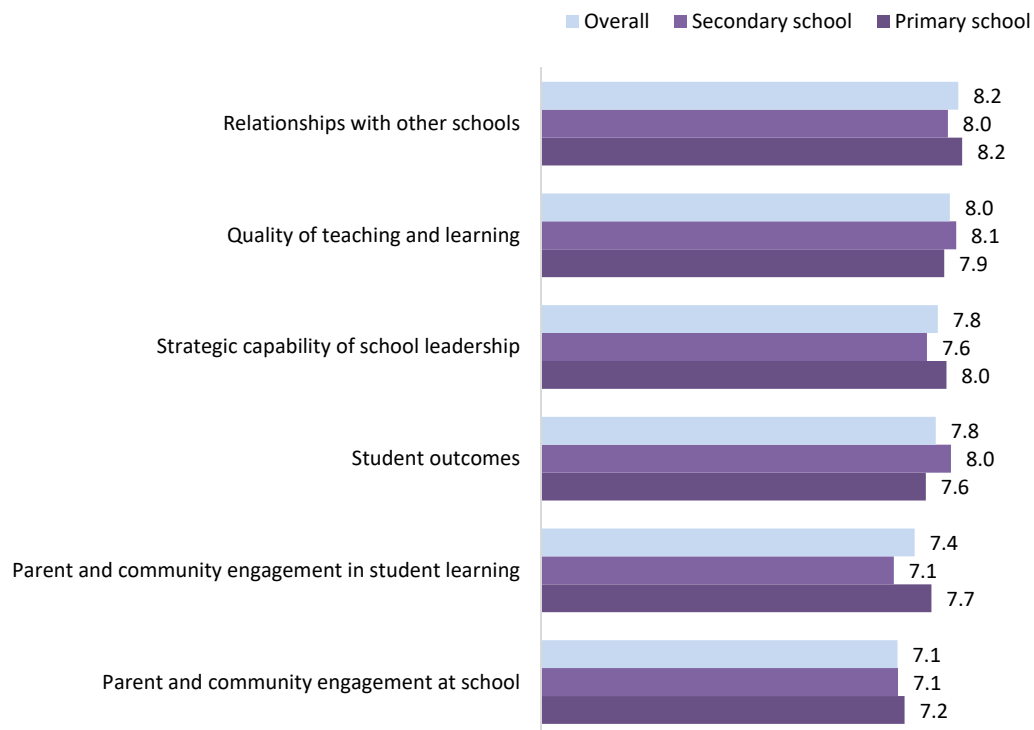
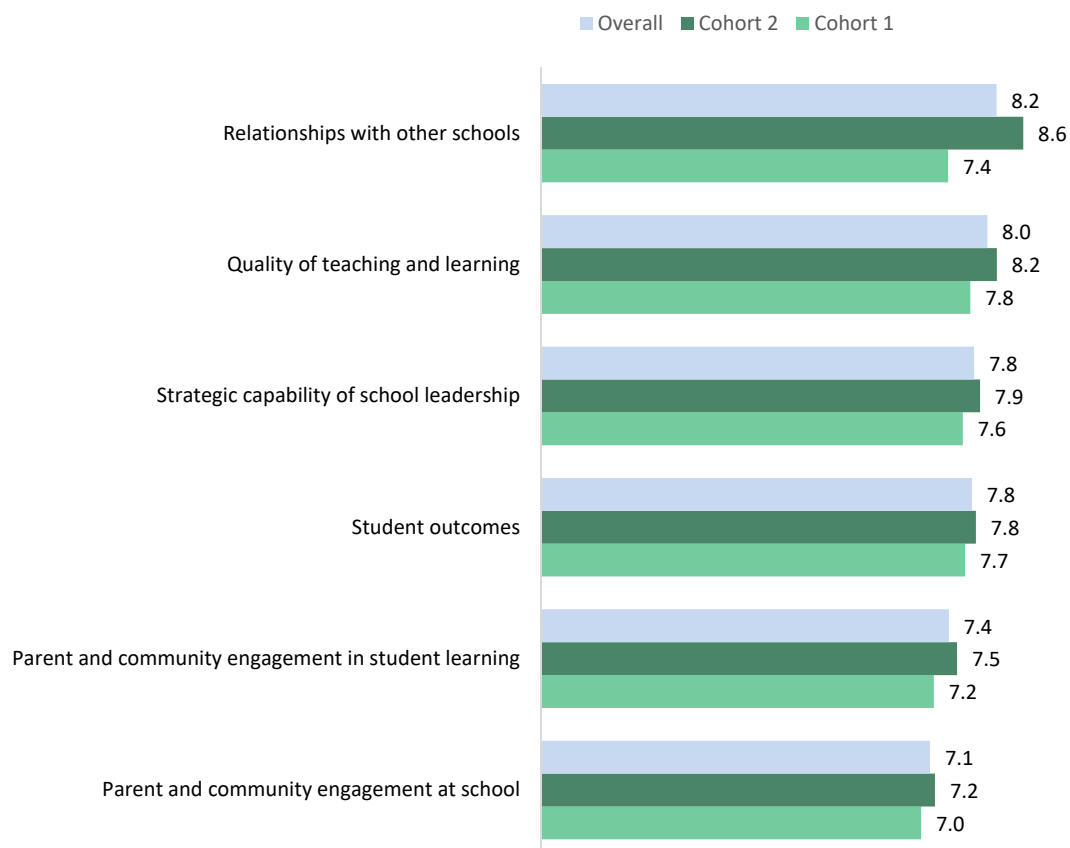


Figure 4-3 disaggregates results on perceived impact according to which cohort schools were part of—Cohort 1 or Cohort—recognising that Cohort 1 schools have had involvement in Fair Education for one year more than schools in Cohort 2.

Figure 4-3 identifies that schools from Cohort 1 and Cohort 2 recorded slightly different views on the level of impact of Fair Education. There were differences between Cohort 1 and Cohort 2 school leaders in how strongly they rated the impact of Fair Education on their relationships with other schools (7.4 for Cohort 1 compared to 8.6 for Cohort 2). Overall, Cohort 2 schools recorded stronger levels of perceived impact of Fair Education across every dimension, despite or maybe because they have been in the program for one less year.

These results may reflect various factors. The stronger perceived impact in Cohort 2 schools may be associated with the application process to Fair Education. The successful schools in Cohort 2 may have been more prepared and capable of capitalising on the support provided by Fair Education. And/or the result may reflect changes or improvement in how Fair Education was managed with growing knowledge and experience as Fair Education developed.

Figure 4-3 School leader rating of school improvement across key areas: Cohort 1 and Cohort 2 schools compared



Perceived impact of Fair Education also varied by the type of project that schools implemented. Table 4-1 shows the average ratings of impact for each dimension, by the type of project implemented. It is important to keep in mind that the numbers of schools varied by type of project.

Table 4-1 School leader rating of Fair Education impact, by type of project and area of impact

Type of project	Area of impact					
	Strategic capability of school leadership	Relationships with other schools	Family and community engagement in student learning	Family and community engagement at school	Student outcomes	Quality of teaching and learning
Implementation of applied/project-based learning	8.1	7.6	7.9	7.9	8.0	8.1
Change in school approach to teaching and learning	8.7	9.3	8.3	6.3	6.7	8.2
Improvement in communication with families	8.3	8.5	7.8	6.3	8.3	8.3
Development of student social-emotional skills	7.8	8.1	7.6	7.5	8.1	8.5
Establishment of student mentoring	6.7	7.7	5.3	5.3	5.7	6.0
Involvement of parents in school life	na	8.0	8.3	7.5	7.5	6.0
School leadership structure redesign	8.0	7.0	7.0	7.0	7.5	6.0
Improved transitions	7.3	8.8	6.5	6.7	7.6	7.9

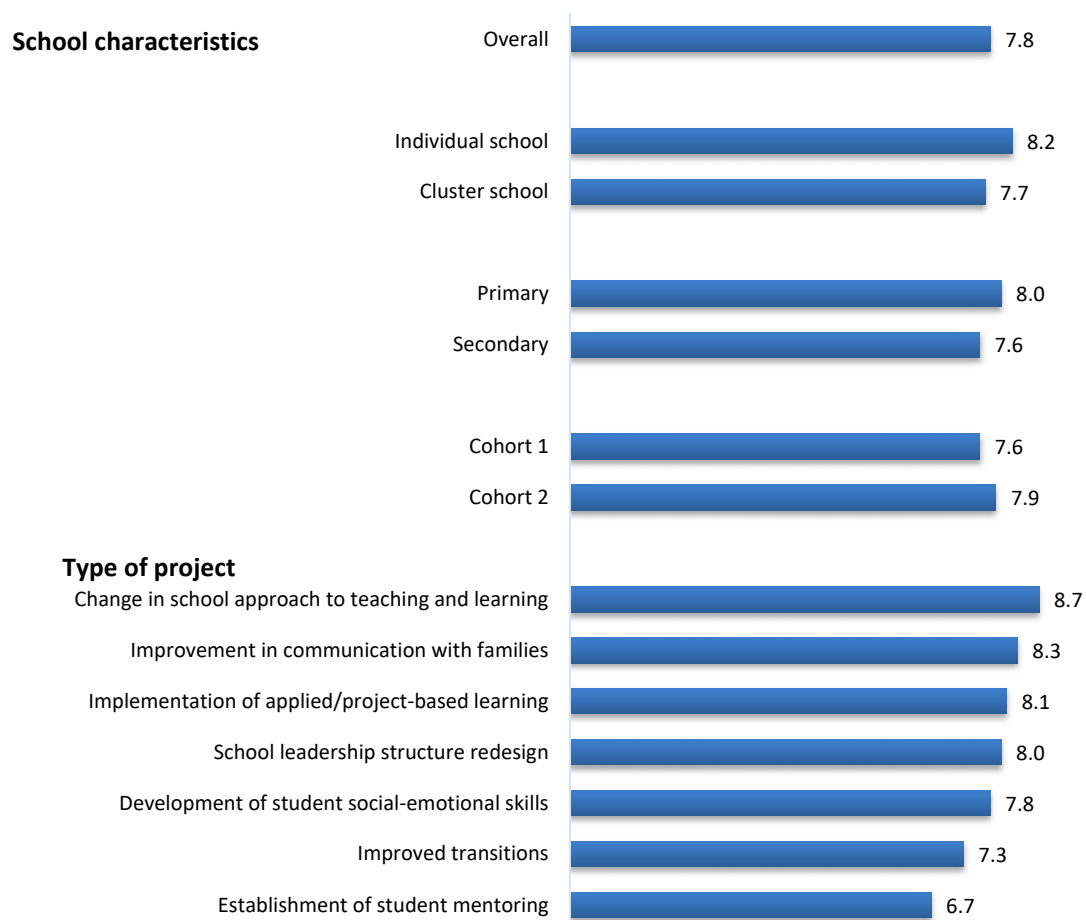
Table 4-1 highlights that the differences in perceived impact of Fair Education also vary by the type of project schools implemented. Projects which had a transition focus were rated as having strong impact for schools in their relationships with other schools (8.8). This possibly reflects the fact that many of the schools with transition initiatives focused on strengthening connections across primary and secondary schools to facilitate smoother student transfer. Schools which implemented projects to involve parents in school activities rated their improvements in family and community engagement in student learning above other dimensions (8.3). Also, the schools implementing applied or project-based learning rated family and community engagement in student learning (7.9) and engagement in school (7.9) as strong areas of impact (7.9). However, other projects focused on curriculum change (change in school approach to teaching and learning and development of student social and emotional skills) were not perceived as having high impact on family engagement in school (6.3, 7.5).

In summary, this section highlights that not all schools and not all projects were perceived as having the same levels of impact on every area of school improvement. This may be due to differences in the types of projects, but also to other factors such as differences in the needs of students, community disadvantage, and school characteristics. There was no formula for success in Fair Education. It is apparent that Fair Education contributed to multi-dimensional outcomes where improvement in each school or project occurred in different ways.

Impact on strategic capability of school leadership teams

One of the main purposes of the coaching, in conjunction with work on projects and attendance at annual forums, was to build the capacity of leadership teams in schools in order for them to develop capacity for innovative, high order strategy, systems and practices for school improvement. Figure 4-4 shows that there is considerable variation across projects and schools in the perceived impact of Fair Education on building strategic capability.

Figure 4-4 School leader perception of the impact of Fair Education on improving the strategic capability of school leadership teams



Some schools reported a high level of impact, most noticeably in schools with single projects and schools with projects that pursued changes in the approach to teaching and learning and in improving communication with families. Several features of Fair Education were mentioned by schools as contributing to impact on leadership capability.

1. Targeted professional learning to support improvement

In the interviews, 27 school leaders reported that they had used their funding for additional professional development in support of strengthening capability, sometimes engaging experts, including academic partners, who brought specialist knowledge to their schools. One school's leader described how their school strengthened its commitment to professional learning during their time involved in Fair Education:

I now have 100 per cent buy in with the teachers in regard to my expectation for professional learning, to the point where my teachers now, they drive it. They feel safe and brave enough to say, we need this.

One school transformed its initial project objective to focus specifically on the provision of professional learning and bringing the 'experts' into the school. The professional learning was provided for teachers at the school rather than at regional or central offices, particularly pertinent given that the school's location is approximately 600 kilometres from Sydney. The professional learning was supported by Fair Education as well as a Commonwealth Bank Teaching Award. The school leader was adamant that their investment in professional learning ensured that '*location was not a determining factor for a higher quality of education*'.

Deer Valley Public School Cluster implemented AVID teaching and learning strategies across primary schools located in the same region. They worked together to share professional learning and resources. Teachers were excited about the professional learning they undertook and as a result they feel that they have a new common language to talk about their practice. School leaders emphasised that a key benefit for them was that their project has been a vehicle for shared professional growth within each school and across the cluster. For more on the [Deer Valley Public School Cluster](#), please see the Appendix.

2. Coaching was a critical element

Some school leaders reported that the key ingredient to improved leadership capability was the coaching: '*It has grown us exponentially as a leadership team, the way we operate and the way we've refined and improving our goals and achievement*'. In the cases where Fair Education worked well the coaching support was particularly effective. Individual schools often brought various members of the school staff together in the regular sessions. Some cluster school coaching sessions involved the participation of a range of other staff, aside from the school leaders. One cluster invited the lead school's Aboriginal Education worker who described her inclusion as 'the opportunity of a lifetime'.

Coaching in other instances supported and revitalised experienced educators. For one school leader, the coaching support was *'the best thing that I've ever done in my career.'* Another school leader described how: *'when things get a bit stagnant and dull, you think, oh god, where am I going to get the new ideas from? The coaching happens and all of a sudden, the lights come on.'* Enlivening experienced educators, many of whom might not have had the opportunity to engage in reflective learning or obtain feedback in some time is an important mechanism to strengthen leadership density.

Another key impact of the coaching was that it served in certain instances as a key support to aspiring leaders. In some schools, the opportunity to participate in Fair Education *'gave others the opportunity to step into a leadership position'*. The improvement to leadership density as a result of Fair Education is highly relevant to regional and rural schools as many have to manage high staff turnover. One school leader remarked:

The development of leadership skills in young staff is great. Staff move on in country schools. This project has given a focus to the development of younger staff with ambition. It helps younger staff to work with other staff and develop their confidence and skills.

A few school leaders reported that their involvement in Fair Education meant that they had improved their ability to work with others. Some school leaders reported that the coaching practice modelled transferable skills which they could use elsewhere. One leader said, *'the coaching has been important and particularly around modelling good professional learning practice and getting us to think and read widely'*. School leaders described how they used the coaching techniques, specifically around generative questioning, in other leadership meetings. Another school leader identified that a derived benefit was *'learning how to develop goals and encourage feedback as part of a wider group.'*

Building leadership capability through coaching and Fair Education did not always work

While some schools reported improvements in leadership skills, others did not. Schools in some cluster-based projects had difficulties in establishing processes that adequately engaged all school leaders and supported leadership development. The largest cluster, where costs were spread thinly, found the cost of leaders attending cluster meetings prohibitive. At the end of this particular project, frustrations remained as to the efficacy of coaching sessions, *'a fair bit was perceived to be a waste of time and I think that's why the numbers dropped off a bit'*. Another challenge for project leaders across the cluster was to maintain commitment to a unified approach, as there *'were a few too many cooks'*. A criticism of the coaching sessions was that the inclusion of members of the community meant that they did not know how Government schools operate and their expectations did not meet the reality. This prohibited the benefit of the coaching sessions for the school leaders.

The turnover of school leaders in some schools worked against developing leadership capability. One project school had such a high turnover of staff that consistency of purpose

was not achievable. One school leader in the interviews reported that knowledge of Fair Education was minimal, as *'I am new to the school this year. I have only been here for a few months. I work across two schools'*.

Impact on family and communities

Among the broad goals of Fair Education two that were critical included (1) building strategic capability of school leadership teams to promote family and community engagement, and (2) improving family and community engagement in student learning. Evidence on how well Fair Education has helped promote family and community engagement in schools and in student learning is mixed. As Figure 4-5 reveals, the perceived impact of Fair Education on family and community engagement in school (bottom panel) and in student learning (top panel) varies by cohort, type of school, and type of project.

There are projects and schools where school leaders identified Fair Education having a high impact on family and community engagement. In terms of student learning, schools which implemented projects that directly focused on involving families in school life recorded the highest scores on impact of Fair Education on family and community engagement in student learning. Projects with this focus also recorded high impact for engagement in school. Several features were mentioned as important to promoting family and community engagement.

Whether a school undertook Fair Education as a cluster or an individual school had the biggest influence when considering which dimension and to what degree school improvement was realised. Individual schools were more likely to rate that they had improved their school's family and community engagement and school and family and community engagement in student learning, in contrast schools in clusters were less likely to rate this measure of impact strongly. Schools in a cluster regarded that their biggest improvement was in their collaboration with other schools. Therefore it can be said that the impact of improving school relationships with family and communities was somewhat diluted in cluster schools due to the nature of the arrangement where schools had to work together. Schools engaged in Fair Education as individual projects were more likely to realise gain in dimensions closely associated with the overall aims of the Fair Education program associated with family and community engagement.

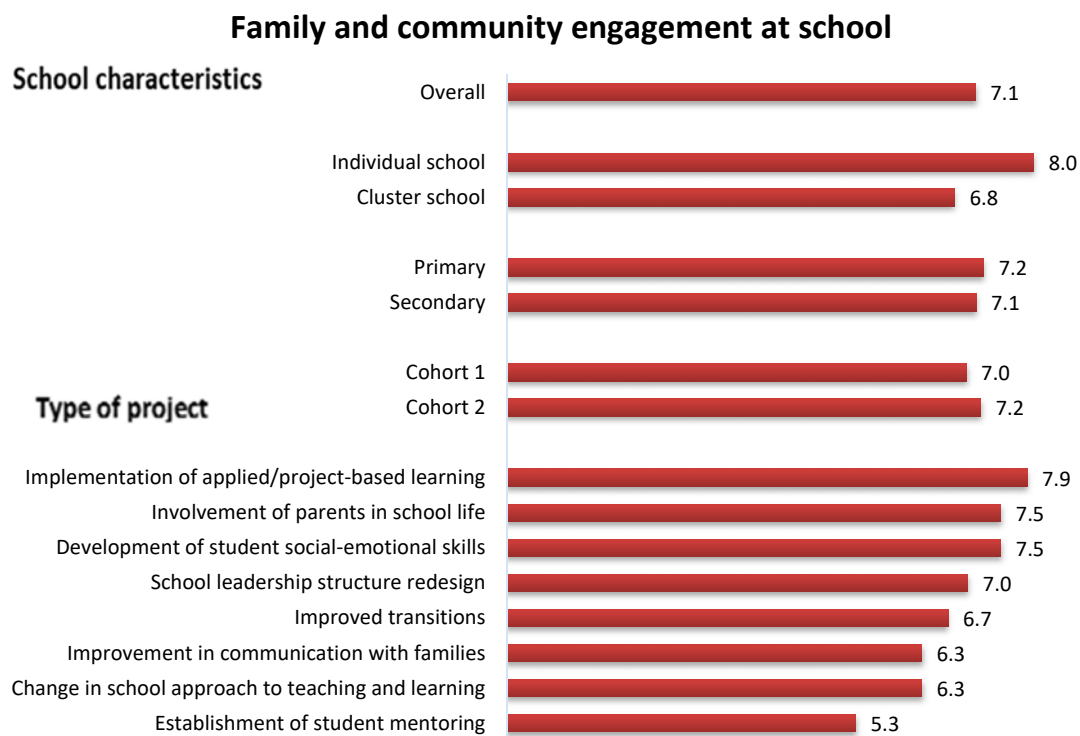
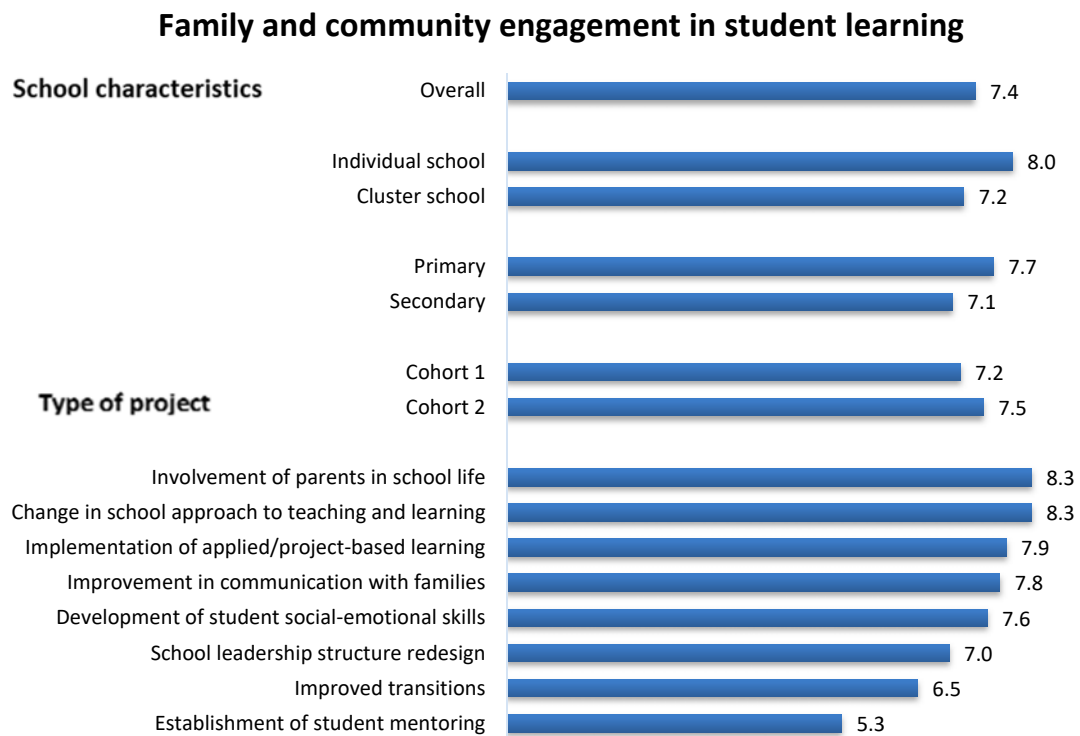
1. Finding new ways to communicate with families

Twenty-five school leaders in the interviews discussed an improvement in how they communicated with their families. Some schools used their project funds to roll out the use of online tools, including SeeSaw, Dojo, WIX, and SkoolBag, which received positive feedback:

Parents now know what we are doing. Previously, parents didn't know, and they probably didn't want to know. Now they do want to know.

Through social media platforms like SeeSaw, they know more of what we are doing; they have a window into the classroom. They have more of an opportunity to contact us if they need to and to feel more supported.

Figure 4-5 School leader perception of impact on family and community engagement in school and in student learning



Some schools used Fair Education to develop three-way parent, teacher and student led conferences. One school reported a significant improvement in family engagement as a result of the introduction of such conferences, which provided a personalised occasion for parents to ‘turn up and engage and appreciate and take that learning.’ They reflected on the impact of this initiative: ‘We can hold a workshop at school on the big topics—anti-bullying, homework, the canteen—but we would be pushing it if we got maybe 10 parents out of our 300. But we have averaged 97 per cent across K to 6 for a 30-minute sit down with the teacher and their child.’ Importantly, some schools used the initial three-way conference to establish what parents’ expectations were of schooling. This was especially relevant where parent trust in what the school was providing for their child had broken down.

We have invested in relationships... We have sat down with all families in order to develop relationships. This will allow us to move forward. The initial task was to interview each family with the student present. We talked about goals for their children, aspirations and what they found challenging. How they felt about their relationship was with the school. Students were encouraged to talk about challenges and blockages. Just being able to invest that time was important.

Manna Gum Public School improved school and family connectivity through the development of Personal Learning Plans for each student. These plans had previously proven successful in engaging families of students with a disability as well as Indigenous families. Therefore the school chose to roll out the initiative for all students and their families. The development of Personal Learning Plans provided the school with a direct channel to parents and an opportunity to discuss their children’s learning at school in a positive way.

For more on [Manna Gum](#), please refer to the Appendix.

2. Improving family engagement in student learning through parent-focused events and activities

In the interviews, 29 school leaders described improvements in parent engagement through the development of parent-focused events and activities. Some school leaders actively sought to change school views on the importance of engaging with parents, realising that formerly held assumptions about parental attitudes to school needed to be challenged. Consequently, some leaders designed new initiatives specifically for engaging with parents. For some school leaders, it was seen as a leap of faith to provide opportunities for parents to feel that the school cared for and supported their child as an individual.

Basically, what (parents) were saying is that you’re the professionals, we trust you, you know what you’re doing, end of story. That seemed to be the scope of what they wanted their involvement to be...We assumed they knew they were welcome to come here; they assumed they weren’t welcome unless they were invited. So what we started to do was, as a part of our component of PBL, at the end of every project there needed to be an exhibition. The exhibition can be as small as children

presenting to their own class, or as big as taking the exhibition out to the community.

One school developed specific parent workshops facilitated by a CLO, who had the specific role of bridging the gap between home and school. This was a school with high staff and leadership turnover and where parents were reportedly very wary of any school contact, as the only time this occurred was when their child was 'in trouble.' The impact of Fair Education on this approach is that *'the CLO has been able to work on things that as teachers, we do not have the time to work on.'* The school felt that the workshops improved parent confidence and self-esteem, particularly when compared with parents who did not attend. . At other schools, various workshops were run with parents on such topics as students self-regulating their behaviour or the new computer systems and applications their children were using at school.

Emubush Public School tried various programs to engage parents in the life of the school over the years they were involved in Fair Education. Initially they trained parents to become teacher aides and four were employed in the school in 2018. Alongside this the school invited parents to take part in cooking classes, sports coaching, and activities related to health and wellbeing with variable effect. The school in 2019 ran an inaugural 'information fete' which involved an early-morning breakfast session during which families were informed about new policies and had an opportunity to get to know each other. School leaders were pleased with parent engagement in this event and continue to keep in running in the future. For more on [Emubush Public School](#), please refer to the Appendix.

Family engagement was not always the focus and where not impact was low

A number of the projects that schools implemented did not directly relate to parents or family involvement in school or student learning. The transition projects and those focused on changing approaches to teaching and learning recorded low scores on perceived impact of Fair Education on improving family engagement in school and student learning. Many of these projects were adopted by schools in a cluster arrangement. Two clusters reported lower levels of success in engaging parents due to the nature of their designed projects. Two other clusters had problems in engaging parents across all schools. The coaching in such projects and schools may contribute to development of leadership skills which support greater engagement ultimately, but the perceived impact was lower in such schools than in those where the projects were more focused directly on engagement.

Family and community engagement sometimes was understood as different things

Every interviewee was asked a direct question about whether or not the project at the school had improved family engagement. Schools in clusters that focussed on transition tended to concentrate on improving relations between schools so as to develop transition programs that would meet the emotional needs of student and their parents. Community liaison officers (CLOs) were important as an intermediary between the school and families.

Successful family engagement can sometimes mean that parents have the confidence to talk to an effective CLO.

There's a lot more communication between all of us. It's certainly helping the parents, they feel more confident to be engaged and make that phone call to ask a question.

As has been noted, some projects that were focussed on teaching and learning managed to directly engage families in the learning of their child but others did not. Some schools in the latter category still tended to regard parents as a broad, undifferentiated group and saw parental inclusion as a longer-term goal.

Parental engagement is one of the areas we are now focusing on and putting those systems and structures in place to more effectively engage parents in the school. It was probably lacking in our project at the start so we are now building those dimensions into our project, based on our discussions during the coaching.

Fair Education did encourage the majority of school leaders to recognise that a shift in attitude towards what school leaders and teachers expect of parents is a necessary initial condition for change in school family relations. A challenge of Fair Education coaching was to encourage school leaders to take responsibility for what they could do to engage parents. This did not mean they were successful with all school leaders.

Our school is reasonably low SES and there hasn't been a lot of parental input, this has been a focus of Fair Ed, around involving parents in the school, how does this look, what can we do?

To be honest, there has been no benefit with parents. My attitude to parents is that they are happy to send their kids here. Attendance at public events is always low. Parents leave us alone. We hoped that this project would be encourage kids to talk with their parents, but it didn't happen. My feeling is that the bulk of our parents have relatively low expectations for their kids and the school.

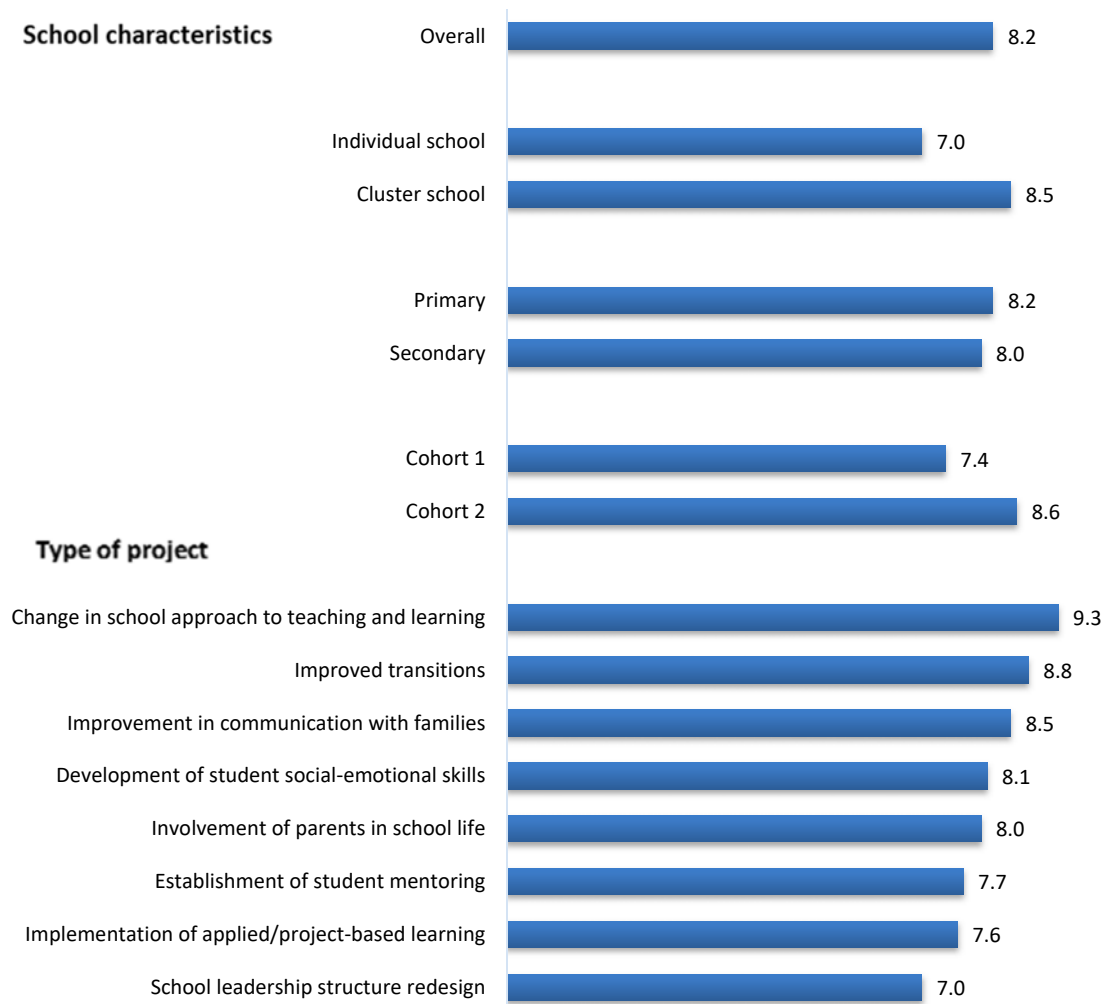
Impact on school relationships and working together

One of the stated objectives of the Fair Education program was to improve the capacity of low SES schools to work together to generate real world learning environments. With a number of projects involving clusters of schools working together on the same project it might be expected that there would be an increase or improvement in school partnerships.

Figure 4-6 presents the results on the perceived impact of Fair Education on schools working together. Indeed, cluster schools do record a high average impact score—8.5—for Fair Education, while single project schools score lower overall for perceived impact on schools working together. Perceived impact on schools working together also varied by cohort and type of project.

Several features were mentioned and there were several examples of where impact of Fair Education on schools working together or partnering was strong.

Figure 4-6 School leader perception of perceived impact of Fair Education on schools working together (relationships with other schools)



Several features were mentioned and there were several examples of where impact of Fair Education on schools working together or partnering was strong.

1. Some schools worked together to realise improvements in educational provision

One leader involved in a cluster project said *'Fair Education has strengthened the relationship between schools. It has crystallised and given direction.'* An example of one successful project involved the Ti Tree Secondary College Cluster (see Appendix) where the schools conceived the idea of redeveloping a 'suspension centre' which was meant to serve a cluster of schools. At the outset only one school was accessing it but over the course of Fair Education the suspension centre evolved into a student re-engagement program which supported better outcomes for the students and influenced policies towards student welfare within the cluster schools. This cluster

began to work together and to regard their provision of education to students who were at risk of disengagement as a key community issue:

Working with a cluster of schools, getting that community of schools thing happening is important particularly in rural settings. We do share a lot of the same kids, they go from here to XX and if they get expelled, they end up in one of the other schools. That is important working in clusters of schools rather than one silo, one school.

Deer Valley College undertook AVID through the support provided by Fair Education. The secondary school ran AVID as a select-entry class which enabled the school leaders to present a confident image in the community, which appealed to aspirational families who otherwise indicated that they would have chosen a private school for their children. Alongside the work undertaken by the Deer River Public School Cluster, school leaders at Deer Valley College see the potential for AVID to become a central foundation for improving the educational provision across the entire regional community. For more on [Deer Valley College](#), please refer to the Appendix.

2. School leaders developed relationships with other school leaders

One benefit of Fair Education mentioned by school leaders was that it gave school leaders the opportunity to develop more focused relationships with other school leaders:

It is really comforting to know that other teachers are walking in the same shoes at a different location on a different journey, but we are all headed towards the same destination.

Another school leader said, ‘Prior to this project, I don’t think I could have told you [the name of] one other teacher who worked in another school apart from the assistant principals. We know the teachers in the other schools now.’ This was particularly an outcome realised by clusters; as one school leader described how ‘the advantage of the cluster meetings is that we have developed relations and trust, so that we can cooperate informally and informally.’ One set of primary schools in a cluster all talked individually about how their relationships were strengthened through Fair Education. The resulting effect was that they had recently run a shared staff development day with all the schools in the cluster.

Some individual project school leaders also described how they were able to broaden their community of practice, specifically at the Fair Education conference. Some felt it was a great benefit to them to be able to network and connect with schools that shared similar project objectives to their own.

3. Some schools learnt from one another and there is evidence of ideas-transfer.

Fair Education gave project participants opportunities to come together, learn from each other’s work and visit each other’s schools. It gave some schools the

opportunities to have professional conversations with other like-minded schools about how to implement reforms and work better with their students. During the interviews, 38 school leaders indicated that they had explicitly taken on board ideas they had gained from other school leaders involved in Fair Education.

According to some school leaders, the annual conference was regarded as an important contributing factor:

The conference gave us the opportunity to network with schools around the state and how other regions were using the funding...It was quite interesting that what we saw from some of our other colleagues from across the state, compared to what we thought, was quite different.

(There was) cross pollination of ideas when we came to the conferences.

It's great to have that day or two, to speak to people face-to-face that have nothing to do with your own context, and looking at their ideas and how we could potentially put them into our context. We have stolen a lot of ideas, as good educators do.

I don't think the right mindset is to go to the conference and find out what you can get. It's about what you can contribute.

In the interviews, some school leaders mentioned how they had borrowed ideas from other schools or were intending to 'bank' them for the future. They had connected up with relevant people who were engaged in a project that interested them. Some school leaders spoke positively about witnessing the improvements in other schools through their presentations at the conferences.

Not all schools saw impact on working with other schools nor benefited from doing so

Some schools recorded little or no impact on relationships with other schools. Many of the single project schools, particularly those which implemented projects not related to partnering or engaging with other schools, rated the impact of Fair Education on working with other schools lower than other areas of impact. The annual forums, which most schools viewed positively, provided scope for school leaders to exchange ideas and interact with leaders from other Fair Education schools, but even so relationships with other schools scored lower overall for perceived impact of Fair Education.

While cluster schools, particularly lead schools, on average rated impact on relationships with other schools more highly than did single project schools, across all projects and schools some cluster schools rated this aspect as the lowest area of impact of Fair Education. So, despite working with other schools as part of a cluster, some leaders did not perceive any improvement associated with involvement in Fair Education in the quality of relationships with other schools or the capacity to work with other schools.

Impact on student learning outcomes

One of the broad goals of Fair Education was for the program ultimately, through the actions of enhancing leadership capability and improving family engagement in school and student learning, to enhance student learning outcomes. What evidence is there of impact on this goal?

Measuring impact is addressed in two ways. The first is through an analysis of school-level data from the results for Reading and Numeracy in NAPLAN. It needs to be noted that the analyses are based on all students sitting the tests yet some projects undertook specific interventions for targeted sets of students which may not show up in school-level results, even if the long term goal of Fair Education was to improve student learning and outcomes for all through improving family and community engagement. Why would NAPLAN results change if not everyone is targeted within the program? Also, any change may reflect the actions of other initiatives that schools adopted over the period of Fair Education. NAPLAN is used here because there are no other independent assessments of student learning available. When pressed to comment on improvements as a result of Fair Education, ten school leaders in the final interviews mentioned that their school's NAPLAN results had improved in some way. One school leader said, *'You never know the impact of one thing over everything else, but over the three years of the project, with regard to our NAPLAN results we have got double the number of kids getting in the proficient bands than we did in 2016..it is not a direct relation but things are aligning'*. No school leader attributed their NAPLAN results solely to the support provided through Fair Education, but in their view, their NAPLAN results were correlated to the improvements in their school during their time in Fair Education. Therefore it is important to include an assessment of school achievement according to NAPLAN, despite the caveats associated with using data of this nature.

The second section looks at perceived impact of Fair Education on student learning outcomes according to school leaders using more discrete school-specific examples drawn from the interview materials.

Assessment of impact on student learning using NAPLAN results

This section updates previous analysis using NAPLAN presented in earlier evaluation reports. It uses the most recently available datasets from 2018. The time frame used to report on improvements is from 2016 to 2018, in both NAPLAN. Changes in ICSEA scores are also presented because changes in student skills can be linked to changes in student composition over the time as much as to the effects of Fair Education or other school initiatives.

Following the method used previously, schools are divided into primary and secondary. They are then grouped into three categories:

1. 'increase'—schools showing improvement in their NAPLAN scores between 2016 and 2017 and between 2017 and 2018,
2. 'decrease'—schools showing a fall in the measure between the same time points,
3. 'stable'—schools that did not show any change.

Only schools with NAPLAN scores in 2016, 2017 and 2018 are included, which excludes schools, such as special schools, which do not administer NAPLAN.

Note of caution using NAPLAN

The results using NAPLAN come with certain caveats. As identified previously, there are many other school level factors that may have an influence on student NAPLAN achievement, such as strategic and operational differences in program implementation and varying conditions or circumstances in which schools are operating. It is not possible with certainty, therefore, to suggest that improvement or decline in NAPLAN can be attributed to involvement in Fair Education alone.

Table 4-2 reports the numbers of Cohort 1 and Cohort 2 schools by their NAPLAN performance. For Cohort 1 this represents the full period over which schools were engaged in Fair Education.

Half of the primary schools involved in Cohort 1 saw increases in their NAPLAN reading results at Year 5. One primary school had an improvement in their NAPLAN Year 5 numeracy while one primary school had a fall in numeracy results over the time. The majority of primary schools in both subject domains can be defined as 'stable', that is, there is no clear trend up or down.

Five secondary schools in Cohort 1 recorded an increase in their Year 9 NAPLAN reading scores while eight did so in Year 9 numeracy. For more than half of the secondary schools in reading and one-third in numeracy no trend is apparent, either up or down. No secondary schools included in Cohort 1 recorded a decline in their NAPLAN achievement for the period of Fair Education.

There were also improvements in NAPLAN in some Cohort 2 schools, even though the time period only takes into account two years of involvement in Fair Education. Nine schools recorded an increase in their Year 5 reading achievement while four schools improved in numeracy. One primary school experienced a decline in their Year 5 reading scores and another school had a decline in numeracy.

For the secondary schools involved in Cohort 2, three schools displayed an increase in Year 9 reading while four recorded an increase in Year 9 numeracy. Two secondary schools experienced a decline in Year 9 reading.

Table 4-2 Trend in NAPLAN performance for Cohort 1 and Cohort 2 schools: number of schools

		Decrease	Stable	Increase	Total
Cohort 1	ACARA Year 5 Reading		3	3	6
	ACARA Year 5 Numeracy	1	4	1	6
	ACARA Year 9 Reading		7	5	12
	ACARA Year 9 Numeracy		4	8	12
Cohort 2	ACARA Year 5 Reading	1	13	9	23
	ACARA Year 5 Numeracy	1	18	4	23
	ACARA Year 9 Reading	2	8	3	13
	ACARA Year 9 Numeracy		9	4	13

Source: ACARA

How do the changes compare against changes in ICSEA (the measure of educational advantage and disadvantage in student populations)? Table 4-3 crosstabulates the school-level NAPLAN trends in reading and numeracy (decrease, increase, stable) with the trends in school ICSEA (decrease, increase, stable) over the same time points. Cohort 1 and 2 schools are grouped together.

Primary schools with an increasing NAPLAN reading score had, in most part, a stable ICSEA score. One school which showed a decreasing trend In Year 5 Reading also experienced a downward trend in their community's relative social and economic standing. This also applied to another school in numeracy. One primary school had an increase in reading achievement, while their ICSEA rating suggested that their community was becoming more disadvantaged over the time. Another primary school had a decline in numeracy achievement, with no clear change in ICSEA. Yet another primary school had both an increasing ICSEA and an increase in their NAPLAN numeracy.

Four primary schools showed no change in terms of ICSEA but recorded an increase in numeracy achievement scores. Eight primary schools exhibited no changes in their ICSEA but experienced an increase in reading achievement.

Table 4-3 Fair Education schools by NAPLAN trend and ICSEA, 2016-2018

ICSEA trend	NAPLAN achievement trend		
	Year 5 Reading		
	Decrease	Stable	Increase
Decrease	1	3	1
Stable	0	12	8
Increase	0	1	3
	Year 5 Numeracy		
	Decrease	Stable	Increase
Decrease	1	4	0
Stable	1	15	4
Increase	0	3	1
	Year 9 Reading		
	Decrease	Stable	Increase
Decrease	1	0	1
Stable	1	12	5
Increase	0	3	2
	Year 9 Numeracy		
	Decrease	Stable	Increase
Decrease	0	1	1
Stable	0	11	7
Increase	0	1	4

Source: ACARA

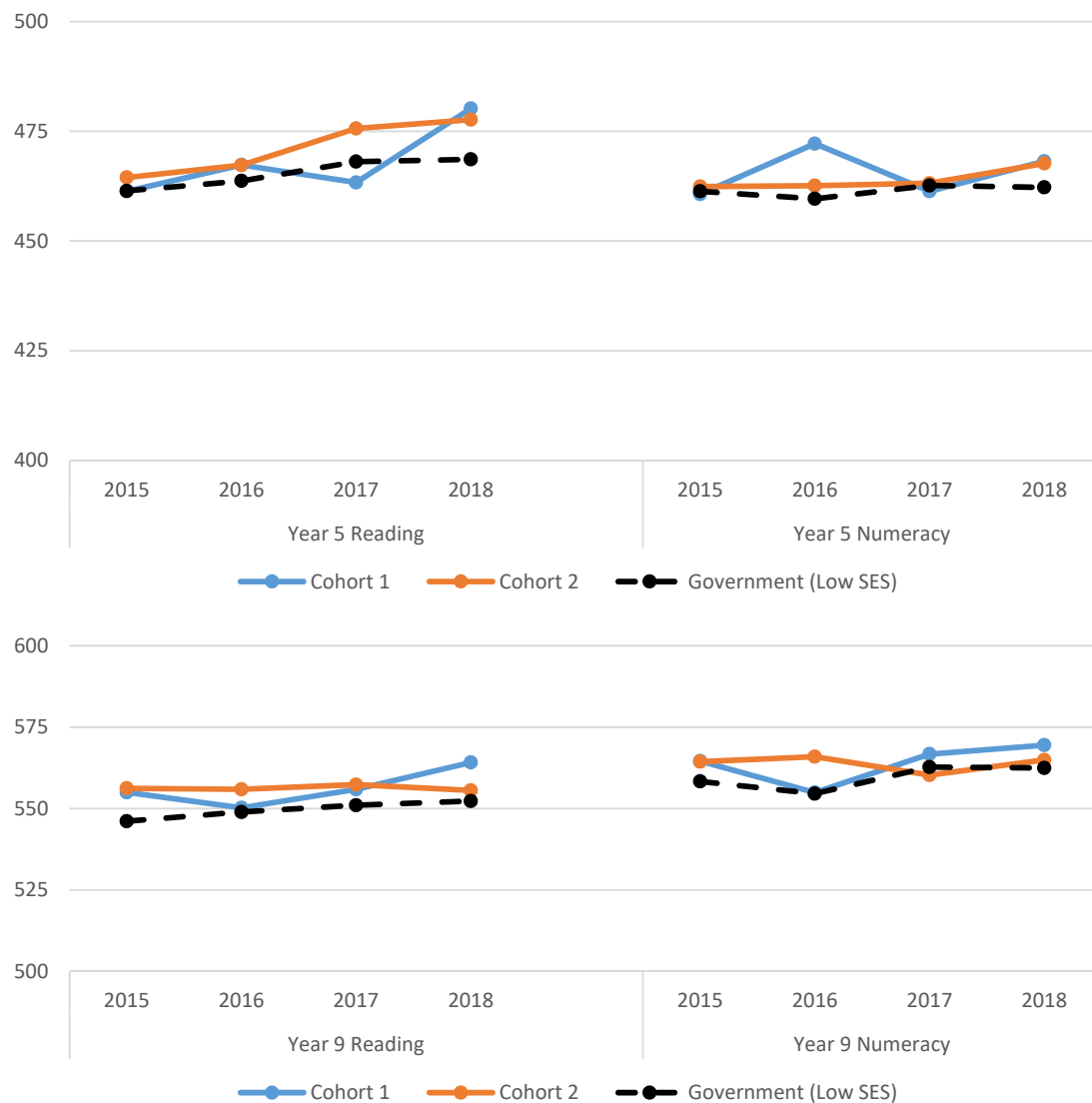
Secondary schools have similar findings. One secondary school recorded an increase in both reading and numeracy despite having a declining ICSEA. Five schools experienced an increase in Year 9 reading but were stable in ICSEA. Four secondary schools recorded increases in Year 9 numeracy along with an increase in ICSEA, and seven experienced increases in numeracy without changes in ICSEA.

Do the results reflect broader trends among similar NSW schools, or are they more specific to Fair Education schools? To consider this, Figure 4-7 presents the average NAPLAN scores achieved by Cohort 1 schools and Cohort 2 schools when compared to the average for all low SES government schools in NSW—those below the national average in ICSEA, about half of government schools and covering schools that reflect the spread in Fair Education.

Figure 4-7 shows that Year 5 students in Cohort 1 schools in particular were initially achieving fairly similar results to students in all low SES schools for both reading and numeracy. In 2018, students on average in Cohort 1 and Cohort 2 schools recorded stronger mean scores in both reading and numeracy, though only marginally in numeracy. Student achievement in Cohort

2 schools in the most part were above the average for disadvantaged public schools in NSW in 2016, and largely remained so. In general, an upward trend is apparent in both Cohort 1 and Cohort 2 Fair Education schools in Reading over the past four years. The trend is also apparent in numeracy though weak.

Figure 4-7 Trends in NAPLAN reading and numeracy scores, 2015 to 2018: Cohort 1 and Cohort 2 schools and low SES NSW government schools compared



Source: ACARA

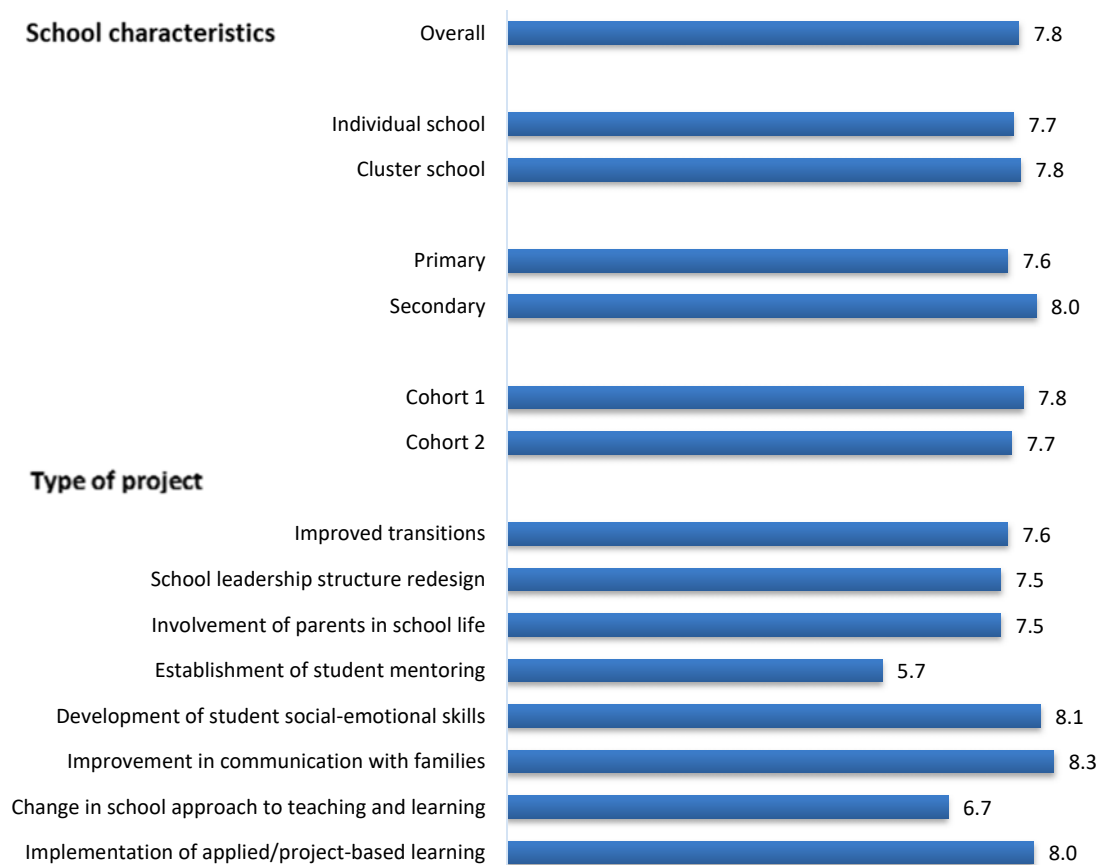
Both Cohort 1 and Cohort 2 secondary schools were already achieving average scores in reading and numeracy above the average for disadvantaged schools in NSW. Secondary schools in Cohort 2 had fairly steady achievement in reading and numeracy over the period. Cohort 1 secondary schools demonstrated an upward trend in both subject domains, over the years of involvement in Fair Education (2016-2018).

Perceived impact of Fair Education on student learning

School leaders involved in Fair Education were cautious, even sceptical, about using NAPLAN results as evidence of impact and change. One school leader described this type of measurement of student outcomes as only offering ‘a narrow and imperfect view.’ School leaders pointed to the sorts of projects they were implementing, often targeted to particular groups of students, as a reason NAPLAN was not a good or even appropriate indicator of Fair Education impact on student learning. Some mentioned preferring to provide more qualitative evidence to measure change.

So, given this, how did school leaders rate the impact of Fair Education on student learning outcomes since improving quality of student learning was one of the broad objectives? Figure 4-8 presents the perceived impact scores which vary by school type (primary and secondary) as well as Fair Education project type.

Figure 4-8 School leader perception of improvement on student learning, by school characteristics and type of project



Several schools reported high impact of Fair Education on student learning outcomes at their school. The schools were those which implemented applied based learning projects or projects to develop student social and emotional skills, and projects which were designed to improve communication with families. There are several examples and contributing features.

1. Sharing a framework for teaching and learning for high need students

One cluster of schools supporting diverse students with high needs embedded a whole of school curriculum framework which was shared across schools. All school leaders involved in the cluster reported positively on the impact that the common teaching and learning and assessment strategies were having on students with a disability whose academic learning needs might otherwise be excluded from consideration from the national and state curriculum frameworks.

Teachers across various schools in the cluster became actively engaged in implementing the tailored curriculum framework supported by Fair Education. They used Fair Education as an opportunity to build a strategic network where educators visited each other's schools once a term, to 'brainstorm and to bring new ideas'. Each meeting they presented on their approach to the curriculum and shared ideas for teaching and learning for students with complex needs. One school leader said, '*the outcomes are there in that they can see the difference in how the kids are working and their engagement levels*'. Another impact is that the teachers have become less professionally isolated and more equipped to cater for student need.

2. Teaching broader or more generic skills in support of developing academic skills

One school developed a learning disposition wheel inclusive of intra and interpersonal skills including grit, determination, collaboration, team working, making meaning, critical thinking. The school's developed learning disposition wheel is now used as a framework for students to 'understand all the complexities that go into learning'. Actively encouraging students to build social-emotional skills, which many schools did through Fair Education, had for some schools broad impact:

We can see students' ability to communicate and collaborate together has really been enhanced and as a result the students are really active in their learning, mindful of each other and there is a building of that relational trust among students to be able to work together to have that voice, to be comfortable to make mistakes, to be able to provide each other with feedback, to be able to listen to each other, to persist in their learning.

One primary school adopted a program in which students learnt language around how to talk about their social and emotional state. This provided the opportunity for staff and students to develop a shared understanding about the importance of emotional wellbeing across the school of approximately 750 students. The school leader reported that '*students are now able to communicate when they are 'flipping out' or even use sign language when they are in a particularly heightened state. The techniques of communication, initially embedded within classrooms, has expanded to outside in the playground*'. Some school leaders pointed to a fall in school suspension rates and some parents starting to use the techniques to communicate with their own children at home as well.

Another school thought that the impact on student learning outcomes was demonstrated by students being happier at school:

The most important outcome is to have happy children. Everything works better once the students are engaged. Things become possible once everyone feels like they are part of a bigger picture.

In their school, students were more prepared to participate in extra-curricular activities which was a positive signal of broader school engagement which has occurred since involvement in Fair Education.

Improving student outcomes is also about improving a broader set of student skills, particularly in areas which are not regarded as traditionally academic. School leaders talked about how the broader skills intertwine and reinforce the development of academic skills.

Ferntree Secondary College had a horticulture program at the centre of their project, where participating students began to build confidence and verbal skills alongside academic skill development. One school leader identified that the improvements to student outcomes were achieved by ‘*not hemming kids in. It’s about student voice and passions: how can we support that as well as balance it with everyday learning*’. The development of a school garden has made the school a more welcoming place for both students and their families.

For more information about [Ferntree Secondary College](#), please see the Appendix.

Not all schools reported an impact of Fair Education on student learning

Approximately one in six schools rated Fair Education as having little impact on student learning, and a further one in five rated the impact modestly. In some respects, this may not be surprising given that many of the projects in Fair Education either targeted only particular groups of students (e.g. those at risk of disengagement), rather than the whole school, or implemented projects that were not specifically about student learning or skills. There were also some projects which did focus more on student learning but the school leaders, particularly in cluster arrangements, were either mixed in their view of impact or of the shared view that there had been low impact.

Measuring progress and impact on student learning was a challenge

Many schools, in describing the impact of their Fair Education projects on improving student outcomes, gave qualified responses. Some also described as a result of learning through their project that they intend to take actions, to better measure improvement in student academic results. A theme that was present across many schools is that the right conditions need to be established before academic results can improve, and these hadn’t always been achieved.

I take a very broad view of the term student outcomes. I don’t like the term because people narrow down to data typically – literacy, numeracy and attendance. Which tells a narrow and imperfect view.

We definitely have happier students. We survey students, our attendance is up and suspensions have dropped right away, to below half what it was before Fair Education.

Enrolments are up, as I mentioned before. We still have a way to go improve literacy and numeracy. We have put some money into programs in these areas.

Broader application and sustainability of Fair Education

Broader application

Historically schools in low SES communities have received additional sources of financial support from the New South Wales Department to improve student outcomes. Annually, through the Resource Allocation Model, disadvantaged government schools in NSW receive additional needs-based funding to help address the higher needs of disadvantaged students (e.g. for low SES, indigenous, rural and remote, English language learning need students and families). Also, from 2009 to 2013, through three Smarter Schools National Partnerships (SSNP) the Australian Government provided significant additional funding to the states and territories, including NSW, to implement systemic and sustainable education reform to improve literacy and numeracy outcomes for all Australian students, strengthen the capacity and resilience of disadvantaged school communities and drive quality and continuous improvement in teaching. The reviews of the impact of SSNP suggest mixed success (e.g. Huo & Lamb, 2018). The substantial amounts of additional funding governments provide to support disadvantaged communities and schools, and yet the ongoing social gaps in student outcomes, highlight the huge challenges associated with overcoming or neutralising the effects of disadvantage on student learning so that schools can work well for all. The Gonski review on how to achieve excellence in Australian education suggests that additional funding is very important but that school improvement within disadvantaged communities may need more than additional funding (Gonski et al., 2018). In that context what does Fair Education provide, even as lessons, about what disadvantaged schools can do to deliver improved outcomes for students, families and schools in disadvantaged communities?

The ingredients of Fair Education provided schools with something different to what they have received in the past through larger-scale strategic funding. This is demonstrated clearly by the interviews with school leaders who spoke in favourable terms about their engagement in Fair Education and what they were able to achieve.

If we throw money at schools, that isn't the solution...Getting our hearts and minds captured by the possibilities, I think that's the only way, and I think Fair Education does that beautifully'.

There are various key points for the VFFF to consider around the potential for the broader application of Fair Education's design to extend beyond the scope of the current model. One of the key benefits of Fair Education from the perspective of school leaders is that the support provided was independent of the Department.

While we must be within the Department's realm of working, we also don't want the Department to have a big influence about what happens with Fair Education. While we want the Department to have insights, we still want the authentic freedom to explore and trial new things without the pressures.

The project wasn't just confined to our initial parameters, we were encouraged to take it as far as we possibly could. That allowed us to do that. I think that if it was government money, or straight from my budget, we wouldn't been able to have the license to do that.

The independence enabled the schools the chance to try something new and think differently. They were also able to use the support to identify and specifically design a project for their school, rather than implement a departmental initiative, which 'do not always match with what the key issues of the school are.' Some school leaders also felt that their projects were validated by being chosen through a competitive process by an independent body.

It is also nice to get validation from someone (Schools Plus and the VFFF) who can see projects across the broader scheme of things and let us know where we sit in a wider educational context.

The flexible governance of Fair Education was also identified as a positive and often surprising feature for many school leaders. Project administration for cluster schools presented some challenges and there are signs that the flexible governance did not necessarily work well across all clusters. Yet at the same time, any imposition of a more standardised model may have the effect of lessening creative freedom.

We were at a stage in the school where we getting money from the Department but it was constrained to specific projects. The Fair Education money gave us flexibility to do something that we wanted to do. We wanted to do something that was outside the box. The Department constraints do not always match with what the key issues of the school are. We are now using Departmental money to further develop our own plans. The wonderful thing was that we were allowed to fail, which probably meant we felt confident we were not going to.

Most schools felt that it was vital that schools were given the autonomy to realise their own objectives through their project and were allowed to influence coaching support in a way that suited them. Each school is unique. Any standardisation in the coaching and the project format may have reduced the unintended gains that many schools in Cohort 1 and 2 realised. Therefore a successful broader application of Fair Education needs to carefully tread the line between enabling schools the creative freedom to realise gain, whilst ensuring a firm set of accountability mechanisms are in place, particularly for the clusters.

School leaders were asked for their perspectives around whether an initiative such as Fair Education should be made available to all schools in NSW. While some school leaders volunteered that schools with above average ICSEA scores have challenges as well, particularly in terms of their parent and community engagement, the majority of leaders were of the view that Fair Education should remain a program which specifically targets more disadvantaged schools:

I like the fact that they are using disadvantage as their first criteria. I think focusing on disadvantage, but not using disadvantage as a reason not to succeed...Why should {advantaged} schools put their hand in the bucket, when they don't need the bucket?

Sustainability

Evaluation activities ceased at the end of 2019. This also marked the final year of Cohort 1 school involvement, while Cohort 2 schools have one year to go. Therefore, the findings around sustainability are necessarily circumspect, as the outcomes for Cohort 2 schools once Fair Education support concludes is unknown.

Compared with shorter term grants, the Fair Education program supported schools over an extended period. This aspect of Fair Education was singled out for particular praise.

It's given us time to reflect, the time with you and the time in the coaching sessions, rather than being stuck in the day to day issues and the management of the program.

From the start, schools were encouraged to work progressively towards sustainability. Schools needed to articulate from early on, including in their initial application, how they intended to sustain their proposed initiative beyond involvement in Fair Education.

The previous chapter identified that high-impact projects tended to include the following characteristics: evolution in objectives, 'right' staff involvement and integration in school strategic thinking. All of these characteristics signal that the school had built the necessary infrastructure for the sustainability of their reform directions and project objectives in the years moving forward. School leaders with high-impact projects were also able to discuss their school's future direction: *'This is part of our vision and the direction of the school... We will still be taking what we've got and continuing down that path.'* By contrast, interviews with school leaders that encountered challenges in their project implementation, expressed a sense of uncertainty about where their project was headed in the future:

It is a grey area as to whether this program will run next year.

It's hard to say if we can afford XX using school funds. We will need some other funds from somewhere.

Project sustainability also correlated with the program design, as the amounts requested by schools varied from one project to another. There were also funding variations depending on whether the school participated as a cluster or an individual school. Schools which undertook Fair Education as an individual school often were operating on a leaner budget and made adjustments accordingly. One school leader said how 'Fair Education money helps us do things in house. We rarely use the money to bring in experts or for staff to go outside the school'. Schools which were given less funding but nevertheless implemented a successful project were less likely to find sustainability a challenge. School clusters received significantly more funding, and it was not a requirement of Fair Education that clusters distribute the funding equally between all participant schools. Therefore, lead schools which often received the bulk of the project funding may also be likely to face greater struggles with sustainability. Another issue identified in the previous report was that some clusters received differential amounts of funding per student capita.

Schools which invested in high cost projects would obviously have greater challenges in terms of their financial sustainability. Other project designs were less costly, which may also serve to mitigate their resourcing challenges after Fair Education. Another important issue raised in previous reports was that of the significant costs involved for schools which has implemented AVID programs (see CIRES 2018). These schools report that through the support of Fair Education, they were able to contribute funds toward the site license and to support staff attending AVID professional development (both mandatory requirements of being an AVID school). Schools which undertook AVID, remain committed to the program but were uncertain about how they were going to resource AVID from their school budget:

A priority for us now is our long term financial planning. We will have to take monies from other parts of our school budget in order to keep going with AVID. We are committed to AVID because of the success we have had.

In terms of the sustainability of the coaching, as discussed earlier in Chapter 3, some school leaders indicated their intention to maintain their relationship with the coach. Some expressed that they had already used school funds to pay for additional coaching sessions, and intended to continue to do so when Fair Education funding had ceased.

Actions and strategies undertaken as part of Fair Education were very often cross-subsidised by each school's budget. School budgets in NSW public schools have recently been transformed through the new RAM and equity funding model, which gives schools scope to adjust and move things around. This new budgetary autonomy is advantageous to the sustainability of Fair Education initiatives. One school leader reported that this is the key factor in why their project will continue to be sustained, as *'this money can be used in a more flexible way than in the past and will allow us to continue the Fair Ed initiatives.'*

5. Conclusion

Overcoming the effects disadvantage has in education on students and families remains one of the most pressing challenges that governments and school systems continue to face. Fair Education is a major initiative introduced to help participating schools in disadvantaged areas achieve better outcomes. The program includes funding and support over three years to help schools and school leaders improve family and community engagement and enrich student learning.

There is no easy solution for school systems to be able to close the equity gap. Children from more advantaged homes tend to be able to make greater progress in school, while children from more disadvantaged homes fall behind and are more likely to become progressively disengaged as the curriculum demands intensify as every year goes by (Lamb, Jackson et al. 2015). Students who disengage from education and leave early without completing any formal qualification cost society as a whole both in terms of fiscal and social costs (Lamb and Huo 2017). The philanthropic grant from VFFF which funds Fair Education is an attempt to help in some way counter the social and economic cost to the broader society from educational inequity

Fair Education aims to build the capacity of school leadership to design and implement activities to strengthen family and community involvement in education. Underpinning these goals is the view that school leaders in low socioeconomic status areas are best positioned to engage families and communities in student learning. Fair Education builds on the knowledge and experience of school leaders who work with families and students within disadvantaged communities. It does not impose a model of reform onto schools, instead, it aims to help empower school leaders to realise their own ideas and set their own objectives. This is to ensure that additional support is delivered in a way which is sensitive to each school's community and context drawing on the experience and knowledge of leaders and staff members at each school site.

For this, the support provided to schools through Fair Education has two associated components, (1) coaching and mentoring for school leaders, and (2) funding of a school-focused project. The flexible school-initiated projects give schools the opportunity to drive school improvement, to try something on their own terms without the imposition of a rigid framework or reform agenda. In schools which experienced success in Fair Education, the coaching and project support intersected one another—one enhanced the other. Schools with positive experiences of both tended to have the greatest improvement.

Roughly two-thirds of the remarks made by school leaders about the coaching and the role of the coaches in assisting schools to achieve their objectives were positive. Coaching served a different purpose across the 'life cycle' of the projects. High impact projects were shown to be those with the 'right' staff, were integrated in the school strategic plan and developed over the time to meet and exceed their original objectives. For projects which did not meet their objectives there were various factors at play including insurmountable, school-specific challenges, staff churn and poor inter-cluster relationships. The program model influenced

the school experience of Fair Education. There are signs that the positive effect of the coaching and project support was diluted in cluster schools.

The program model, including whether or not a school was part of a cluster, also played a part in which dimensions of school improvement were realised through the support of Fair Education. Individual schools were more likely to improve their school's engagement with parent and community engagement whereas schools in clusters achieved stronger outcomes in terms of their ability to work with other schools.

The Fair Education program places particular emphasis on supporting disadvantaged schools in their efforts to improve family and community engagement, as well as student learning, through strengthening leadership capability among other measures. The expectation is that developing the capacity of school leaders in high needs schools to better engage families and communities in school and learning will facilitate improvements in student outcomes. In terms of what Fair Education delivered, the results of the evaluation suggest the following:

Impact on strategic capability of school leadership teams

- All schools developed and implemented a strategic project of their own design.
- The coaching was viewed by nearly all school leaders as critical to Fair Education and the development of leadership capability
- Twenty-seven school leaders reported in the interviews that they had engaged in additional professional learning to support improvement
- Schools in two cluster-based projects had difficulties in establishing processes that adequately engaged all school leaders to support leadership development
- Ten school leaders in the interviews reported that turnover of school leaders worked against developing leadership capability

Impact on families and communities

- Evidence from the qualitative materials suggest that 25 schools established new ways to communicate with families, out of the 63 schools participating in 2019.
- Twenty-nine school leaders described improved family engagement in student learning through parent-focused events and activities.
- Not all of the projects that schools implemented directly relate to parent or family involvement in school or student learning.
- A challenge for Fair Education coaching was to encourage school leaders to take responsibility for what they could do to engage parents, but this was not successful with all school leaders.

Impact on schools working together

- In some communities, various schools worked together to pursue improvements related to their projects.
- School leaders reported having developed relationships with other school leaders.
- 78 per cent of school leaders indicated that they had learnt from other school leaders, with 38 leaders explicitly mentioning that they had gained through ideas transfer.

- Some schools recorded little or no impact of Fair Education on relationships with other schools.
- Single project schools, particularly those which implemented projects that did not involve partnering or engaging with other schools, rated the impact on improving relationships with other schools as lower than other areas of impact.

Impact on student learning outcomes

- One cluster of schools successfully re-engaged at-risk students so that they could maintain a formal pathway towards certificates of higher learning.
- A cluster of special schools developed a shared framework for teaching and learning which was rated positively.
- Across the period of Fair Education, average increases in NAPLAN reading and numeracy achievement were recorded in Fair Education schools which were above the average increases recorded state-wide for low SES schools, particularly in reading. It is important to note that it is not being claimed that the gains are due to Fair Education, as many other factors and other initiatives may have contributed. It is simply being noted that improvements in NAPLAN occurred in Fair Education schools over the course of the Fair Education evaluation.
- Nearly two-thirds of school leaders rated their school's improvement in student learning at or above eight out of ten.
- Approximately one in six schools rated Fair Education as having little impact on student learning, and a further one in five rated the impact as modest.
- Measuring progress and impact on student learning was a challenge in some schools.

The broader application of Fair Education needs to take into account the fact that its key benefit is derived from its independence from government. The flexible-governance model may also need to become more finely tuned for future school cohorts to prevent school disengagement. The following suggestions concerning the operation of Fair Education may improve the likelihood of success for future Cohorts.

1. The obligation on school leaders to attend the coaching sessions should be emphasised and reiterated to all schools involved in Fair Education, particularly those in cluster arrangements. The coaching and the project-funding need to be seen as working together to drive improvement, rather than one or the other.
2. Cluster arrangements need to be administered in such a way as to remove the onus on the lead school to be the conduit for all activities in the cluster. Evidence from Cohort 1 and 2 suggest that some lead schools were under pressure or unable to manage these relationships. One possibility is that Schools Plus provides the cluster lead with additional support to manage their task, or at the very least, the capability of lead schools and how they intend to manage the cluster needs to be addressed directly within the application process.

3. Coaches may need to be given more support to tailor their provision to each school's particular needs. This relates to the structure and content of the sessions as well as their frequency (i.e. more/less sessions).
4. Better processes around data and evidence are required to support schools in developing measures of impact. While some schools commented that they were collecting data, it is what not clear in what form this data was being collected and how it was being used for Fair Education purposes. Schools in future cohorts need to be encouraged to develop a consistent approach to gathering evidence to support any claims of impact, especially in relation to student learning and parent and community engagement.

The evaluation concludes by reflecting on the question, *what does Fair Education provide as lessons for future Government reforms or other philanthropic bodies that similarly wish to support disadvantaged schools to deliver improved outcomes for students and families?*

- The competitive selection process to join the program was important. Many school leaders felt a sense of validation that their project had been chosen through a competitive process by an independent body. Their success in Fair Education gave school leaders the confidence to start to look for new innovations and sources of funding to be able to pursue their ideas for school improvement. Furthermore writing an application for funding made school leaders accountable to realising their own objectives. One school leader described, *'when you are given money for whatever your project is, you feel the responsibility. That is a good thing. It keeps the momentum going'*.
- The design of Fair Education empowered school leaders to drive the improvements on their own terms. Fair Education did not impose a model of reform or expect a standardised set of outcomes. The independence provided schools with the chance to try something new and think differently, rather than implement a departmental initiative, which as one school leader said, *'do not always match with what the key issues of the school are'*.
- The three-year project funding and regular coaching visits supported schools to maintain a momentum towards their own objectives. Leaders were able to change or recalibrate their projects to better fit the reality of their schools with the support given to them by their independent coach. The project funds were also administered in a flexible way which supported schools when they adapted their initiatives. One leader said, *'the money was there in the background to enable the project but you can't enable anything if you don't have the coaching and the long-term nature of the project to get the thinking right to use your money well'*.
- The findings from Fair Education show that parent and family community engagement continues to be challenging for school leaders. However the intersection of the projects adopted by schools suggest that a set of strategies to improve family and community engagement is possible. Fair Education provided school leaders with the opportunity to learn from another and share their ideas about how to improve family and community engagement. This helped schools to develop authentic initiatives to support improvement, rather than a traditional systemic approach where an abstract framework or guide to 'what works' is distributed as a mechanism to drive change.

Although disadvantaged schools face many challenges, the contributions they make to their communities and the roles that they play cannot be underestimated. It has been suggested that it is often disadvantaged schools which are 'condemned to innovate' on marginal resources (Teese, 2006). It may therefore be wise to look to these schools to gain a perspective on effective practice. The evaluation framework adopted for Fair Education provides an opportunity for researchers, schools, policymakers and philanthropists to come together to tackle persistent educational inequality. There are important key findings from this report which should be shared more widely. The findings from this multi-year evaluation are important in being able to make a direct contribution to school and community research. It is also important to communicate the results from Fair Education more widely across the educational community.

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Appendix

Emubush Public School

Emubush Public School is a primary school located in the Western suburbs of Sydney in an educational precinct adjacent to two separate and large single sex secondary schools. Approximately two thirds of families have incomes in the bottom two income quartiles. The social demographic of the school indicates that there are 75 per cent of families with a language background other than English, mostly of Vietnamese or Middle Eastern background.

Our strength is that we are a unique and very diverse setting. We work hard as a staff and leadership to provide a robust educational foundation through our thorough curriculum which concentrates on inclusivity for all students, including the autism students who spend time each week in the mainstream classes. (School leader 2016)

Outline of the project

The original aim of the Fair Education project was to engage parents in the life of the school by developing sporting programs and nutritional and other well-being activities. School leaders wanted to use Fair Education as a means to reach out to what was perceived as a disengaged school community.

I developed a sense of my community as being underperforming, people who felt school had a role to play with their children, but were happy to leave school to do what they saw as the school's job. (School leader 2017)

Project plans, early on, were ambitious.

So we thought about having a one-stop shop where parents could drop off their kids and then come and study for a day. If parents are involved in educational studies, e.g. studying to be a teacher aide, they could do voluntary work in our school or the high schools as a required part of their training. (School leader 2016)

We were noticing that kids' attention spans were more diet related than any other learning difficulty because of the amount of sugar they were having in their lunches. So we wanted to get the parents involved to improve this. Then it was about them sharing their culture, so when we get the cooking and nutrition classes up and running we'll get them to share their recipes. (School leader 2016)

We would also include exercise classes for parents to improve their wellbeing. (School leader 2016)

Project development

In the first year of project implementation school leaders encouraged parents to take up training as teacher aides; sports coaches were brought into the school and parents were encouraged to participate in coaching. Parents were also invited to cooking classes that emphasised positive nutrition. The initial year of coaching focused on supporting school leadership to develop a manageable plan.

...it's also just about the (Schools Plus) coaching, in how it is we're actually going to achieve our project. And I think it's been amazing, rather than it be around the accountability. But that real coaching of 'ok guys how do we get you from here to here, what things can we do', and having that additional, if you like, extended team to help keep us on track. I think that's been really great for us, because schools do get busy (School leader 2017)

When things did not proceed as hoped, the Schools Plus coaches offered re-assurance and ensured regular feedback.

(The coach] was always complementing us and re-assuring us on what we've come up with, but then also giving us food for thought in terms of 'have you thought about this.' [He] might offer a couple of suggestions for us to follow through with. (School leader 2017)

In the first full year of the project, around 16 community members participated in a training course to become teacher aides, four of whom were employed in the school in 2018. Fair Education funds were used to support this course, along with other school grants. Other activities relating to health and wellbeing, yoga and personal training, were attempted that year, without any real community take-up.

During 2018 there was a change of Schools Plus coach. As well, there was a turnover of nearly half the teaching and non-teaching staff from 2017 to 2018. The school principal also went on leave in Term 4. The Fair Education project and coaching acted as a stabilising influence.

The Fair Education project has kept us on track. With all the staffing issues we have had, without Fair Education we would not have stayed positive and believe we can do something positive. Fair Education has helped sustain us. (School leader 2018)

A member of the leadership team, who had been on leave during Terms 2 and 3, assumed the position of acting principal. The acting principal placed emphasis on continuing the vision of engaging families in the education of their children.

Our vision has not changed. We want to create a hub where we can support our community become more engaged with the world, to support families with welfare, learning and emotional development. We think our community is insular: lots of stay at home mums who need support to get out into the world. We strongly wanted our parents to become engaged with the learning of their children. (School leaders 2018)

At the end of 2018, the school's Fair Education project was re-set in consultation with the Schools Plus coach. An emphasis was placed on developing ways to better communicate with parents. Encouraging the use of smartphone communication applications SeeSaw, Dojo and Skoolbag were seen as a constructive way forward.

In addition, in late 2018 the idea was developed of employing a Community Liaison Officer (CLO) one day a week. A new CLO was employed at the beginning of 2019 using Fair Education monies carried over from 2018.

Again, in transition from 2018 to 2019, there was a marked turnover of school leadership and staff. The position of the new CLO was increased to two days a week with Fair Education funding and she was effective in engaging a core of up to 12 parents.

Her main task is to be a bridge between our community and the staff. There has been angst, a lack of trust, and parents wanting to do their own thing. There were a lot of issues between the administration and the P&C over the past few years. The aim of employing the CLO was to open up lines of communication to find out what their needs were and what they wanted to do and what their role would be like. I think she has done well. (School leader 2019)

A school fete in the middle of 2019 showed that the new school leadership was prepared to continue to engage with families. It was a major undertaking, involving most school staff.

This fete was a big deal for us, around 60 families turned up. We had it early in the day at 8.00 am to grab parents as they were dropping kids off to school. This was my first big job at the school to organise. We organised a breakfast. Part of this fete would be to highlight how technology worked and related to communication home. The school is using an app called Skoolbag, which allows for notices to be sent home and other information about the school, reminders, notes, and the school calendar. At the fete we got parents to sign up with the app. The take up was about 50 per cent. We have now increased that a lot after the fete. It is not clear to me how many parents know each other. I got the impression that attendance at this fete was the first time some parents had been inside the school. (School leader 2019)

Project impact

Emubush Public School in the period 2016 to 2019 was not an easy place to work:

This is such a tricky environment. Many kids come from really difficult backgrounds. Self-reliance and resilience are not high. Students feel they need to protect themselves; they make big issues out of small things. Physical blow ups can result quickly and things can escalate quickly. (School leader 2019)

One theme of the original Fair Education project design was to bring some more energy to the school. Early strategies of engaging parents saw leaders reaching out to families with activities they thought would work. At the end of first and second years of the Fair Education program, when it was clear that what was attempted had only limited success, there was an opportunity for school leaders to reassess. Having a coach, and importantly, attending Fair Education conferences, encouraged each new group of school leaders to remain positive.

We would run the programs and then things would drop away, so we would try different things. We still have the vision, we still want to establish ourselves as a hub, and we still have the energy to keep going. We really want to improve. (School leader, 2018)

The main benefit of Fair Education is to keep our vision front of mind. The coach allows us the freedom to make changes. It is easy to feel failure. The money allows us to try things. The conference gives a chance to hear other ideas, to give us encouragement, to make connections, to find out what other visions are out there. (School leader 2018)

School leaders in 2019 reflected on the importance of the CLO, and finding someone skilled in working within a challenging environment:

There has been friction between staff and parents which has contributed to high staff turnover. The step of having a CLO tells the community we want to listen and find a way of getting parents onside. My impression was that early on the school tried to do positive things that were not taken up. There have been parents who only come into the school for negative reasons to do with behaviour. This produces conflict that makes the place unattractive. (School leader 2019)

The parents I have spoken to like having [the CLO] to talk to. [The CLO] is running a pilot program with these parents to explain what we do at school. We want parents to understand what they can do at home. Having a non-teacher explain this I think is an advantage. (School leader 2019)

By the end of the project it was clear that communication with parents was a priority and the CLO had a key role in facilitating this. As parents adopted interactive technology using smart phones it became a useful, regular and easy form of direct and immediate communication.

Sustainability

At the end of the third year of this Fair Education project it was clear that continuing to find ways to communicate effectively with families was key to its sustainability:

The CLO is a key. If this role goes parents will think that this was just a band-aid issue. They will not trust us. This role must continue and develop. The money needs to be found within the budget or a grant needs to be applied for. It would be a shame if the role was reduced to one day a week. (School leader 2019)

The information fete was also a key event and must also occur again. We now have baseline data that we can use to develop how a new fete would work. We need to have one at the beginning of next year and ramp it up a bit. We really need to get all parents to attend early next year. (School leader 2019)

We also need to ramp up the use of technology communication apps across the school. We have transition activities with kindergarten groups coming in and we want to enrol parents into the communication apps. The language barrier and experience in using technology can be a barrier. (School leader 2019)

Conclusion

There were two factors that hindered/impeded the project implementation. The first was leadership and staff turnover. The second factor was a wariness in the parent body in their interactions with the school that had become entrenched over time.

This Fair Education project highlighted that communication with parents is a necessary starting point in parent engagement. This case study shows that the process of effective communication takes time to develop and can be resource intensive. This case study demonstrates that goodwill between parents and school staff is not a given. Schools with a low level of goodwill need to work hard to establish it.

With a stable staff over the three years of their Fair Education project, this school may have been able to develop strategies around parent engagement more quickly. It is notable that over the three years of Fair Education, new school leaders were forward looking and were always willing to learn from previous experience.

For us, having to change our project so often, one thing I would like to comment on is that we have stuck at it and had to adapt. The goal has always been the same. We are persistent. We will keep going. There is no other choice. (School leader 2019)

Ferntree Secondary College

Ferntree Secondary College is a senior college, Years 10 to 12, located in coastal NSW. The school aims to provide an adult learning environment with a strong emphasis on delivering VET courses. Over 60 per cent of families are in the bottom income quartile according to the Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage derived by ACARA.

Outline of the project

Many students and families were described by school leadership as high risk, with negative experiences of schooling. Ferntree College also enrolls a number of students from refugee backgrounds who have had experience of trauma. This Fair Education project aimed to build and develop a community garden which would be an approachable and inclusive space for the school and could also be used for a range of school and community activities. The design of the garden would also reflect Indigenous traditions of the region.

Our students are from low SES backgrounds and often have numeracy and literacy deficits. We have of students with anxiety, self-harm and depression issues and so that really has shaped our school plan and what we are trying to do to support those students. We are very welfare-based, trying always to feed in positive experiences. (School leader 2016)

Project development

School leaders began this Fair Education project aware there were barriers between the school and parents. Many families were described as not having had positive experiences of school. The project design assumed that a starting point for creating a positive and more welcoming image for the school started at the front gate. The school principal had worked in school where a physically welcoming environment had been successful.

What we're trying to achieve with this is to build some structures into the school that's going to take away some of the negativity that some of the parents feel by coming into the school because some of them have had not so good experiences. They feel like they're only coming in here for the negative reasons....it's got two components, one is that we will be not only engaging parents and the local community but also build capacity in the students. (We hope) they will have a positive experience and they can take time and talk to their parents about. (School leader 2017)

In the first year, coaching sessions provided a forum for project leaders to consolidate their initial ideas and reshape the overall vision. The school used Fair Education funding to support the part-time employment of a nationally recognised permaculturalist who, as a local resident, was committed to the success of this project. The Fair Education team also included a horticulture teacher and a senior school leader.

Once the core of the garden was established, plans were made to build a stand-alone outdoor kitchen. The kitchen plans had to be put on hold due to Departmental regulations. An undercover gazebo was built in lieu of a full kitchen.

At the same time as the garden was being built the horticulture teacher developed a horticulture program that would eventually become accredited through the NSW Education

Standards Authority (NESA). This course would be first taught in 2018 as an accredited HSC (Higher School Certificate) subject.

During the first year of implementation of the project there were disruptions when the principal and one of the project leaders went on leave. During this time there was also a change of coach. This was a period of setback for the project.

There was also a time in the middle of the year when at least one coaching session did not occur. School leaders expressed concern about what was expected of them in relation to reporting on their Fair Education project, including the conference of 2018.

The coaching in the last year of the project was also problematic. Visits became strained.

The coaching in the middle period was not a great success. [The first coach] gave us some tools to quantify what we were doing; it was an evaluation tool that told us what we wanted to achieve. It started off okay but, later, we didn't like the tools we were expected to use to measure the success of the program. The middle part of the coaching, we would get readings that didn't connect with us. It became something we had to do. We lost the commitment and faith in the coaching. (School leader 2019)

At the same time as coaching was described as 'not working' (School leader, 2018), the growth of the garden continued.

School leaders saw the 2019 Fair Education conference as a positive experience. The conference gave school leaders an opportunity to network and reflect on how other schools had innovated. The final sessions with a different coach were positive, with the coach providing ideas and suggestions that were taken up by the leadership group.

Project impact

At the beginning, this Fair Education project had a single focus: to provide a garden which would become an alternative, non-threatening learning space for the school community. The school leadership had a firm belief that a garden would have practical and symbolic benefits.

There were some (staff) early on who could not see the point of a garden. Some staff found it hard to see how it would get students engaged. The Department gave us a lot of red tape to get what we have got. Every problem forced us to rethink how to get through problems. We haven't pushed the garden with staff; more and more staff are coming around to its uses and how positive it is for the school. When people come into the school, the garden is a focus that sets a good tone for visitors. They all comment on it. The garden shows our school is about growth. (School leader 2019)

The permaculturalist's energy and drive has been key to the development of the garden. The school's horticulture teacher also worked closely with the permaculture expert.

The time with [the permaculture expert] is amazing for the kids. His being here is a real plus. Getting time with [him] is a benefit for the kids. He is such a knowledgeable and energetic man. The space has so much energy. The growth in the garden has been amazing over such a relatively short period. (School leader 2019)

During the absence of the school principal, a welfare orientated school leader took over management of the project. She saw the benefit of the garden as an open, calming space.

The disposition of most kids down there (in the garden) is utterly different to when in the classroom. The levels of authentic engagement is high; students are happy in the space. We have students who can go down there to calm down. The garden flips the switch with many kids and can calm the anger down. (School leader 2019)

Numbers enrolled in the horticulture course have grown substantially in 2019 and the space is used by other students and teachers. Students and volunteers work side by side in the garden, with the adults acting as mentors to demonstrate how useful horticulture skills are in life after schooling.

Parent-teacher evenings at Ferntree College had a history of very low attendance. The garden is being used in 2019 as a starting point for meetings with parents.

Many of the students we work with come from families with generational disconnect from education. Just getting these families through the gate is something. For many students this is their last educational chance. Parents find it hard to process when they are told their child is doing okay. Everyone loves the garden. Parents come to the garden and feel comfortable in the space. Telling parents that their child is doing well while in the garden feels right. (School leader 2019)

This project would not have worked without Fair Education. School leaders have commented that the Department does not easily accommodate programs that appear to have an element of risk, but also recognise that in an environment of very high need, risks need to be taken.

We have progressed with good momentum except when we had to deal with the Department over our original design for a kitchen. The Fair Education model of flexibility has suited our ethos of flexibility. A school like ours has to be willing to be flexible. Departments are not good at flexibility. (School leader 2019)

Local and national media became interested in the garden, composting became a regular practice, the school started to use food grown in kitchens and some was sold at local markets. The garden now has a profile that is a key part of the image of the school in the community.

Sustainability

Fair Education monies were used to build a physical structure and to advance professional development. Leadership skills and horticulture expertise were promoted because the initial team had a strong sense of purpose, strong enough to overcome challenges in the second year of the project.

The money was important because it helped us put our ideas together faster. It enabled us to employ [the permaculture expert]. While not a huge amount it just helped us to make things happen. The grant gave us validation about this project to some people in the schools and outside. The tick of approval by an outside body to do this project was important to us. It was a great kick start. Three years was a good timeline. Three years is a minimum to see change. Any less time is difficult to see any positives. (School leader 2019)

The school leaders are resolved to continue the garden as a central part of school life.

We have one more year of our existing school plan. The next school plan will include aspects of sustainability and interaction from other areas of the school with the garden. (School leader 2019)

We have a management plan for the garden, we will look at how we can use our equity funding. [The horticulture teacher] now has the capacity to keep things going when our permaculture expert is no longer with us. We have the course and the physical space for community use. School leadership is strong in supporting the project. (School leader 2019)

Conclusion

This Fair Education project has met its original goals. The school principal realised early on that family engagement could not occur unless families felt comfortable coming into the school, especially when failure had been the norm for most students.

The garden plan required a high level of expertise and the students were part of the process from the beginning; they learnt that planning and preparation take time and effort.

Each stage of the development of the school garden had a symbolic element. The strong message the garden conveys to students and their families is that growth can be achieved, even when starting from a very low base.

Our school has changed culture over the past few years. Change your thinking if somethings does not work, lower the stakes, welcome people into the school. Initially, we wanted a place that all sorts of parents could feel comfortable: refugee, generational poverty, disconnected families. The focus has developed beyond this. The kids love the space. You have to offer success before you can communicate effectively. (School leader 2019)

Deer Valley College

Deer Valley College is a multi-campus college located in a mid-sized regional city of NSW. A feature of the government schools in this city is that over 30 per cent of their student population come from an Indigenous background.

The college has two junior campuses for Year 7 to 10 students and one senior campus. Over the past 15 years the three campuses have, consistently had ICSEA scores in the low 900s. Over 90 per cent of students are from families in the bottom two income quartiles and the proportion of Aboriginal students enrolled across all campuses is high.

Outline of the project

Through their Fair Education project the college wanted to introduce the AVID program ‘to explicitly teach higher order thinking skills to capable students while engaging the support of their families and wider community’ (project application). In the first year of the project, a single, high achieving class was established in Year 7 at both junior campuses. Students gained entry to these classes by application and school-based selection and were to be taught by teachers trained in AVID strategies.

Senior college leaders were aware of the AVID program before they applied to the Fair Education program. Prior to the school writing its application, some members of staff had visited schools with similar social demographics and where AVID programs were already established.

School leaders were confident that the college offered a variety of programs which supported a range of student needs but they were keen to establish a program that would specifically support highly aspirational students.

We are trying to set up models that provide certainty for our community, so that our community can have trust in the programs. We want to provide a range of programs that suit different needs and can appeal to a range of different aspirations. (School leader 2016)

We are (also) trying to convince families in the town that we can provide a quality education. We are hoping the AVID program will be a pathway for academically able students to progress through the school. We have had a lot of interest from grade six parents wanting to apply for the AVID program. We hope to pick up families who might think twice about sending their children to the private schools. (School leader 2016)

Project development

Early coaching sessions developed a shared sense of purpose amongst school leaders and encouraged a more expansive project plan.

The (early) coaching was really beneficial. (The coach) helped set things up so that all the principals felt engaged. I think they really respected his status. (He) gave the principals the opportunity for any issues they may have had to come out. (He) was able to ask us the right questions and to encourage collegiality. (School leader 2019)

Early in the establishment of their Fair Education project, selected teachers travelled interstate to attend AVID training programs through the support of Fair Education funding. AVID trained teachers began, almost immediately, to use AVID strategies in their other classes. By the time the initial high achieving class moved into Year 8 the AVID teaching and learning strategies had begun to develop a positive profile amongst staff. More staff were encouraged to attend AVID professional training and more staff were keen to receive internally delivered AVID training. A fair proportion of their Fair Education funding was used to support project development and maintain AVID site licences which, along with professional training, are significant costs. By the second year of the college involvement in Fair Education, teachers at the senior campus started using AVID techniques. Primary school principals in the region became aware and interested in what the college was attempting through AVID.

Project impact

There has been a rise in applications for enrolment as the profile of the college lifts across the community, in part due to its implementation of AVID. Increasing numbers of parents are contacting the college who wanting to know more about the designated 'AVID class'. College leaders report that confidence in what the college offers the community has grown. As a result of this interest, the school is choosing to profile their AVID program at parent information sessions. They show families how the AVID strategies work and how they can support their children as learners.

We also have families coming from the private schools wanting to enrol here because they have heard of the AVID system. We have parents glowing about what we have done, they go to presentations that occur on parent-teacher nights and are happy that we do this work with their children. Parents tell us they say positive things about the college to their friends. (School leader 2019)

Leaders report that AVID training is regarded by staff as being of high quality and of immense benefit to them professionally. One school leader describes how '*staff became passionate about what they learnt through AVID*' (2019).

As a result of the support provided by Fair Education, AVID techniques are now embedded into teaching and learning programs across the whole college. In 2018, '*the school started developing consistent teaching protocols that were to be implemented across the college, incorporating AVID strategies for use in each class*' (School leader 2018). One year later, the school had integrated AVID into such components as college development days, staff meetings, and executive meetings. In 2019, the aim of the school leadership is to '*embed AVID in all classes at all levels across the college*'.

The Fair Education project has allowed for leadership development amongst younger staff. The college has appointed an AVID coordinator at each campus and there is also a college AVID coordinator. Part of their brief is to ensure that all staff are exposed to AVID strategies and encouraged to include them as part of their teaching practice. Working with the college AVID coordinator, campus coordinators have begun looking at ways to document student

growth. Students who are part of the AVID program are more likely to become active in other school activities, including school leadership, perhaps signalling an increased engagement.

One big thing I have noticed is that the kids who started in Year 7 and are now in Year 10 are very willing to be part of things in the college and the community. These students see themselves as part of a whole: they are the school captains, in sporting clubs, drama productions, in the school band and on the SRC. (School leader 2019)

AVID is seen by key Aboriginal elders as a means to develop Aboriginal kids as leaders and role models. (School leader 2018)

Sustainability

The cost of maintaining AVID at the college without support from the Fair Education funding is a known issue and a key threat to the sustainability of this initiative.

The college leadership recognises that the investment in AVID has been substantial and that the impact of AVID must be consolidated in order to maintain the investment. One challenge for the school will be to achieve their aspirations for the implementation of AVID right across the college within the constraints of their budget. School leaders report that the cost of maintaining the AVID site license is manageable, however, the ongoing professional development is expensive, especially due to travel costs.

We want to continue with AVID but know how expensive it is. I do not think we can sustain sending six to eight people to Melbourne or Newcastle each year. I would like AVID to come to us. (School leader 2019)

Another challenge is how to continue to sustain the relationships with the cluster of primary schools that have also adopted AVID strategies. A cluster of six primaries in the region developed their own Fair Education application for the second round of VFFF funding. Their original intention was to implement AVID with their Year 5 and 6/ Stage 3 students as part of a program of inquiry-based learning. Many of these primary schools have since introduced AVID strategies to their lower levels, which means that most students at their schools are attuned to the AVID teaching and learning methodology.

An important concern for the primary schools who are now using AVID, is how their students will fare in the transition into secondary school. Despite their aspirations for all students at Deer Valley College to be using AVID, this has not yet occurred. Primary school students who are used to the AVID strategies, inquiry-based learning and more open classrooms may struggle in the secondary context. The resolution of these issues between the college and the primary schools is ongoing

Partly in response to dialogue with college and primary leaders, the college has decided to rebadge their approach to AVID. In addition to their select-entry class, another separate class will be established for aspirational students that do not necessarily achieve the highest grades to permit entry into AVID. The students in this second class will also have the opportunity to be immersed in AVID strategies. The relations with the primary schools will help drive the maintenance of AVID strategies and overall curriculum reform.

Next year, especially because of the push from the primary schools, all year 7 classes will experience AVID at some level. We cannot guarantee that all classes will be taught by an AVID expert; but every faculty will have at least one AVID expert in a leadership role. (School leader 2019)

Conclusion

Fair Education has supported Deer Valley College through a period of growth. The independent coaching and financial support over an extended period have been crucial to the school:

I wouldn't get the Department involved with Fair Education. It is important to have independence from the Department. Independent coaching is important, trust takes time. The degree of freedom is important. The Department puts constraints on things. (School leader 2019)

The Fair Education program has allowed the college to develop a more confident, outward looking image, which appeals to aspirational families. Fair Education has provided a vehicle that has helped support college cohesion. College and campus leaders have worked together to integrate AVID strategies into the fabric of teaching and learning.

The (Fair Education) project has provided us with a framework to work collegiately. Everything about the project has allowed this to happen, the money allows teachers to be trained, the time allows things to come together and the coaching allows us to reflect and develop. We have a focus across the three campuses and then across the whole learning community. (School leader 2019)

The potential for AVID to become a central pillar in educational delivery across the whole of this regional city is there. School leaders feel that AVID brings a consistency in the teaching and learning across the primary and secondary schools, which '*has benefited public education in (this city)*' (2019).

Deer River Public School Cluster

This cluster consists of five government primary schools in and around a mid-sized regional city in NSW. One other small school outside the city was part of the original application but withdrew.

There are two other government primary schools in the city, neither of which were involved in the original application for Fair Education funding. One of these schools has since shown some interest in the project.

Outline of the project

Early on, primary school principals became aware of the Fair Education supported AVID program operating at the government secondary college. Four of the six primary schools in the metropolitan area decided together to submit an application for Fair Education funding in the second round of VFFF funding. The original application stressed the importance of improving the transition of students from primary into secondary school, as the school leaders saw that it *'was a great chance for us to have a transitional link between Stage 3 and Stage 4 at the college'* (School leader 2017). In addition, the dual Fair Education projects running within the city provided them with the opportunity to work together as *"a community of schools"*.

We were all preoccupied with doing work that was required of us under the latest round of educational reforms in NSW. We thought that this was a project that would allow us to work together on something that was important to us. (School leader 2017)

The cluster project, entitled *'Success for All'*, focused on using AVID strategies to improve student skills as independent learners, especially within a structure of using inquiry or project-based activities.

Project development

Primary school leaders were aware that the secondary college had established a selective entry *'AVID class'* and were conscious that many parents of older primary students were supportive of this development. They were cognisant of the interest that parents had in AVID and sought to take it in a different direction within the primary school context.

While we know there is a lot of interest in (the city) in what the college is doing in developing AVID; we want to promote inquiry-based learning as the means to develop student skills. As primary schools we want to bring parents more into the life of the schools as to be active participants in how schools operate. (School leader 2017)

Primary school leaders were confident their schools already had a common focus based around teaching and learning, which made it easier for the implementation of AVID strategies. The successful implementation of AVID, according to one school leader, requires *'collective engagement'*:

We are developing a common language to talk about our work with students. This is occurring at the school level and across schools. We are building a collective community amongst our teachers. (School leader 2018)

Early coaching sessions helped schools develop a cluster plan. The continued sessions provided a forum for ongoing planning and development:

It was important having a facilitator (coach) for the discussions and keeping everyone on track and having those regular set meetings; I think if it was left for everyone to organise meetings, I am not sure it would be sustainable but having a time and someone leading the meetings and keeping track of what everyone is doing, is really important. (School leader 2019)

Fair Education gives us time, it keeps things moving. Things develop, [they] just don't drift along. (School leader 2019)

Project impact

AVID based professional learning has developed teaching practice and promoted a consistency of practice across cluster schools to 'build a collective community amongst our teachers'.

The staff understand that by doing the professional learning with AVID it is taking everyone to the next level of teaching. It is not an add-on, you are improving as a teacher. (School leader 2019)

Primary school leaders emphasise the benefit of their Fair Education project as a vehicle for shared professional growth. They see the reputation of government schools within the city having improved, in part because parents are seen to value a program that is promoted as flowing from early primary through to the senior years of schooling.

From my perspective, the way we have actually been able to all come together as a cluster, it has been up and down over many years, so it has been nice to have a focal point around common ground across all schools... I think that has been a really positive strike for all of us working together in that cluster group. (School leader 2019)

The consistent messages from all primary school leaders are that classroom practice has changed when teachers have received AVID training. Relations with parents have improved as a result, and the cumulative effect is that schools are better places to work in, for both teachers and students.

The other one is that we have seen conversations between parents and students change dramatically. It has been more based around what goes on in their classrooms. Because children in particular have a lot more input into driving what their learning is about and we see a lot more engaged kids, some that weren't [previously] that engaged for many reasons but that are now, and so we are not focusing all the time on children's behaviour or ringing parents about issues. It's more about parents coming in and vice versa: we are talking to home and kids are coming in and having those conversations and talking to their parents at home. That's a big difference. (School leader 2019)

We have started to use AVID strategies in our three-way conferences with parents. We are promoting AVID as a challenging way to learn and have set up meetings with parents to explain and give examples about how AVID works. (School leader 2018)

Inquiry or project-based learning (PBL) has been consolidated and parents feel more confident with what the schools are doing and more willing to engage in three-way conversations (between students, parents and teachers):

Inquiry based learning and problem-solving suits our population. We have around 75 per cent of our population as Indigenous. They love what we are doing and support us with being aspirational for their children. We have done presentations that engage our Aboriginal consultative group. They love the fact that the strategies use are activity based. (School leader 2019)

We have been doing PBL for three years now. We were doing it before the grant started, seeing the change in how many parents we get into the classroom to see their kids work and actually ring and say 'when's a good time for me to come in and see Billy's project, he has been coming and telling me about that' and things like that. We never had that before. Our AVID project has moved this to another level. (School leader 2019)

For me as a classroom teacher it is the conversations I am having with parents. As an example, in a parent-teacher meeting, the parent mentioned to me that at the dinner table, her daughter sat down and gave everyone a 'would you rather scenario', which is a strategy we use to get students to think about what they want to say. And she is conducting these 'would you rather' with her parents. The mother was blown away that her child was having these conversations and wanting to delve deeper into reasons or justifications of their thinking. The mother said it was helping her to think better! (School leader 2019)

Secondary college leaders have attended cluster meetings for the primary schools. The college leadership has promised that this will continue. This will support transition programs, and importantly from the primary point of view, influence the secondary school teaching and learning practices:

They (the secondary college) have changed, they are coming to our meetings. I recognise they have tensions within their own college, they are trying to pull specific KLAs across all of the Year 7s so that everyone can actually be exposed to ongoing AVID strategies so then they go down a pathway onto Year 9 and beyond (School leader 2019).

The smaller size of primary schools compared to secondary schools and a collegiate approach to learning based around year levels rather than subject based learning are seen as factors in the accelerated take-up of new AVID informed teaching strategies. All interviews with primary school teachers were consistent in how they framed the benefit of AVID to their teaching and learning. AVID strategies appear to have quickly gained traction and have been readily taken up by the majority, if not all staff.

The learnings in AVID is amazing that is going through teachers in our school and all the schools involved. Teachers are excited about what they learn. They can talk together in a common language; they feel they are learning something coherent and broad in scope. The strategies and activities are such a high quality. (School leader 2019)

Sustainability

The primary cluster's involvement in Fair Education will finish at the end of 2020. The cost of maintaining professional development, without the Fair Education funding, is a recognised sustainability issue. The larger schools with more substantial equity loading funding hope to develop budgets to sustain professional learning through the AVID institute. All school leaders are hoping to consolidate AVID and PBL learnings within the culture of their school. It is seen as crucial to maintain a critical mass of staff trained in AVID strategies, who can see the intersection of the AVID methodology with other school programs.

Everything we do in this school is focused on what we kicked off with the Fair Ed project. It links together beautifully and people are seeing that now. Even with the Level 3 literacy training, people are coming back and saying "oh yeah, that works with what we are doing here." So that's just the way we are going. Whether we have more money or not, I will find it to make sure this continues. (School leader 2019)

Conclusion

Having two Fair Education projects running at the same time in the one city has had a tangible effect on the way education is delivered in government settings. School leaders across five primaries and three secondary campuses have worked together around shared goals. This is no small achievement. School leaders better understand each other's situations.

The most powerful thing is the work we have done as a network (of primary schools working with the secondary college) (School leader 2019).

Finally, a three-year program of coaching and financial support, independent of government, is valued by the school leaders because it is personalised and over an extended time period:

For everything that Schools Plus is, the DOE (Department of Education) is not. From my point of view, I just find that Schools Plus believe in you. They say, "This is your project, we trust that this is your project. We provide the mentors/coaches to keep you on track but really, you fly, and you go with it and you look after your school and community needs and go and prosper." And that's what I love. The Department, I'm sure they mean (for) that (to happen) but what I get sometimes is, "it's all about accountability: money is coming from government, you are responsible, you are accountable, make it happen." (School leader 2019).

Ti Tree Secondary College Cluster

Ti Tree Secondary College, an amalgamation of three previously separate high schools, is located in a northern regional city of NSW. In addition to the three campuses, the cluster also included a K to 12 school, located within a 100 kilometre radius of the city.

There are two private secondary schools in the wider region but the socio-economic demographics of the two student populations, state and independent, are markedly different.

While Ti Tree Secondary College has an executive principal, campus principals manage their own budgets and the day to day running of their campuses. There is little variation in the demographics of the three campuses which serve student populations where 75 per cent or more of families are in the bottom two income quartiles. Over 15 per cent of the student population at each campus identify as Indigenous.

Outline of the project

The target group for the project were disengaged students and their families. The school's Fair Education project aimed to provide them with an alternative model to mainstream education which would develop student individualised strengths and assist them towards positive pathways into further education, training or employment.

The lead school of the three secondary campuses also has responsibility for the management of a suspension centre of which there are 22 across NSW, many in regional and rural locations. They are designed to cater to an upper limit of six students at any one time for a maximum of 20 days before they return to mainstream schooling. This principal of this campus hoped that the Fair Education project would promote and exemplify best practice for a suspension centre.

Our hope for the Fair Education grant is to capture what we are doing and provide a model for other schools. There are over 20 suspension centres across the state and we want to show a model that can work. These centres should be proactive, not reactive. We want to show how you can access case management, how to use distance education, how to use short courses. The parents are half the program, we are working with the parents as well. We try to case manage the parents as well. We have negotiated with XX University to involve speech and occupations therapies in the program. (School leader 2017)

Project development

The original project submission identified that the 10 year-old suspension centre was in need of a complete overhaul and change seemed appropriate given the retirement of the centre's lead teacher. At the same time, the new college structure came into being. As was consistent with many multi-campus colleges in NSW, a college executive principal was appointed to oversee the development of a college ethos.

The (original suspension) centre has a poor name, with low success rates; behaviours do not change and other schools in the area do not use our suspension centre. (School leader 2017)

The Fair Education project quickly established itself, a senior member of staff the lead campus was appointed as project manager/coordinator, and teachers with experience in special education were selected into the program. As the number of students expanded, a community liaison officer (CLO) was appointed with the support of Fair Education funds. Students were chosen from Year 10 cohorts at each of the college campuses and the school. A weekly program was devised that consisted of four days of class tuition, including coursework by distance education, and a fifth day as work placement. The CLO's role was to support families and to organise work placements. In the afternoons life skills and personal development sessions were conducted. The health and community departments of the local campus of a regional university also provided support to the program. As coursework by distance education, based in nearby Ballina, came an expansion in the number of students who were now able to work to complete their ROSA (NSW Record of School Achievement).

The original Schools Plus coach encouraged all college leaders to be directly involved in the development of the project and to incorporate it into the overall college plan. The transition from a project with a low profile to one that has now gained recognition at the highest Departmental levels was not linear and had clear setbacks.

We are hoping that the Fair Education coach will provide feedback and ideas from an outsider's point of view. Already, (Schools Plus coaching staff) have helped us develop our school plan and link in with the other campuses. (School leader 2017)

There were some pretty challenging conversations within the team initially when it was quite small; we weren't always represented by every cluster member. We have got to a point now where we have generally got all principals at a cluster meeting. Initially it started out with the principal of the project and the head teachers of the project. We are now at a point where we are going to the conference next week and my director is coming. (School Leader 2019)

In 2018, the coach and the campus principal who had written the original submission both moved on. In addition, the centre was flood damaged. A second site attached to the local university proved inappropriate and a new home was found in 2019 in the centre of town. Fortunately, the project was well established by this stage, with strong internal leadership. The new campus principal responsible for executive management of the program was also fully committed to its success.

While meetings with the coach provided a consistent forum for the project development, there were challenges in establishing an appropriate management structure. Attendance at coaching sessions by a large group of college leaders was questioned from a cost benefit viewpoint and interviewees were at times guarded as to how much they gained from these sessions over the period 2018 into 2019. They had no doubt, however, that without regular coaching sessions, the project could not have developed as it did.

They (the coaching sessions) varied. Sometimes it was about the way in which the coaching sessions were structured. Some were probably much more beneficial than others. I think they are all positive. I've certainly found them of benefit personally. I don't know that it

always meets the needs of all of the individuals there. There is a cost, but we have come to see this is a valuable program that we are committed to. (School leader 2019)

Initially, finding a way to engage families was also a challenge. While there was diversity in the background and emotional and psychological needs of the students involved, many were from families with generational issues around poverty and lack of engagement with school:

Engagement with families is now okay. Many of our parents have had the same experience (with school) as their children. This is generational. The parents have often gone to the same schools as their kids, having had suspensions and expulsions. The parents love it when their kids have success. We are offering something that can change the mindsets of these families, that education can do something positive. (School leader 2018)

We tell the parents that their kids will have a much more positive outcome if they move into (the project). The parents go, yeah, yeah, sure, but after a couple of weeks their kids are coming home happy and this means they are not having as many issues at home. It takes a while for the parents to see there is light at the end of the tunnel. We are trying to support families trapped in a negative cycle. Many of the parents are stuck at home, getting them to come to see the school can be a big step. (School leader 2018)

Project impact

The project set out to make a difference in the lives of the most challenging young people in the region. After only two years a model has emerged that leadership believes to be working.

All our kids have mental issues: 90 per cent of the kids haven't been to school in the last twelve to eighteen months. They all have drug issues, particularly the cohort at the moment. A lot of them have absent families, or they choose to not be anywhere near their families; they all have trauma of some sort. They are a very complex bunch of young people. It's their last step. Most of them would be in jail if not in (the project), or dead. That's the sad fact of the matter. (School leader 2019)

Those directly involved in the running of the program measure success in terms of behavioural and attitudinal change:

The first measure of success is kids turning up, getting into a routine. These are kids who are totally disengaged from society. The second measure is the kids completing modules. The next measure is whether they have a chance to get their ROSA (NSW Record of School Achievement NSW). This means they can apply for TAFE if they want or return to mainstream school. They next measure is how they handle work placements and if they can gain any part time work. (School leader 2018)

We also have records of behaviour management and monitor their development. With the right preparation these kids can and do turn into solid workers. (School leader 2018)

This project has developed a profile among local service agencies, including the police. A measure of the program's profile is that organisations and businesses offering camps, music, dance and environmental activities have contacted the project leadership.

Our name has grown in the region with NGOs, welfare, police all becoming aware of what we do. We are known as doing good things (with what) the rest of the community might call the 'crazy kids'. The fact that distance education is heavily involved with the academic side of our program and we have connections with support agencies means we are developing a program that a lot of groups are invested in. (School leader 2019)

The talk around town (is that) those kids in the two per cent who are involved with the law, they know about (the project) and some of their mates are in the program. They have a positive spiel about the program. (School leader 2019)

All sorts of outside groups want to get involved with us. We are starting to get every man and his dog knock on the door – "we want to be involved, we can offer this, we can offer that". Part of my job is to slow this down. Ours are complex kids. (School leader 2019)

The success of the project encouraged the college to develop another program targeted at younger students, one which will also engage with primary schools. The 'Accelerate' program aims to support high risk students in Years 7 and 8 before they totally disengage from mainstream schooling. In its first year in 2019 the program involved the establishment of small onsite centres designed to offer support using the original project's approach to student welfare.

We looked at how we could trial a model, as an offshoot of (the original project), using our own money and using the philosophy of (that project). I have employed the head teacher out of my RAM (Resource Allocation Model (monies)) as a deputy but because he has trained up his specialist (project) staff, they don't need him at the centre, they have the skill sets to run without him. He oversees the head teacher responsibilities and we have someone taking his teaching load. This frees him up to drive the Accelerate program with Year 7 and 8 kids. We have 30 odd kids accessing this program. They were all candidates for (the project). Now we are struggling to find kids from our campus to refer to (the project). We are going, "this is really good because other schools are having more of an opportunity to access (the project)." (School leader 2019)

The college's Fair Education project also developed as a program with a solid governance structure. The processes to establish this structure have benefited the college, modelling what the college could achieve as a unified body.

Fairly early on in the piece, we needed a transparent governance process in place as far as the decision making goes. Now there is a shared responsibility: we have the appropriate protocols and norms. As well, you need a governance structure around making decisions around which students enter the program, so it's not viewed as one campus or group favoured over others. The structure we have put in place has internal and external people who make the decisions-- district office, wellbeing teams -- and we have got distance education also which is separate to the college. Part of the evolution has been an increase in promotion and in people's awareness of the program; it has been recognised way beyond (the city). There have been numerous visits from other schools. The program has been looked at by all sorts of people. (School leader 2019)

Sustainability

The project has components which school leaders believe are central to its sustainability. The first is the way staff are employed. Teachers working in a high need environment need to have a particular skill set and need to feel valued.

That's the sustainability issue: it's finding the teachers with the skills, the art to care, the care of themselves so they won't drive themselves in the ground. And they have got that approach where every single day they come in with a fresh day and start with the kids again, after being told all the things before. (School leader 2018)

I've got to look after the staff we've got and always be on the lookout for people who could fill in. The major risk at the moment is permanency for teachers, none of them are permanent; they are all on temporary contracts. (School leader 2018)

The second component is the time frame of assistance for students:

There's not a lot you can do in two to three weeks for kids with complex issues; you just babysit. You need them in one place for 12 months or 18 months. (School leader 2018)

School leaders at all levels have all benefited from the program. As the program has expanded, so has the skillset of all involved. The success of the program has attracted attention that has reflected how leaders see the program developing.

As a result of getting people in higher places involved and seeing our successes; that was the missing part of the puzzle before. If you've got a director saying this is really good stuff, other people are wanting to come on board and have a look. We were asked to present at the secondary principals' conference. (School leader, 2019)

The Department wants to help us collate what's worked well, so we can share with the broader community. [The final Schools Plus Coach] has linked us to the Gonski Institute. We sent a principal to a conference organised through the Gonski institute. We paid for this out of the Fair Education funding. [A professor at the Gonski institute] is coming to talk to our community about P&C engagement. (School leader, 2019)

Into the future, the project will have a separate building on one of the college campuses. School leaders are optimistic that the program model will continue to evolve, possibly in unexpected ways:

We have plans for a building to make the project sustainable I want to set up an entrepreneurial school-based model. Aquaponics, cut flowers, harvesting, and the profits to go back into the program. We had conversations with professionals in the industry. The Fair Ed money is going to help fund this infrastructure. The kids will build the aquaponics set up; there will be a shed there and the kids will take ownership of the project. We are aware of an expert in hydroponics at another Fair Education project by going to the conference. (School leader 2019)

Conclusion

This project from its beginning set out to support some of the most marginalised members of the wider school community and hoped to develop a model that would have wider influence across the state of NSW. While only two-thirds through their involvement with Fair Education, it is clear that these two goals have at least been partially realised.

College leadership has also reflected on the value of the project as a focal point for cross campus cooperation and the development of welfare policies to support high need students while in the early years of their secondary schooling. This project highlights that, given time, a project with a solid foundation and strong leadership can develop beyond what might have been expected. Importantly perhaps, it is hard to imagine how this project would have developed within a Departmental resourcing, timing and regulatory framework. And yet, because this was a project that began independently of the Department, those working within the Department found opportunities to help it develop.

The Department is very much on side with the rolling out of our model across the state. Our model is a very inexpensive way of supporting kids with complex behaviours. There have been stories that central office are on side. This is helped by the fact that some of the coaches working with Fair Education are effective lobbyists and have extensive contacts in the Department. (School leader 2018)

We need pilot models that work in other settings, (to show) that our model is not situation dependent. We need the Department on side. This our big plan, to change the way suspension centres operate and get the Department to realise this. (School leader 2018)

Manna Gum Public School

Manna Gum is a small town close to a central regional centre of NSW. Affordable housing in the area has attracted low income families, many of whom are on welfare, needing high levels of social support.

Manna Gum Public School is a small rural school the demographics of which indicate that over 80 per cent of the school population are from families in the bottom two income quartiles. The number of families in the bottom income quartile has been increasing over a number of years and in 2018 was at 65 per cent. There are also a small number of families of indigenous or LBOTE background, at around five per cent each.

Outline of the project

The goal of the school's Fair Education project was to improve school and family relationships. Every family in the school participated in the development of Personal Learning Plans (PLPs) for each student and regular meetings were planned to support their implementation. At the beginning of the project, in order to assist more effective communication with parents, a Facebook page was developed and the use of the smartphone application Seesaw was encouraged.

Project development

For a number of years, school leadership had been aware of complicated school family interrelationships. Interfamily and family-school conflict had alienated many families from the life of the school, families that might otherwise become involved, and teachers had left the school because of these school-family tensions.

This was a school that wasn't in a great place Part of the problem was that there was a lot of hostility between parents and the school for a whole lot of historical reasons.
(School leader 2017)

Personal learning plans had proven a successful way to engage with families of students with disabilities and families of indigenous students. The school principal felt that opening up direct lines of communication with each family would allow for more positive interactions to take place. To break the nexus of communication from school to home invariably being about issues involving a particular students, teachers were instead encouraged to ring parents with positive comments about their child

For this principal in a small community, the coach provided a level of one-to-one support that was highly valued. The coach provided expertise and clarity around what was possible, independent of Departmental expectations.

The kinds of accountability and directives from the Department can be a little bit less helpful compared to the kind of coaching that [the coach] provides.
... Of all the professional development that I ever had (as a principal), [the coach's] visits are the highlight for me.... We talk about some pretty big stuff and they are good at coming back and bringing it into something that's really practical and achievable, and clear, that it's not all this waffle. (School leader 2017)

Fair Education funding enabled leadership to give teachers time for family meetings.

...And this is where the funding has come in: it's given us an opportunity to actually do what we probably wanted to do and it's clarified the vision of what we wanted to do. So I guess it's given people time, for the personal learning plans particularly. So basically, the funding has enabled us to get teachers off class to have half hour meetings with every single family. (School leader 2017)

The development of PLPs took time. Learning plans were refined after student reports were written and discussed with parents.

I was trying to work out how to make our reporting more authentic in light of the (Fair Education) project. What we will try and do at the end of the year, is have a personal learning plan meeting at which we have our report format and do it with parents and they've got a written copy. But we will actually formulate it in the meeting, which is much more authentic than teachers writing long form reports. (School leader 2017)

During 2018 the school principal went on leave and there was a changeover of coach. The acting principal was well aware of the conflict that existed between some families and the school. Together with two teachers who as project leaders had been part of the planning and development of the Fair Education project from the beginning, the incoming principal and the coach worked collaboratively to consolidate gains made with families in the previous year.

(The new coach) helped me as a mentor in dealing with the 'complex' family. (The coach) helped (our school leaders) to establish and then realise their milestones for this project. Maybe this should have been my role, but I had to trust (our coach) to do this. (He) helped us operate at a deeper level. (Our coach) gave us suggestions as well as asking us lots of questions. (He) helped me at the beginning to settle into my role as principal. (School leader 2019)

A Facebook page, developed in the first year of the project to be a vehicle for showing student work, had low effect. The advantage of the face-to-face meetings was that they occurred regularly over 2018 and 2019. Every family was encouraged to adopt the smart phone application Seesaw.

We now get feedback that kids are talking about their learning with parents. We are now able to talk more as a staff about curriculum and our scope and sequence. We are now doing work where the parents can be involved. (School leader 2018)

Project impact

This Fair Education project has been central to changes that have occurred within the school. Teachers are being encouraged to see students as individuals with individual needs. A 'strength focus' has been adopted in talking to parents about their children. Three-way communication, between teachers, families and children, has concentrated on the language of growth.

In talking to teachers about reports, knowledge of the content was downplayed. A lot of work was done early on in documenting student strengths, so we started talking about

positive things with parents. We then had to work out the advice to parents about how they act to support their children as managers. (School leader 2019)

One of the main parts of our projects was to get parents to understand what goes on in a school and how to support their children. Parents felt they had to act as tutors; we showed them they can act as managers. (School leader 2019)

When asked about the best ways to interact with school, 40 per cent of parents preferred face to face and 40 per cent preferred See-Saw. Most of the other 20 per cent said phone calls. (Few said newsletters). The take up of See-Saw is now over 90 per cent. Parents can see what their children are doing on a regular basis. (School leader 2019)

Growth is now spoken of between parties, not as an abstract concept but in terms of achievable goals. Once parents saw that the school wanted to communicate about their child in positive terms, parents were willing to trust the advice offered by the school about how to support the growth their child.

Staff feel now more engaged with the work and feel their positions are valued around it. Staff feel more confident about negotiating with families and are better at knowing about what goes into a PLP. (School leader 2019)

I am happy with the flexibility that Fair Education offers. Open-endedness is a good thing. We feel confident with what we have achieved. The time of three years was good. The coaching helped keep us on track, but we now build on what we have done, not needing a coach. I liked the fact that coach did not pressure us, but that they respected us to do a good job. (School leader 2019).

Sustainability

The foundation of change within this small school is in developing one on one communication. The benefits have emerged quickly. All parties -- school leaders, teachers, students and their parents -- have developed a more trusting set of inter-relationships. Core expectations around how the school works have changed.

The school is now changing from an 'us vs them' environment to one where there is just 'us'. The Fair Education project is a large part of that. We are doing more at local festivals and other community involvements. (School leader, 2019)

We are finding that new teachers or teachers coming back from leave have noticed a change. The older children are helping out with the technology for younger children. The new children coming in will only know PLP, See-Saw and parent teacher conferences. (School leader, 2019)

Now that core relations, based around trust, within the school have stabilised, school leaders have become energised and are optimistic that more material measures of growth can be achieved.

I have been working with local quarries, which are the main employers in the area, to get some money to develop out main oval and play area. (One project leader) is keen to create

a permaculture garden and has hooked up with a school that he met at the Fair Education conference. (School leader, 2019)

Any small regional school is susceptible to changes in staff. Manna Gum is a school with only a handful of teachers, and those school leaders that have helped develop this particular Fair Education project have grown in confidence and may in time consider applying for promotion.

I am determined that our school budget next year will accommodate the improved parent teacher student meetings. These relations need to grow. Next year we are being externally validated by the Department. This happens in NSW every five years. We are now confident about this process. Let's see what the next few years bring. (School leader 2019)

Conclusion

This Fair Education project highlights that maintaining goodwill within the school-family relationship requires the school to provide the means for ongoing and effective communication. Establishing a framework for effective communication within schools and trust in the institution of schooling cannot be assumed. This is the challenge that leaders at Manna Gum have met.

We have invested in relationships. We are backing our values of authentic partnerships. We have sat down with all families in order to develop relationships. This has allowed us to move forward. The initial task was to interview each family with the student present. We talked about goals for their children, aspirations and what they found challenging. How they felt about their relationship with the school. Students were encouraged to talk about challenges and blockages. Just being able to invest that time was important, to make goals together. It was important we reached out to them. (School leaders 2019)

This school made the effort early on to talk to all families, and not to make broad generalisations about their community, especially around what their community needs.

Each school has a different density, different needs. We looked at some of the projects at the conference and said, that is where we want to go to, but realised we were not ready to do this now. Now that we have good will and trust we can move forward. The other projects we saw at the last conference have also inspired us as to what could be done in things like transition that we had not thought about. (School leader 2019)