

Policy frameworks for learning support

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The focus of my talk is to share with you some of the policy approaches for the delivery of learning support both here in Australia and by reference to selected international programs. I should acknowledge the valuable contribution of my colleague Sharon Bond who put together the BSL report on Learning Support Programs completed earlier this year.

I thought I would start by giving some context on the key policy reforms & settings that relate to the provision of learning support. I'll then give a brief overview of Australian and selected international policies. I should comment that this is a shallow scan due to the inherent difficulties in finding policy material and evidence on specific elements of the various forms of extended student support. Drawing on our scan of the material, I have drawn out some key issues that should be addressed and suggest some recommendations for the further development of learning support in the future as a sustainable program consistent with social inclusion principles.

As you would be aware, there have been substantial reforms initiated over the past couple of years across school education, vocational education and the training sectors. The underlying policy goal quite rightly seeks to maximise the learning opportunities and completion rates through the developmental years so that we have a far better educated and skilled workforce suited to the 21st C global economy. We have lagged behind OECD best practice in education outcomes (for example Keating 2009). The current wave of policy reforms will certainly contribute to improvement over time. But will these be sufficient?

There is widespread agreement that students from low-income families are significantly disadvantaged in their education. Low parental education, incapacity & lack of resources contribute to poor attendance, participation and attainment of their children.

Our assessment of these reforms is that their focus is primarily on *school* reform rather than on *education* reform. Each of the school reforms, namely quality of teaching, leadership in schools, curriculum reform, performance testing and reporting and regeneration of facilities, makes a contribution to retention & completion. However, these will be insufficient unless the family and environmental barriers to participation, such as parental chronic ill health or incapacity, financial hardship and housing insecurity, are also addressed.

This is not to say that there has been no consideration of social exclusion factors in shaping the reform agenda. For example, Victoria's Blueprint includes a specific set of actions to strengthen partnerships with parents & communities (DEECD 2008a). And at the national level, the COAG education reform agenda includes a national plan for improving literacy & numeracy and the low socio-economic status school communities plan. Both these plans coincide with the objective of learning support for overcoming disadvantage and exclusion faced by too many children.

There has been interest in, and some commitment to, after hours learning support - for example, Victoria's 2007 national reform proposal for literacy & numeracy recommended targeted programs to support student learning outside of school hours (Action 20 to COAG) and the ALP had included homework centres in their national action plan on literacy & numeracy before the federal election in 2007 (ALP 2007). **However, after hours learning support does not yet have a clear place in education policy to enable delivery of a well-coordinated, high quality and adequately resourced program.**

There are a range of initiatives and programs at national and state level that offer some elements of learning support. At the national level, there have been several programs focused on remedial assistance for indigenous students through homework centres and tutorial help for those not meeting literacy or numeracy benchmarks. These were:

- *Whole of School Intervention Strategy within Indigenous Education Programs*
- *Indigenous Tutorial Assistance Scheme*

These were initiatives of the former Howard Government and have since been consolidated into the National Education Agreement with States and Territories under the Schools Assistance Act of 2008.

The Even Start National Tuition Program concluded in June this year having assisted 87,000 students who had failed 2007 literacy and numeracy benchmarks. While the evaluation is still to be completed, there were questions about its targeting and take-up. The voucher system for families may have limited its take-up by parents in disadvantaged circumstances and it is questionable whether children with learning needs took up the opportunity (refusing to attend tuition), and some children may not have benefited from the approach, such as those already in receipt of integration support who may not have sat the benchmark tests.

At the state or territory level, as far as our scan was able to find, no comprehensive program exists. However, we have found a number of targeted and limited initiatives in several States (Table 1).

Table 1: Learning support – Australian policy initiatives *

<i>State</i>	<i>Program</i>	<i>Department</i>	<i>Resources</i>	<i>Scope/focus</i>
Victoria	SFYS	DHS/	DEECD	Submission based one-off grants
	Learning Beyond the Bell	DEECD	4 years	20 LSP's (\$15k) aimed at refugee students; regional support & training from CMY; one-off \$5k for 45 LSP's for top-up
NSW	Refugee Action Support Program	DET/ALNF /UWS	Not known	40 tutors & 8 schools (W. Sydney) for refugees; in-school and after school tutoring by pre-service teachers
	Links to Learning	DET	Not known	Informal learning activities for 12-24 yr old early school leavers; during and after school hours
	Priority Action Schools	DET	Not known	Disadvantaged schools funding to enable extra assistance
South Australia	Aboriginal Program Assistance Scheme	DECS	Submission based one-off grants	Operational costs for homework centres for indigenous students

**described in Bond 2009*

In Victoria, until a couple of years ago, funding for community based learning support has largely been through one-off grants through the School Focused Youth Service which is a joint initiative of DHS and DEECD. A few programs have received some funding through Neighbourhood Renewal. In MCM's audit of 33 LSP's in 2006 in North & West Melbourne, 2 had a SFYS grant and 3 received funds from Neighbourhood Renewal. The majority were funded through a combination of not-for-profit untied monies, philanthropic trusts and local government grants.

As you have already heard from Robyn, ‘Learning Beyond the Bell’ was funded in 2008 through a significant commitment by the State Government over a four-year period. The funding provides \$15k to support 20 programs aimed at refugee students, offers regional support, training and a statewide coordinating role; and top-up funds of up to \$5k for 45 LSP’s.

North of the border, NSW has developed 3 programs that enable different forms of extra learning to be provided either in school or out-of-hours. Unfortunately we were unable to document the level of resources for learning support through these programs. It is worth noting that the Refugee Action Support program utilises pre-service teachers as tutors. This is a win-win as it enables a supply of tutors with the appropriate skill sets (albeit on a time limited basis) and also contributes to the grounding and experience of pre-service teachers in working with children from disadvantaged circumstances. There have been initial developments of this approach to recruiting tutors in Melbourne as well.

South Australia has one submission based program to provide homework help for indigenous students. I should mention that this scan has not included mentoring type programs which invariably have similar aims, for example Big Brother, Big Sister and the Check and Connect programs cited in Lamb & Rice’s recent review of effective strategies in support of school completion.

In summary, despite policy analysis in support of learning support, the picture I paint is of an ad hoc, fragmented and under resourced policy setting for its delivery.

Turning now to some international examples, our scan shows that the value of learning support has been acknowledged overseas. We have found that governance arrangements, program design and funding mechanisms vary for the delivery of learning support. However, these examples provide valuable context for consideration of the future development of learning support in Australia (Table 2).

Table 2: Learning support – International policy initiatives

<i>State</i>	<i>Program</i>	<i>Scope/focus</i>
USA *	No Child Left Behind Act 2001- 21stC Community Learning Centres Program	Before & after school education support managed by States through grant to local education agencies and community providers; include a range of learning activities to advance student achievement
England	Every Child Matters (2003) – Extended Schools Program: now through Extended Services Funding 21st C Schools White Paper endorses community hub role	All children <14 yrs provided extended hours support by 2010; School centred as service hubs with collaboration with community partners; includes homework centres, breakfast clubs, remedial classes, special interest programs; based on school to community consultations. Local Authority fulfils coordination & support role. Central Dept provides website as clearing house.
NZ	Study Support Centres (as part of broad education support policy)	Centres operate in disadvantaged areas for primary and intermediate level students; Minimum standards imposed (school & not-for-profit providers) Supervision by a registered teacher
Norway	Homework Assistance Program	Free homework assistance for students in years (1-4) as part of drive to improve learning in early primary years

* US has long history of after hours provision

The United States has a long history of diverse after hours programs which have multiple aims including academic improvement, the provision of sport and recreational activities, the development of social skills and building social cohesion (reducing risk taking and anti-social behaviour/ providing a safe play environment). As a result of the education reforms introduced in 2001 through the 'No child left behind' Act, the 21st Century Community Learning Centres program shifted from the federal to states administration. States can utilise this \$1b resource to provide before & after hours educational support, such as remedial education, art & music activities, tutoring, English language proficiency, IT, parental engagement, and drug prevention (DoE 2009). In California for example, funding for this program has increased tenfold over the past decade. It is a substantial national program.

In the UK, the government introduced its Every Child matters reform agenda in 2003 as a more holistic approach to child development and well being. The aim of its Extended Schools Program has been for schools to act as service hubs providing a wider range of education, social support and care services in collaboration with other agencies. As a part of this commitment, all children under 14 are to be offered 'dawn till dusk' childcare and support by next year. The study support component of this program includes activities provided either by the school or by community agencies, such as homework clubs, catch-up programs, breakfast clubs and special interest activities. Key elements include local support and direction through local authority advisers, a central dedicated website and leadership that reinforces study support as an essential component of personalized learning. All schools are expected to provide educational assistance outside of school hours (DFES 2009). The annual budget in 2008 was 680 million pounds for this program - a significant commitment based on the strong evidence base on the effectiveness of this approach.

In NZ it was estimated in 2000 that over half of secondary schools and 5% of primary schools operated homework centres (Gerritsen 2000). The NZ government subsequently provided recurrent funding for education support for 'at risk' students. This included \$7.5m in grants for Study Support Centres which operate in disadvantaged areas across primary & secondary levels. Minimum standards are imposed on providers, including the requirement for registered teachers as coordinators (MoE 2008). Finally, Norway has recently introduced a free homework assistance program aimed at the early primary years as part of measures to strengthen learning (MER 2009).

In summary, the underpinning commitments and principles through the national social inclusion agenda and the Melbourne Declaration for example support the provision of inclusionary approaches and programs such as learning support.

There is a growing body of evidence both here and overseas in support of a structured approach to the provision of learning support, either school-based or community provided. The contribution of this approach to student attendance, commitment to learning and achievement is well documented, and the model is consistent with the key elements for effective interventions as documented by Stephen Lamb and Suzanne Rice in their report to the Department (DEECD 2008).

Across Victorian communities, as we have heard, there has clearly been a great need for this form of educational support which has led to the grass roots growth of about 220 community based programs to fill the void (CMY 2009). However, there are limitations in the current ad hoc provision with questionable sustainability, inequitable access, reliance on insecure funding, and potential risks due to variable quality. The Victorian Government has made a welcome and valuable start to partly address this, and is arguably the leading State in this area.

Our view however, is that central government education departments at Commonwealth and State levels need to take a stronger lead to put learning support program delivery on a sustainable footing to address these limitations and build an effective and dynamic mainstream model of learning support. Leadership is necessary to:

- Support sustainability;
- Ensure quality provision;

- Meet equity considerations for coverage and access;
- Ensure activities reinforce learning methods and curriculum in school;
- Encourage schools to develop local provision in collaboration with not-for-profits where appropriate;
- Mitigate against potential risk; and
- Evaluate to ensure dissemination of best practice.

As an example of the application of social inclusion principles, a structured program will enable children in disadvantaged circumstances to catch up with their learning and strengthen their interest and commitment to education.

We have therefore developed some recommendations for consideration as we enter the next election period. We are urging an extension of the ‘Learning Beyond the Bell’ model of grant funding to enable coverage across disadvantaged areas in Victoria. We suggest that this roll out should be jointly resourced by both levels of government. We consider that the low socio-economic schools national partnership plan offers a mechanism for resourcing this extension. It is welcome to hear of the new Extended School Hub Pilot being developed in Victoria.

The current level of resourcing for LSP’s through ‘Learning Beyond the Bell’ is inadequate to deliver a high quality program. We are proposing an expansion to ensure coverage across the bottom 20% of disadvantaged postcodes, that is, 77 locations using ABS data. Based on previous analysis by Melbourne Citymission, we have used an average annual cost of \$1,250 per student to calculate a total budget of \$9.6m to deliver support for 7,700 primary and secondary students. This is not an expensive outlay as it works out at \$30 per student per week for a 2 hour session.

We propose three additional core initiatives – there needs to be a coordinating body or unit to oversee development and monitor effectiveness of LSP’s through a quality assurance framework and code of practice building on the great work of CMY and Foundation House over the past few years. It is also important that the right level of encouragement comes from DEECD through its regional offices to ensure collaboration at the local level between schools and community organisations in offering learning support.

We also recommend a clearinghouse be established for the collation and dissemination of research and best practice knowledge – most likely within an academic setting. And finally, there is a need to resource additional research to build the evidence base on both the extent and effectiveness of LSP’s. Both the Brotherhood and Melbourne Citymission believe that this increased investment in the provision of learning support will make a significant contribution to educational outcomes aimed squarely at the cohort of highly disadvantaged students. **This type of policy innovation, that responds to barriers *beyond* the school, is essential if we are to achieve the COAG agreed goal on year 12 or equivalent attainment.**

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