



Public submission made to the Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools

Submitter: Australian Schools Plus
Submitting as a: Other (Education charity supporting disadvantaged schools)
State: NSW

Summary

Australian Schools Plus (Schools Plus) is a national charity that drives high-impact philanthropic support and expert coaching to schools in disadvantaged communities, to improve students' learning outcomes.

Our experience working with schools across Australia puts us in a unique position to assist the Review. In this submission, we contribute insights and data that reflect the needs of disadvantaged schools and their views on how funding can be best used to improve school performance and student outcomes. These have been derived from an analysis of more than 400 funding requests schools have submitted to us, plus our intensive work with schools to build their capacity to create changes in their culture and practices, and to develop partnerships with philanthropic and community organisations.

Our analysis shows that schools in disadvantaged communities are acutely aware of the need to introduce new teaching and learning models, plus new equipment and technology, and to maintain and develop the skills of their teachers and school leaders. They want to seize opportunities to better develop students' future-focused skills, confidence, resilience and global outlook so they can thrive at school and beyond in a rapidly-changing world. However, schools – especially those in less-advantaged communities - are often hampered by a lack of funding, professional development opportunities and community connections that would support these changes.

This submission culminates in five recommendations to the Review to support the profound change required in disadvantaged schools and strengthen Schools Plus' positive role in the Australian education system.

Main submission

Australian Schools Plus (Schools Plus) supports schools in disadvantaged communities to improve student outcomes, by channelling philanthropic funding

and providing expert coaching. Our experience working with schools across Australia puts us in a unique position to assist the Review – here, we contribute insights and data that reflect the needs of disadvantaged schools and their views on how funding can be best used to improve school performance and student outcomes.

BACKGROUND

Schools Plus channels high-impact philanthropic support to schools in disadvantaged communities, to improve students' learning outcomes. A national charity, we were founded in 2013 as a result of Recommendation 41 in the 2011 Review of Funding for Schooling. We make it tax-deductible to give to schools and help build schools' capacity to develop strategic projects and philanthropic partnerships, with the ultimate goal of reducing the impact of disadvantage on students' education.

More than 4,600 schools (Government/Catholic/Independent with a value below 1000 on the Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage) are eligible for support through Schools Plus.

As part of our work connecting schools with donors, schools submit funding requests to us. In these, they identify their highest priorities and preferred strategies to improve student outcomes not being met by systemic resources and for which they seek philanthropic funding. The demand for additional support beyond system-provided funding to address students' complex needs is huge. Since April 2015, we have received 416 funding applications, totalling approximately \$15 million.

Over that time, we have delivered \$4.5 million in philanthropic support to more than 200 school initiatives, benefiting over 50,000 students. This confirms that philanthropy can help bridge the gap between systemic funding and schools' desire to deliver programs that harness their students' and communities' potential and enable them to be dynamic centres of learning. By connecting schools with individuals, corporates and foundations, our experience shows that powerful symbiotic relationships can be forged for the benefit of students.

Schools Plus has a strong interest in ensuring funding supports activities that best address the challenges holding back students from disadvantaged backgrounds, and seizes opportunities in schools to bring about profound change. This submission provides insights from our experience, structured under the Review's themes.

WHAT STUDENTS LEARN AND HOW THEY LEARN

Insight 1: Schools want to introduce new learning models to develop students' future-focused skills, but are limited by lack of funding for technology/equipment, teacher professional development and time to deliver programs

From the funding requests we receive, it is clear disadvantaged schools want to introduce new approaches to teaching and learning to better prepare students for future jobs and society. These new approaches are seen as better able to develop

students' future-focused skills such as critical thinking, problem-solving, collaboration and creativity – skills critical for students to thrive at school and beyond.

An analysis of all funding requests shows 22% are for initiatives that directly focus on developing these skills. Creative solutions proposed include project-based learning (PBL) initiatives, programs that incorporate coding, robotics and Makerspaces to encourage collaboration, critical thinking/problem solving, and specific school-to-work or trade training programs. The aim is to engage students in more meaningful learning opportunities that they readily connect to their current and future lives.

However, shifts from traditional curriculum and teaching approaches are often inhibited by a lack of resources. Funding support was primarily sought for the purchase of technology (32%), costs associated with employing additional staff (13%), teacher release time to plan and deliver the initiatives (12%) and engaging consultants/experts to help train teachers and conduct the programs (9%).

Schools wanting to introduce these new learning models are often eager to support this shift by transforming the physical learning environment and providing access to new technology. However, the funding requests show many do not have the resources to do so. Of projects that focused on the way students learn, just over half identified the need to create flexible and collaborative learning spaces (as opposed to the traditional classroom set-up) and purchase technology such as 3D printers and robotics equipment (common in more advantaged school settings). One school described how a technology-filled Makerspace will develop students' future-focused skills: "Many students prefer hands-on learning. MakerSpaces act as a counterbalance to testing and conformity by providing an emphasis on creation and creativity."

Insight 2: Schools are taking innovative approaches to addressing student needs outside of the traditional curriculum, including programs to improve wellbeing and engagement

Students' wellbeing is crucial to success at school and beyond. Yet in less-advantaged communities, students often face additional challenges – arising from issues such as unemployment, violence, alcohol/drug abuse, poor health - that are detrimental to mental health and wellbeing. Our funding requests analysis shows schools want to take a more holistic approach. One-third of all applications are for initiatives designed to improve student wellbeing or re-engage them in education. Schools recognise that supporting students' wellbeing is critical to the core business of teaching, and want to create a supportive school environment conducive to learning.

Many projects seek funding for targeted interventions, often within a whole-school framework, to assist students who require additional support to improve their wellbeing or school engagement. Of applications aimed at improving wellbeing, 20%

sought philanthropic support for general wellbeing programs or hubs, 15% were aimed specifically at improving student resilience (70% of these came from primary schools) and 15% identified the need for specialist therapy interventions, e.g. speech or play therapy.

Recognising that a traditional curriculum focus does not meet the needs of students who are not attending or are disengaged, schools also develop innovative programs to address engagement issues. For instance, rural/remote schools with high Indigenous enrolments have sought support for initiatives to raise cultural awareness to re-engage students, while several schools have focused on extra-curricular and after-school activities (e.g. sport, robotics, arts) to build student engagement and connection. At Doveton College in Melbourne, absenteeism halved when student engagement in after-school activities rose from 10% to 60%, resulting from Schools Plus' support.

Insight 3: Schools want to take a more student-centred approach, but require support and training to introduce individualised learning models

Schools recognise the value in taking a tailored approach, often enabled by technology, that customises teaching to an individual student's level of knowledge or skill. This is particularly the case in literacy and numeracy – in disadvantaged schools, where a high proportion of students may have fallen behind expected standards, an individualised learning approach is often identified as a priority.

Of all projects submitted, 13% sought funding for literacy and numeracy initiatives – literacy is the greater focus, with approximately 70% of these initiatives focused on reading/writing skills. Projects frequently use either technology to target teaching at a student's current level (e.g. Maths Pathway) or provide professional development/resources for teachers so they can develop individualised student learning plans. In Queensland, SA and the ACT, literacy and numeracy initiatives were a significantly higher proportion of applications than other states.

TEACHERS AND SCHOOL LEADERSHIP

Insight 4: Schools lack time, skills and access to training to serve students the way they want to

Our data indicates schools have an enormous appetite for professional development and recognise teachers and principals need to maintain and develop their skills to meet society's changing needs. However, funding requests show that schools lack time, financial means or access to opportunities to engage in the professional learning and planning that will allow them to better serve their students.

Applications for support to engage additional staff, provide teacher release (to attend training or spend time collaborating and planning), facilitate professional development or engage external coaching/consultant expertise make up 60% of all

requests. Schools frequently want to recruit professionals with particular skillsets (e.g. community liaison officers or teachers with early childhood experience) or provide professional learning or coaching (targeted to specific teachers or whole-school) to ensure they can confidently implement new programs and equipment.

Access to training is especially difficult for rural and regional schools. Online training is often more difficult to engage with and falls short of the impact of face-to-face professional learning, and the tyranny of distance makes it prohibitively expensive for schools to send teachers to training in cities.

Insight 5: A coaching model like Schools Plus' Fair Education program should be expanded

Our experience with schools, particularly in NSW, indicates that school leaders at all levels of experience value external coaching as an important element in their ongoing professional development.

To that end, we have embedded an intensive coaching model in our Fair Education program, a \$5 million program delivered in NSW funded by the Vincent Fairfax Family Foundation. Now in its second year, the program is an exemplary model of how to develop the capacity of leaders in disadvantaged schools to better engage families/communities and to create significant change in schools' culture and practices. Principals of many decades' experience say it is the most liberating experience of their career, as it provides the time, structure and support to develop a possibilities-driven approach and implement strategies to create profound change. Feedback indicates our coaching model creates a more objective and less compliance-based relationship than coaching provided within sectors. We are currently exploring ways to expand Fair Education into other states, and ensure our coaching model is recognised as a valid component of the Lead Teacher accreditation process.

Insight 6: Greater recognition of teachers as committed, skilled and crucial professionals will attract and retain highly effective educators

In 2016, Schools Plus partnered with the Commonwealth Bank to launch the Commonwealth Bank Teaching Awards, supported by our Pioneers in Philanthropy donor group. Created to elevate the teaching profession's status in the Australian community's eyes, the Awards publicly celebrate exceptional teaching and school leadership, especially in challenging and socially diverse communities. Each year, 12 Teaching Fellows are announced – their 12-month Fellowship includes professional development, observation of high-performing education systems and opportunities to influence education practice in Australia.

In its first two years, about 850 teachers have applied for an Award, a number significantly above our initial expectations. This interest level and comments in applications show an appreciation for greater recognition of teachers' skills and

significance. The Fellows provide key insights into practices proving highly effective through their work. They offer a unique voice from a group which is highly successful, to provide valuable advice to system leaders nationwide. Support from all states and sectors to promote these Awards and access the Fellows' experience would contribute to incentivising and inspiring teachers to grow their practice.

PARENT AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Insight 7: Schools recognise the importance of family and community engagement, but struggle to prioritise it among myriad demands

Approximately 19% of funding requests are for projects that aim to increase family and community engagement in student learning. About two-thirds come from primary schools, often to establish pre-school programs to address their students' lack of early childhood education. These programs frequently also focus on parents, giving them skills and confidence to support their children in learning, familiarising them with school and connecting them with support services. To support these projects, schools predominantly request funding to release teachers from classroom duties to coordinate activities or to pay for additional staff (e.g a community liaison officer) to work specifically on family engagement projects.

In the past two years, 207 NSW schools have requested funding to increase family and community engagement through our state-specific Fair Education program, indicating the substantial interest in better engaging this group to improve student outcomes.

Insight 8: Schools see benefit in building partnerships with business and community

The high demand for support through Schools Plus indicates many schools would like to strengthen their business and broader community relations. The main driver for connecting with industry and community is to make student learning more meaningful by bringing 'real world' examples into the classroom, through project-based learning, careers exposure, work experience and mentoring. The sheer number of schools seeking support to build partnerships through Schools Plus (416 schools applying for funds and a further 28 conducting their own fundraising) suggests schools are struggling to form partnerships themselves.

We have generated numerous examples of school-business connections that have resulted in more than financial support. Many of these connections are broader than the school's immediate community, and would not have been possible without Schools Plus' intervention. For example, employees at enterprise software company Salesforce have devoted more than 800 volunteer hours to teach coding at schools in Sydney and Melbourne. In addition, we are developing a program to assist schools to engage with their former students. We see great potential in re-connecting schools with their alumni as a path to increased financial support (common in universities/private schools) and community engagement.

DEFINING AND MEASURING SUCCESS IN EDUCATION

Insight 9: Broader measures are needed to measure education success

Schools receiving funding through School Plus collect evidence to assess progress and report on their projects' impact. We use this information to support schools, determine our programs' effectiveness and report to donors.

The clear message from disadvantaged schools is that success measures are most relevant and useful when they closely reflect their projects' purpose. This takes two main forms – firstly, assessing the extent to which schools' practices are changing due to their projects and secondly, identifying changes to the overall culture of each school. A range of evidence is collected and used by schools to make such assessments and illustrate changes. Evidence varies from learning achievements, including external tests such as NAPLAN and school-based learning assessment, through to other observable and assessable differences specifically aimed at capacity building. In projects we support, success may be demonstrated through indicators such as the extent of changes to attendance and retention, student behaviour, staff professional expertise, community engagement, student achievement in extra-curricular pursuits and indicators relating to wellbeing.

Therefore, Schools Plus calls for school achievements to be viewed through an integrated approach that recognises the degree of shift in the school's capacity to deliver enhanced student learning, as well as the changes that occur for students in terms of their learning experiences and achievements. Importantly, it should be noted there is often lag time between increasing school capacity and improved student learning results. Such an approach appropriately values the impact of the change process, as well as the effectiveness of translating such endeavour into sustained learning improvements.

Insight 10: Teachers need to develop data literacy skills

There is growing demand for professional development to build teachers' capacity to analyse student achievement data and choose effective teaching approaches in response. This is critical to improving student outcomes in a future-focused learning environment.

Schools have requested external expertise to deliver professional learning particularly in the analysis of standardised tests such as NAPLAN and to identify and implement strategies to enhance learning outcomes in literacy and numeracy. These schools are often in rural/remote regions where resources and opportunities for professional learning are limited. For example, Schools Plus is working with the NT Education Department to support a cluster of schools around Katherine. The project focuses on the consistent collection and use of data to inform cluster school decisions and the building of collective capacity to ensure students' move from

Primary to Middle School is informed, supported and focused on improved academic outcomes.

IDENTIFYING, SHARING AND DRIVING GOOD PRACTICE AND CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

Insight 11: Schools welcome greater sharing of knowledge and good practice but are hampered by time and other constraints

We believe significant benefit can be gained by connecting schools in similar communities addressing similar issues. To that end, we have begun joining schools in communities of learning to provide additional support for change in culture and practice, reduce duplication of effort and increase project impact. Three examples are:

- leaders from 34 schools attended our Fair Education conference to share details of their family/community engagement projects and strengthen their common purpose
- our Teaching Fellows have relished opportunities through the Awards program to collaborate on projects, develop shared approaches to education and contribute to education policy debates
- we encourage schools to work in clusters where appropriate, to better enable the sharing of experiences, and create stronger support networks and greater community impact.

Many existing platforms (virtual and otherwise) aim to encourage collaboration and diffusion of knowledge/good practice between Australian educators, but are not effectively used. Reasons for low take-up include lack of time, awareness and access, choice and technology overload, challenging user interfaces, difficulties translating theoretical examples into practice and limiting beliefs and behaviours that deter educators from trialling new practices.

We see potential in partnering with others already working to connect teachers, especially across regions/states/sectors, to build upon our collective networks and expertise to facilitate more meaningful opportunities for educators to connect, debate and share good practice, and support each other to achieve greater outcomes for their schools.

Our final comments relate to the role of Schools Plus in the education system. Since our establishment, we have built a strong and growing knowledge base about how schools can support the strengths of every child - regardless of their location or background – and the resources they need to do so. When systems are unable to provide these resources, our experience shows philanthropy can play a role in bridging the gap.

From our insights, we make the following recommendations:

One: An independent leadership coaching model, as evidenced by Schools Plus and Fair Education, to be adopted more broadly across the education system.

Two: Education departments, sector peak bodies and other agencies to recognise the Awards and Fellows, as well as drawing on the Fellows' experience and leadership capability as a "brains trust" in policy-making.

Three: The Review to consider ways the system can recognise and reward school achievements more broadly than has been traditionally done.

Four: To ensure the voice of hundreds of schools is 'front and centre' in decision making, Schools Plus to play an ongoing role in providing insights, case studies and feedback to federal/state governments and other bodies in the education sector.

Five: State governments and education bodies to provide ongoing support for Schools Plus' work in facilitating connections between schools and philanthropy, for the benefit of students.