



TURNING BRIGHT SPOTS INTO A BRIGHT SYSTEM SEPTEMBER 2011





The inaugural Education Dialogue was hosted by Social Ventures Australia in September 2011. The participants were a cross-sector and cross-state group of leading practitioners, thinkers, bureaucrats, funders and academics. Our aim for the day was to showcase what is working to turnaround student achievement in our most disadvantaged schools, and identify how we can duplicate this success and ultimately achieve system-wide improvement. In other words, how we can turn bright spots into a bright system.

From its inception, SVA has been an organisation which invests in social change. In our view, promoting educational excellence for all young Australians is the best way to achieve breakthrough change in our most disadvantaged communities.

At SVA, we want to understand what works in education, so that through collaboration with our non-profit venture partners, educators, governments and philanthropists, we can contribute to transformed performance outcomes for low SES schools.

Right now, across the states and across the public, independent and Catholic sectors, outstanding leaders in some of our poorest schools are achieving a stunning turnaround. In all of these schools, an attitude of "these kids can't learn" has been replaced by high expectations for all and an absolute determination to lift performance by reinventing schooling so that it works for each and every student, no matter their starting point. SVA saw an opportunity to bring together a coalition of innovators to work collaboratively and listen to what it is that effective principals, teachers, school administrators and non-profit organisations are telling us about how to engage some of our most challenged students and communities. We believe that together we can transform our system and close the unacceptable gap in educational performance.

The dialogue group was described on the day as an "uncommon alliance" and we have spoken to many of the participants and reflected ourselves on why that is the case. We believe that the uniqueness came from three key elements:

- Firstly, we all share a relentless commitment to focusing on disadvantage and raising expectations and achievement levels for students in low SES schools in Australia:
- Secondly, we are all actors and doers and we are putting ideas into practice to drive change inside schools and school networks today; and
- Thirdly, we all believe that it is essential that we collaborate across all states, all sectors and all levels to figure out how we can duplicate successes and ultimately achieve system-wide improvement.

Going forward, SVA is committed to harnessing the power of this unique group and providing further opportunities to showcase what is working for disadvantaged students and schools. We foresee significant opportunities to collaborate on projects that will enable further knowledge development and sharing and also contribute to ongoing systemic change.

The purpose of this initial document is to share with you a summary of what was discussed on the day. We hope it can act as a 'call to arms' that will inform discussion regarding priorities and importantly further work and action on all our parts.

We note that participants were invited to join the group on the basis of their expertise, rather than as representatives of particular interest groups or organisations, and all discussions were conducted under the Chatham House Rule. SVA takes full responsibility for the views expressed here which have been distilled from the range of opinions expressed. They should not be interpreted as being endorsed either by the individuals who participated in the forum or their organisations.

We encourage you to read the communiqué and invite you to join SVA in the task of turning bright spots into a bright system.

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Australia has a significant equity gap – the difference between the performance of the affluent and the disadvantaged in Australia is wider than in other countries. These disadvantaged children start school behind, fall further behind whilst at school, and are less likely to complete 13 years of schooling. By the age of 15, the poorest quartile of Australian students is not only well below the OECD average, they are nearly 3 years behind their more affluent peers. Significantly, a key driver behind this achievement gap is the school environment: a low SES child is more likely to achieve if they attend a school in a high SES community.

Low educational achievement has a significant impact on individuals, and later their own families, contributing to an ongoing cycle of disadvantage. Children who underperform in education and drop out early become "youth at risk" of unemployment. Over the long-term they are more likely to earn less, be involved in crime and become the next generation of disadvantaged parents.

This issue impacts on Australia's economic development overall. As the Grattan Institute has estimated, improving Australian education standards up to world best practice – both by increasing top student performance and lifting the tail – would add up to 0.7% to GDP each year. We need to look for the type of funding and support on a long-dated basis that will enable us to achieve these standards and build a sustainable platform for long-term growth.

Australia is increasingly focusing attention and resources on this issue. At a government level, statements such as the Melbourne Declaration of 2008 affirm that Australia's future economic prosperity requires governments and all sectors to improve educational outcomes and foster high expectations for disadvantaged young Australians. The Gonski Review of Funding for Schools is currently looking into the type of school funding approaches Australia needs to achieve a world class education and training system for all Australians. Groups such as the newly-formed Centre for Public Education, the National Alliance for Inclusive Learning, and the Grattan Institute are building public demand for a more equitable, accountable and high-performing education system.

Across the country also, forward-thinking bureaucrats, ground-breaking teacher training and development institutions, and creative non-profits are developing, testing and refining new approaches which support and enable low SES schools. The Australian Government's Smarter Schools National Partnerships investment of \$2.6bn, is funding a series of initiatives designed to better support schools, in particular low SES schools, throughout Australia. These initiatives are focusing on addressing disadvantage, supporting teachers and school leaders, and improving literacy and numeracy and in some schools are acting as a key support for change.

The result of these initiatives and greater investment is pockets of innovation and transformation, as individual bright spot schools take up these new opportunities to transform themselves, and lift outcomes for their students. What we do not yet have a clear line of sight to however, is a bright system, extending, reinforcing and sustaining these pockets of innovation to ensure that all schools are impacted. Why not?

Firstly, we have not focused on showcasing our bright spots, learning the lessons from their work, and working with them and others to spread and scale innovation. Best practice is not shared, we are yet to create a genuine learning network across states and sectors, and we are too territorial about knowledge. Where we have competition and rivalry between schools and across the sector, we need instead collaboration and creative partnering.

And secondly, whilst we recognise the key levers of teacher effectiveness, principal leadership, and family and community engagement in transforming student achievement, we have not worked hard enough at the system and policy level to fully engage these levers in all schools.

How can we ensure that all low SES schools have highquality, well-prepared and supported teachers, led by strong and effective leaders, working hand-in-hand with empowered communities?



Bright Spots: Leading the Way Forward

"Quality teaching. Quality relationships. Quality systems. All underpinned by high expectations and the right resources"

"Improvement is a given. It's about accelerating the rate of improvement"

The SVA Education Dialogue brought together a unique coalition of innovators, all of whom are actors and doers driving measurable change inside schools and school networks today.

We heard from the principals of Woodridge State High School (Qld), Toronto High School (NSW), Hume Central Secondary School (Vic), Montrose Bay High School (Tas), St Ignatius College, Riverview (NSW), the Director of Edmund Rice Education Australia, managers driving National Partnership support in NSW independent and Catholic schools and in Queensland public schools, teacher educators at the Universities of Sydney, Melbourne and Queensland University of Technology and non-profit ventures partnering with schools.

What, we asked, do our bright spot schools have in common?

 High expectations. High expectations underpin absolutely everything else - expectations that the principal, staff and students have for themselves and for each other. This means academic expectations as well as behaviour and attitude expectations.

"You have to believe that every child can achieve."

Strong leadership. Successful change agents have vision, strategic direction and an unswerving commitment to improving student outcomes. Leaders confront the biggest problems head-on, and proactively establish the pre-conditions for change (people, resources, structure and timing). They invest in high quality professional development and creatively leverage external networks, mentors and programs. Successful leaders also focus on sustainability, building strong management teams, thinking about succession, and embedding cultural change.

"I am able to push the staff a whole lot harder because they can see the changes in the school and what supports them." Genuine community engagement. The student is the starting point, and schools need to understand the whole range of things that influence students in the family and the wider community. Achieving the potential of the student will require schools to work hand-in-hand with communities, recognising that each community is different and adapting to its distinctive features and seeking out voices that usually go unheard. Successful principals take personal responsibility for community engagement, get the right support staff on board, and co-ordinate an integrated set of programmes and involvements with community partners, businesses and non-profits.

"We made sure we heard the voices that we normally wouldn't hear. We sent cars and taxis to bring them into the school."

Relentless focus on teaching and learning. Teaching and learning are at the heart of every bright spot school. Good teaching and learning is not rocket science - we know what works and success comes from relentless implementation, in every class, every day. Bright spot schools have attitudes and practices embedded that allow for trial, observation, reflection and improvement. The culture is one of coaching for success, where classroom doors are opened, peer observation is legitimised as the norm and pedagogical specialists help everyone to improve. Teachers mentor each other and learn from each other within schools and across schools. Everyone uses data to inform and guide practice.

"We're in the business of creating high performance teams."

Flexibility in resourcing. School leaders have the flexibility and autonomy to hire the types of staff that they need. Successful leaders act entrepreneurially to maximise investments entrusted to them. This manifests in clever resourcing and new dedicated positions like Pedagogical Development Teachers, Teaching and Learning Coaches, behaviour and attendance specialists, and Literacy and Numeracy Coaches. Continuity of funding enables successful change to become embedded in a new culture.

"It's not just the money but the flexibility that the money has given us to create new ways of working."

- Alternative learning models. Students who are completely disengaged from mainstream schools need different models to help them learn and achieve. Models like Big Picture schools and Flexible Learning Options change the context of learning by focusing on individual students and their aspirations, re-engaging students and producing radically different outcomes.
- Sequencing. The first step is to get students to school because, if they are not there, nothing else can happen. Success begins with front-loading engagement with students, families and communities. Behaviour is addressed up front by drawing a line in the sand delineating behaviours that are acceptable and those that are not, explaining the consequences and consistently applying them. Attendance, engagement and behaviour are early lead indicators of improved outcomes.

"We drew a line in the sand about what behaviours were acceptable."

For Australia to build a bright system, we must identify the lessons from schools whose efforts we have invested in, so that our focus becomes not just on stand-out examples, but on change which is shared, sustained and spread across all schools.

We need also to focus on the critical enablers for low SES schools at a systemic level. What can we do to ensure that all low SES schools have access to the type of principals, teachers, and community networks they need to succeed, and that these people are empowered, resourced and supported effectively?



Achieving a Bright System

The SVA Education Dialogue recognised particular sets of challenges for low SES schools around the key levers of teacher effectiveness, principal leadership, and family and community engagement. Addressing these challenges effectively is critical if we are to sustain and scale bright spots towards a bright system.

Collaboration & sustainability

At the heart of our recommendations is an emphasis on sharing and collaboration. Schools, teacher educators, and school administrators are confronting similar challenges, and, in many cases, innovative new approaches have already been developed (or old ones revitalised) which can be effectively adapted in different context. We need to find new ways to collaborate and learn from each other, through new networks and relationships, between and across schools, sectors and states.

"There are sparks of brilliance and excellence all around the country, but so many schools are operating in isolation".

Underlying our recommendations also is a focus on sustainability. As our Asian neighbours have recognised, transforming educational opportunities requires a focus on the long-term, and a commitment to sustain change, rather than lose momentum through constant policy churn. Schools and regions driving significant change programmes need to be assured of ongoing funding and support to realise the right behaviours, cultures, processes and investment required to achieve accelerating impact. Where significant investment, such as National Partnerships funding, has precipitated change, we need to think hard about how we leverage that investment and continue to invest in a way which sustains and accelerates the change that we have seen.

Sustainability is also critical at the school level, with significant potential for school transformation to be threatened by the loss of an outstanding principal or set of teachers. We need to pay attention to bench strength across the system, and constant succession planning.

Teacher effectiveness

We know that high quality and high capability teachers, well-prepared for the particular issues faced in low SES schools, and working together constantly to refine and develop their practice are critical for transforming student outcomes. What can we do to train and develop teachers in this way?

Ensure high-quality, appropriate pre-service training, particularly for a low SES environment

Currently only 41% of Australia's teaching graduates feel well-prepared for their profession, with many new graduates having only limited practical experience*. Few programmes focus significantly on the issues faced in a low SES setting and many struggle. Employers, even those such as state governments employing 70% or more of graduates, have little or no input into what is taught, and there are few creative partnerships between schools and universities.

New models which concentrate on teaching teachers how to teach and giving them extensive real-world practical experience show the way forward. Masters of Teaching courses at the Universities of Melbourne and Sydney and 'paradigm shifters' like Teach for Australia are programs that build on foundational degrees that teach critical thinking, provide training in pedagogy and classroom management and deliver highly-supportive and resourced practical experience. Programmes like QUT's Exceptional Teachers for Disadvantaged Schools specifically focus on providing the highest quality teachers with the practical skills they need to make a difference in low SES schools, working closely with partner disadvantaged schools.

We need to demand more from our pre-service teacher training system, ultimately finding metrics which assess the effectiveness of the large numbers of different training providers and being prepared to cut what doesn't work and invest in growing what does. We need to ensure that our universities are teaching what our schools need, particularly our low SES schools, and that appropriate and useful partnerships are being built between schools and universities.

*The Australian Education Union's New Educators Survey 2008 found that 41.2 percent of beginning teachers considered their pre-service teacher education prepared them 'well' or 'very well' for the reality of teaching.

Assist the placement and support of highquality teachers in high need schools

We know the impact of high-quality teachers on student achievement, but also that low SES schools struggle to attract and retain the best teachers for their students. Many high-achieving teaching graduates are head-hunted for private schools, and many public schools cannot compete with wages or terms – particularly given that funding difficulties often make it hard to confirm permanent positions. The overall problem of teacher retention - 3-5 years out of university, many teachers are planning to leave the profession – is exacerbated by challenging low SES environments.

Models such as Teach for Australia and the QUT Exceptional Teachers programme deliberately channel the best teachers into low SES schools, as well as providing initial support. A number of schools are exploring active new teacher mentoring within and between schools, and some governments are experimenting with new teacher induction programmes. We need to understand and share what is working here, particularly in the low SES context.

Ensure ongoing professional development and learning, particularly building capability in new teaching methodologies

New teaching methodologies focus explicitly on teaching and learning, working with colleagues and pedagogical specialists to trial, observe, reflect and improve, and using data constantly to inform and guide practice. For some teachers, this is a new paradigm, with significant capability-building required in technology, data analysis, and new pedagogical and collaborative techniques. For all teachers, this model requires ongoing attention to and resourcing for professional development.

Schools can find it very difficult to provide this level of professional development support - finding funding for specialist teachers and coaches, and setting sufficient time aside for professional development. Funders need to recognise the critical importance of this process, and to assist schools to source assistance appropriate for their needs.

Principal leadership

Principals are powerful agents in school transformation. They need to be selected as leaders and innovators committed to change, empowered and resourced appropriately, and supported effectively by peers and external supporters.

Find and motivate the right people

Transforming an under-performing low SES school will very often require a new principal who can come in with a mandate for change, a go-forward strategic plan, and a relentless commitment to achieving it.

We need to make sure that we are building and developing a cohort of principals who have these characteristics across our schooling sector, and encouraging them to bring their talents to a low SES environment. The Stronger Smarter Leadership Program is one example of an existing program with a proven track record of effectively motivating and supporting these principals.

Further, we need to support the efforts many of these principals make to build and develop leaders within their schools, capable both of succeeding them, and of helping to replicate success at other schools.

Empower and resource them appropriately

We are learning that whilst it important to be "tight" on some things – potentially the curriculum and teacher standards, for example - we need to be loose on others, particularly the use of resources.

Principals leading significant change need the flexibility and autonomy to innovate and direct resources to meet the particular circumstances of their school, and the assurance of continuity to reliably build a sustainable new culture and environment.

Different states, such as NSW, Victoria and Queensland, have been experimenting with new models here, with the National Partnerships funding often directed on a flexible basis to individual schools. We need to think how we can share these learnings on how to resource schools flexibly but accountably, continue to innovate and refine and apply them throughout the system.

Support them through focused networking, mentoring and coaching

States and independent and Catholic school organisations have been actively experimenting with techniques for supporting principals, including through setting up formal and informal relationships between schools - whether of the same size or type, in the same geographic region, or matching low with higher-performing schools. Relationships can be one-on-one, or with clusters of principals, and can extend to relationships between other staff. Other options include matching principals with experienced mentors from the education and even the business community, with some non-profit organisations assisting here. We need to share what works, and to find ways to support and re-inforce effective practice.

Community engagement

Education is everybody's business, and the doors of the school need to be open to families, the wider educational community, businesses and non-profits who have a stake in student success.

Encourage a community of learners approach

Our focus needs to be beyond individual schools to the wider education community – early childhood eduation, primary, secondary and tertiary - in which students and their families participate. We need to recognise that a number of schools often serve a single community, and that working together at the leadership, teaching and support level to address underlying social, cultural, logistical and other factors can be powerful and effective.

We have seen examples of this in Queensland in areas like Logan where State Government Regional Directors are working to link schools, universities, early childhood centers and employers; and in Education City within Springfield, a master planned precinct encompassing early childhood education through all phases of learning to post graduate university study.

We need to seek out examples of this community-wide focus across Australia, learn more about what works, and ensure ongoing experimentation and learning.

Assist positive family-school relationships

Many schools have placed a considerable focus on engaging families and students in creative ways which emphasise the centrality of this relationship. We need to share practice here to develop and refine what will still often be locally-tailored solutions. Non-profit organisations can play as important role in supporting schools to motivate and maintain this

engagement. For example, parents of students participating in Gabinas program in Shepparton commit to a 'contract' of support.

Assist productive business-school relationships

Business partnerships create real-world relevance by giving kids the opportunity to get immersed in real industry experiences and ultimately providing employment to school leavers.

We need to invest in strategic partnerships and pro-bono collaborations, like those built by the Australian Business and Community Network, the Business Council of Australia and non-profits like Beacon Foundation , as well as the Australian Government's School Business Community Partnerships programme which cultivate relationships between clusters of schools, training organisations, business and industry and work closely with the region's Youth Connections provider who supports the needs of disengaged youth.

Strength and streamline non-profit involvement

We recognise the important role of non-profits in low SES schools – working with families to ensure kids are ready for school and supported to learn, linking students to educational and jobs-based mentors, training and experiences, working with schools to bring in additional specialist resources.

Equally, we recognise the challenges of making this involvement effective – the fact that some schools are overloaded with support where others (particular regional and remote) have little; the difficulties schools (and non-profits) have in knowing whether the involvement is effective, and the challenge of co-ordinating multiple sources of support to minimise duplication and ensure programmes re-inforce each other. The ICAN model developed in South Australia which brings together young people, families, schools, community groups, businesses and different levels of government to find local solutions to locally identified issues that prevent young people from completing their education is an important model for doing this. The Smith Family's Learning for Life programme is another important example.

We need to build on these initiatives to ensure that schools are able to proactively access the support they need, group programs in a way which is meaningful and provides a whole systems approach rather than one-off injections, and potentially create opportunities for clusters of non-profits to broker investment in a co-ordinated way to a school or community, and measure impact in a way that is meaningful to the school and the non-profits involved.





The SVA Education Dialogue brought together a unique group of educators, bureaucrats, researchers, thinkers, non-profit ventures partnering with schools and funders – an "uncommon alliance", as it was described on the day.

Underpinning this alliance are three key elements:

- Firstly, we all share a relentless commitment to focusing on disadvantage and closing the gap for low SES schools in Australia;
- Secondly, we are actors and doers, and we are putting ideas into practice to drive change inside schools and school networks today; and
- Thirdly, we believe that it is essential that we collaborate across all states, all sectors and all levels to figure out how we can duplicate successes and ultimately achieve system-wide improvement.

Together, we believe that we have the ability, influence and resource to make the changes needed to ensure that Australia's poorest children have the ability to achieve their educational potential in the same way as other Australian children. Overcoming this totally unacceptable barrier is achievable, and all of us have a part to play in ensuring that these issues are faced head-on.

On SVA's part, in addition to the work we do to support our non-profit venture partners in the important work they do with schools, we are also working with governments to undertake projects allowing us to learn from school systems which have significantly lifted student performance within low SES schools. This work will help us to better understand the enabling conditions in terms of policy, resourcing, support and programs and to develop models which facilitate the replication and iteration of these approaches.

SVA is committed to providing further opportunities to showcase what is working for disadvantaged students and schools through additional Education Dialogues. One potential area for exploration, highlighted consistently at the initial Dialogue, is the effective attraction, training, retention and development of effective teachers for low SES schools, and we welcome further ideas and input.

SVA will continue to build on our heartland work with non-profit venture partners and lead and collaborate on projects that enable further knowledge development and sharing, as well as contribute to ongoing systemic change. We are partnering with new groups such as the Centre for Public Education and the National Alliance for Inclusive Learning who are also committed to change in this area and believe through such projects and partnerships we have the opportunity to turn bright spots into a bright system.





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