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What is the potential for philanthropy to address  
inequality within disadvantaged schools?

Learning from an evaluation of the Fair Education program in New  
South Wales

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### **Cover photograph**

Community garden project at a Fair Education school in New South Wales. Photo by Graeme Newman.

# What is the potential for philanthropy to address inequality within disadvantaged schools? Learning from an evaluation of the Fair Education program in New South Wales

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## Abstract

The Fair Education program was designed to address the complex challenge of educational inequality and to strengthen parent and community engagement within disadvantaged schools in New South Wales (NSW), Australia. This philanthropic program provided a number of NSW schools with periodic external coaching over three years and additional funding to implement locally-driven projects.

This paper draws on qualitative data collected from school leaders whose schools were included in the first two cohorts of Fair Education. Initially we look at the key features of Fair Education. We address schools' experiences of the program, what aspects of the program worked well, in regards to both the external coaching component and the locally-driven project, and any challenges the schools encountered. The paper summarises school leaders' perspectives on the impacts of Fair Education and where schools derived the most value from their participation in the program. Finally, the paper reflects on implications for future development of Fair Education and how the wider school system can benefit from what was learnt through this philanthropic initiative within disadvantaged schools.

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## About CIRES

The Centre for International Research on Education Systems, located at Victoria University, conducts strategic research that identifies how well education systems work, for whom, and how they can be improved to work well for all. The Centre undertakes large-scale survey and policy-related projects covering every state and territory in Australia and every sector of education and training. It also undertakes international comparative research examining the features and performance of education systems around the world.

## Table of Contents

Abstract .....	3
Table of Contents .....	4
Introduction .....	5
Philanthropy in Australia.....	5
Fair Education.....	7
Methodology.....	9
Findings .....	10
The different uses of project funding.....	10
The importance of coaching to the program .....	11
Summary of Fair Education impact .....	14
Implications for future development.....	16
References.....	17

## Introduction

Fair Education is a major philanthropic program introduced to help schools in disadvantaged communities within various Australian jurisdictions. Fair Education in the state of New South Wales (NSW) is funded by the Vincent Fairfax Family Foundation (VFFF) and delivered by Australian Schools Plus (Schools Plus). Philanthropic initiatives signal a change from traditional funding arrangements in modern education systems, as schools seek to diversify and look for new sources of revenue to fund their own initiatives which align with their ideas for innovation.

Fair Education provides additional funding and support to participating disadvantaged schools over three years to help schools and school leaders improve family and community engagement and enrich student learning. Parent and community engagement is generally regarded as an important resource for schools, as it is thought to strengthen school programs. Fair Education is also about leadership development, supporting school leaders to develop skills in order to engage with and support their communities to participate more fully in the life of the school as equal partners.

This working paper is drawn from a longitudinal evaluation of Fair Education in NSW funded by VFFF and conducted by CIRES at Victoria University from 2016 to 2020. The working paper addresses the following questions:

- 1) What were the key features of Fair Education?
- 2) What was the impact of Fair Education and did the initiative prove successful in supporting all participating schools to realise improvement and better connect with families and communities?
- 3) What does Fair Education reveal about the potential for philanthropy to better support disadvantaged schools?

## Philanthropy in Australia

Philanthropy is a growing influence on educational thinking and policymaking worldwide (Ball, 2012). The United States has a particularly strong history of educational philanthropy with various foundations investing in specific educational programs or institutions (Ball, 2012; McGoey, 2015; Saltman, 2010). Beneficiaries include elite institutions like Harvard University, which from 2013 to 2018 raised a record-high 9.6 billion US dollars from private contributions (Joslyn, 2018). Large American philanthropic bodies also have significant influence on policy and politicians through think tanks and lobbyists. Critiques of 'Big Philanthropy' or 'Venture Philanthropy' in the United States suggest that through their large investment in cash-strapped public school systems, philanthropists wield undue political influence and promote reform agendas that emphasise educational change imbued by neoliberal thinking rather than being driven by a compelling vision of the place of schooling within a democratic society (Ball, 2012; McGoey, 2015; Rogers, 2015; Saltman, 2010; Quam, 2015). There are various examples, such as the Walton Family Foundation, which has invested heavily in charter schools, teacher effectiveness and replacement of low-performing schools, and the Gates Foundation, which has championed teacher effectiveness and the implementation of the Common Core Curriculum standards (Saltman, 2010; Quam, 2015). Many of these reform agendas are highly contested and do not necessarily support the ethos of public education (Ravitch, 2011). Many philanthropic-funded educational reforms in the United States have not provided the success that was hoped for and some have even been regarded as policy failures (Saltman, 2010).

Echoing the practices evident in other education systems worldwide, the most recent national review of school funding in Australia (known as the 'Gonski review') effectively encouraged all schools, including the most disadvantaged, to start to 'connect with philanthropic partners to deliver time, money and expertise to schools' (Gonski et al., 2011). Historically Australian philanthropy has been concentrated in certain parts of the education and training system, in large part directed towards a handful of universities and select non-government schools. Recent estimates are that in 2020, the vast majority (73 per cent) of philanthropic donations within universities are concentrated in just five large universities, the well-regarded 'sandstone institutions', which have always gained more from philanthropy (Blainey, 2012; University of Melbourne, 2012; Yezdani, 2020).

Private benefactors have also played a significant role in the establishment of many Australian non-government schools where many buildings and campuses have been secured through the donations of private benefactors and alumni (Meadmore & Meadmore, 2010; Symes, 1998). The greater pull of private and philanthropic money into the non-government sectors continues. Analysis of publicly available administrative data about Australian schools (ACARA data) by Thompson, Hogan and Rahimi (2019) finds that average funding derived from private contributions is highest in the independent/private sector and higher still within schools educating the children of the wealthiest families. Disadvantaged schools within the public sector have the lowest level of private contributions to their overall school budget and continue to be less likely to receive philanthropic donations (Thompson et al., 2019). In addition, Connors & McMorro (2015) calculated that public schools receive the least per-student recurrent income when taking into account private income, state/territory funding and federal (Commonwealth) funding compared to non-government schools. Public schools then, have the lowest amount of total resources to draw upon to implement educational programs for their students.

These circumstances provide a meaningful context for understanding the organisational premise of Schools Plus that administers Fair Education. Schools Plus is one of a small number of philanthropic organisations that have become involved in disadvantaged schools to help implement programs which improve educational inequality and help bridge the educational gap between rich and poor (Australian Schools Plus, 2019; Gonski et al., 2011). One reason why philanthropy has thrived in universities and non-government schools, rather than the public school sector, is their different regulatory environments. Universities and non-government schools are able to qualify for deductible gift recipient status under federal tax law, whereas public schools are unable to do so (Bolton, 2019). Overall, supporting investment from philanthropic bodies also needs management and oversight, which may be out of reach for disadvantaged public schools that are typically under pressure to meet other strategic goals or are solely focused on their teaching and learning. To better support philanthropy in public schools, Schools Plus retains much of the responsibility for oversight and management, including the administration of philanthropic funding to the specific school programs.

The overwhelming majority of school funding to address educational inequality continues to come from the State and Federal governments, through implementation of various policies that target disadvantaged schools. Targeted equity funding administered by government departments typically involves certain restrictions attached to how the funds are used. Previous government equity programs in NSW include the Priority Action Schools Program (PASP) which ran from 2002 and was designed to provide additional support to disadvantaged schools to implement a project of their choosing. One key condition tied to the use of funds was that PASP schools also had to undertake a within-school evaluation or action research study on their

project with an academic partner (Groundwater-Smith & Kemmis, 2004). This source of additional funds was supplanted in 2008 by the Commonwealth Government's National Partnerships funding for low socioeconomic schools. Here, extra funding was provided for schools to implement additional initiatives that were specified in a comprehensive list. An independent evaluation of this program found varying impacts on schools realising improvement (Huo & Lamb, 2016).

In recent years, states like NSW have moved away from targeted, short-term funding to disadvantaged schools and towards recurrent funding to students with additional needs, through the provision of additional loadings calculated per-student. To be able to use this to best target need, schools are increasingly responsible for managing their own resources, as evident in the relatively recent adoption of the resource allocation model in NSW (NSW Government, 2020). Nevertheless, philanthropic contributions provide the opportunity for disadvantaged schools to secure an additional source of revenue, which sits outside of their school budgets. Previously to Fair Education, there have been other sources of philanthropic money available to disadvantaged schools to undertake a set project or initiative either through a contribution made directly to their school, or indirectly through a non-profit organisation (e.g. the Foundation for Rural and Regional Renewal) (Anderson & Curtain, 2012). Fair Education represents a new philanthropic initiative designed to alleviate educational inequality in disadvantaged schools which uses a different approach than those programs which have preceded it.

## **Fair Education**

Fair Education has been implemented by Schools Plus in NSW since 2016. At the time of writing, three cohorts of schools have taken part in the program. All schools in NSW were encouraged to apply for Fair Education through professional networks and advertising, with the only condition that their level of socioeconomic disadvantage (as measured by the administrative Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage, or ICSEA) must not exceed the median value (e.g. 1000) at the time of application. In the first two cohorts, 23 projects were established in various urban, inner regional and outer regional areas across NSW. The cohorts commenced in 2016 and 2017 respectively, and comprised mainly public schools with a selected few schools from the non-government sector. A range of primary, secondary, combined and special schools participated. Schools undertook Fair Education as either an individual project or a project which involved a group of schools working together as a 'cluster'.

There were two distinct inputs associated with Fair Education as a philanthropic educational intervention. Schools receive support through:

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

The following discussion explores these two features to consider how they were undertaken across Fair Education-supported schools.

These two areas of support were directed at improving family and community engagement, and to access funding schools needed to submit applications that showed how their intended initiatives would achieve this objective. The applications also needed to articulate a strong recognition of the needs of their specific school community. Fair Education provided schools with funding (maximum \$70,000 per school, or \$250,000 per cluster, over three years) to implement projects driven by their own strategic thinking. Unlike the ethos of philanthropy

present in the US system, where schools have to renovate their structures and practices considerably according to certain set formulas, Fair Education starts from the premise that schools know their own communities best (Ball, 2012; Ravitch 2011). School leaders were encouraged to develop local solutions to the issues concerning their school's community. Their main obligations were to commit to implementing their developed project over three years and to participate in the coaching. Schools also had to include in their application ways to address their project's sustainability beyond the three years of philanthropic support.

To support their ambitions for school improvement, each school or 'cluster' of schools was provided with 'coaching' support over the three years of the school's project. Coaching is a term adopted by Schools Plus and referenced by all school leaders involved in Fair Education (Australian Schools Plus, 2020). The Schools Plus coaching team represents an important component of the Fair Education model. The team is not based within individual schools; rather, it provides coaching across Fair Education funded schools. The coaching team for the first two cohorts comprised professionals drawn from various backgrounds, some with extensive experience in school leadership, and others who had previously held senior positions within the NSW Department of Education (the Department). The coaches undertook to visit each school roughly four times per year, for a duration of two to four hours. Schools were able to make the decisions about who attended the coaching sessions, based on their own needs and judgements. Often the way that the schools structured the coaching was associated with the style of leadership already in place in the school, including whether the school leader adopted a more executive style or whether a more distributed model of school leadership and decision making was in place.

The aspirations of the Australian national declaration of educational goals, the Mparntwe (Alice Springs) Education Declaration, set out that 'learning is a partnership with parents, carers and others in the community, all of whom have a role to play in nurturing the love of learning needed for success at school and in life' (Education Council, 2019). It has long been recognised in the educational literature that the education of young people is most effective when it results from a harmonious partnership between the school, the home, and the community (Connell et al., 1992; Groundwater-Smith & Kemmis, 2004; Epstein, 2010; Lareau, 2011). The reality on the ground, however, is that not all schools are able to use their communities as a resource to support learning. Schools which are working predominantly with socioeconomically disadvantaged communities are likely to face different and harder challenges to achieve strong family and community engagement in their programs. Schools in disadvantaged communities have to focus on supporting their families in other ways. Teachers are less likely to consider parents, who may have experienced challenges in their own education, as 'equal partners' in their child's education (Horvat, Weininger & Lareau, 2003; Lareau, 2011). Providing schools with support to improve parent and community engagement, is generally recognised as an important objective, particularly within socioeconomically disadvantaged schools (Epstein, 2010; Woodrow et al., 2016). Schools involved in Fair Education in NSW described families suffering from the effects of intergenerational poverty, unemployment, health problems or hardship caused by domestic violence or drought. School leaders described how for some of these families, the school was one of the main social services trying to support them to manage their difficult circumstances.

Fair Education responds to a need to provide greater resources and support for community engagement in disadvantaged schools. Social and economic disadvantage is becoming increasingly concentrated in certain communities across Australia and NSW, and consequently



it is a bigger concern in particular schools over others (McLachlan, Gilfillan & Gordon, 2013). An OECD report on Equity in Education (OECD, 2018) finds that social segregation in Australian schools is higher than in most other countries/economies participating in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2015. This is because the school system in every Australian state or territory does not have enough effective policies in place to break up or ameliorate this disadvantage (Lamb et al., 2020). Instead, research has shown that over the past thirty years, reforms and policies, such as those supporting school choice, have worked to strengthen disadvantage and have increasingly undermined the ideal of the provision of a local public school which serves its local community (Teese, 2011). The reality remains that family and community engagement in schools continues to be lower in communities with high concentrations of socioeconomic disadvantage due to circumstances outside of the school's control. School systems do not operate independently from broader social and economic structures that work in complex and interconnected ways to advantage some and disadvantage others, and effectively build and entrench conditions of inequality (Apple, 1982; Piketty, 2014).

## Methodology

This paper is drawn from a longitudinal evaluation of Fair Education funded by VFFF and conducted by CIRES at Victoria University from 2016-2020. The evaluation was formative in its first stages and increasingly summative as the evaluation went on. Regular reports were presented to VFFF (the funder) which summarised the available evidence and key findings. The final evaluation report is available on the VFFF website (CIRES, 2020).

As part of the overall project, the CIRES evaluation team drew together various sources of evidence over four years, including: online surveys, administrative data and in-depth qualitative interview materials. Online surveys were designed specifically for teachers, principals, and parents at Fair Education schools and administered in the second year of the evaluation (2017). School administrative data from the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) was also analysed to gain a picture of school-level differences between Fair Education schools and other low socioeconomic schools in NSW. The evaluation team accessed the regular reports and acquittals provided to Schools Plus from the participating schools. The evaluation activities received approval in early 2016 from the Victoria University Human Research Ethics committee.

The annual in-depth interviews conducted with school leaders provided the evaluation with a rich account of each school's unique experience of Fair Education. The interviews were conducted both through school visits and via telephone and lasted approximately 40 minutes. The interviews followed a semi-structured design, which 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 about their experiences of Fair Education. The interviews were used to provide more elaboration and detail on the specific contextual circumstances of Fair Education schools and their project objectives, including capturing progress and change.

This paper draws exclusively on the final interviews conducted with 72 school leaders in late 2019. For Cohort 1 schools, the 2019 interviews came at the end of their involvement in Fair Education so they were able to provide summative assessments of their experience. Schools selected in Cohort 2 had one more year of their project to go when the data collection took place, so their reflections were more formative in nature. These qualitative research materials were coded for the evaluation using grounded theory techniques (Glaser, 1992). The coding practices included an initial coding of the qualitative data to generate meaning, which was

followed by a more focused coding process to classify and conceptualise large amounts of qualitative data that were continually revisited (Charmaz, 2001). All personal information associated with the school leaders was removed and their quotations are used in an illustrative way which ensures their anonymity.

## Findings

The findings here are presented in two parts, which correspond to the two forms of support provided to schools involved in Fair Education – i.e. the project-specific funds and the coaching.

### The different uses of project funding

Fair Education's central purpose was to improve family and community engagement, but various other areas of school improvement were encouraged and supported through the initiative as well (Australian Schools Plus, 2020). Schools developed a range of projects. Many had a focus on applied or problem-based learning, or sought to develop student social-emotional skills. Others had as their core focus improving communication with families. Some projects involved transforming teaching and learning across the whole school, through adopting new models of curriculum implementation. Other projects sought to involve parents in school life, improve student transitions, establish mentoring, and redesign school leadership structures to include students. The projects capture the diverse approaches taken by participating schools as they sought to strengthen their interconnections with family and community.

School leaders often spoke in favourable terms about their engagement in Fair Education and what they were able to achieve when given the opportunity to pursue their own project. In many cases there was a difference between what was initially proposed for each project and what occurred, recognising that some projects changed or evolved over time. School leaders valued the flexibility they were given to change and reposition their project over time. One 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.'* Fair Education did not tie schools to what that they had initially proposed in their application. Therefore, many projects evolved from their original design and grew or changed to realise more developed outcomes and achievements. One secondary college developed a project for disengaged learners that became richer than the objectives expressed in their initial application for Fair Education funding. They eventually broadened their scope to offer their tailored and individualised educational program to upper primary school students in the community. Another school leader said, *'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.'*

Participating schools were invited to take part in an annual conference, which brought school leaders together from disparate localities across NSW, all of whom shared a common ambition to improve educational outcomes in disadvantaged communities. This annual conference facilitated greater connection between schools that they did not have before. One leader described how the forum was a positive environment for *'cross-pollination'*, while another expressed the importance of *'face-to-face'* contact where they could discuss ideas openly and think about how they could apply aspects of another school's initiative to their own context. There was evidence that school leaders really benefited from the peer-to-peer learning that occurred due to their involvement in various Fair Education activities.

There were other differences between schools in the design and implementation of their projects. Projects differed according to whether they were to be year-level specific or rolled out across all year levels. The scale of the project had implications for the number of students affected by Fair Education as well as the number of staff involved in the initiative. Projects also were distinctive according to whether schools had devised the ideas themselves, or whether they chose to buy a program 'off the shelf' using their Fair Education funding (Connell et al., 1992, p.453). Fair Education provided schools with the opportunity to develop and implement their own ideas for improvement, but paradoxically some schools chose to invest in externally-sourced programs, which paralleled Departmental policy initiatives in that they were generic and did not necessarily directly respond to specific community needs. Eight schools chose to purchase an 'off the shelf' program. Although many of the projects supported school improvement, it is questionable whether buying costly and commercially available programs served as a sustainable initiative due to the ongoing investment required by schools to maintain the annual site license and ongoing professional development.

For schools that worked together as a cluster, projects tended to be implemented by schools with a common concern around a shared educational challenge. This was particularly notable in one cluster that consisted of a mix of primary and secondary schools within the same community. One of their school leaders described how they gained value from developing a common language around school improvement: *'The most powerful thing is the work we have done as a network' (of primary schools working with the secondary college)*. However, the impact of some projects was muted in larger clusters, especially those involving large secondary schools, due to the very fact that they involved multiple schools working together. A lot of work had to go into ensuring all the schools communicated and had the practices to function well together, and the project became a secondary goal. A school leader involved in one cluster observed, *'It's hard enough to make a commitment within our own school let alone making it across schools.'*

Despite clear evidence of success in many projects, some schools did not gain as much from their Fair Education-supported project as others. Some did not meet the objectives that they had set out in their project application. Schools that faced considerable readjustments over the years of their involvement in Fair Education, including staffing or leadership change, tended to lose the direction of their project. The revolving door of school leaders and teachers is a common concern within disadvantaged school communities, particularly those which are located in rural and regional areas (Halsey, 2018). Other schools faced significant contextual challenges where the project design developed in theory was unable to be applied in practice.

### **The importance of coaching to the program**

Coaching is the second key aspect of support provided by Schools Plus through Fair Education. It occurred alongside the ongoing implementation of each school's specific project. It is important to acknowledge that there is no agreed upon model or definition of what coaching practice should look like within schools. Gornall & Burn define coaching as both a learning relationship and a form of professional development (Gornall & Burn, 2013). Aguilar acknowledges that coaching orientated towards activities that achieve behavioural change can be transformative for schools, leadership teams and teachers (Aguilar, 2013). Bresser & Wilson perceive coaching as a way to facilitate self-directed learning, personal growth and improved performance at work (Bresser & Wilson, 2006). Existing academic literature on coaching in schools remains somewhat opaque about what coaching should entail. Schools Plus has developed a model of coaching in the Fair Education program where they suggest that

'independent coaching simultaneously builds capability and unlocks creative localised solutions' (Australian Schools Plus, 2020, p.4).

While coaching was central to the Fair Education initiative, many schools were unfamiliar with the idea when beginning their involvement. Some schools regarded the coaches as mentors or 'critical friends', as exemplified by this comment from one school leader: *'Just having that expert colleague to rely on and bounce ideas off and to challenge us: (it) was an incredible benefit.'* The coaching team's independence from the Department was particularly valued by the school leaders. One leader said, *'The degree of freedom is important. The Department puts constraints on things.'* Mutual respect was also a precondition for a successful coaching relationship. One leader indicated, *'I liked the fact that the coach did not pressure us, but that they respected us to do a good job.'* The program enabled school leaders – at least to some extent – to think and act outside the constraints imposed by government performance measures. They are arguably being positioned differently by Fair Education as professionals with the autonomy to respond to the needs of their community, as opposed to implementing short-term government policy mandates.

The interview data showed how the coaching worked alongside the development of the project and served a different purpose at various points in time. The coaching support was tailored to each school and the project they sought to implement. The importance of coaching, particularly to early project development, was acknowledged by many school leaders. The initial coaching sessions gave many schools a sense of the vision and objectives of the Fair Education program. Practically, 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 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.'*

Not only was the coaching seen as vital in the initial stages for many schools; the regular coaching sessions were also described as an important check point to monitor progress. One school leader felt, *'(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.'* Coaching gave many school leaders a sense of affirmation and validation, and a sense that they had made improvement and progress. Coaching gave confidence to some of the school leaders that they were on the right track. 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, *'The coaching gave me the confidence and assurance to know that I was doing the right thing. It was important for me.'* Similar sentiments were also expressed by other school leaders, for example: *'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 comment was: *'It is nice to get some positive feedback and encouragement which has also been helpful in keeping us moving forward.'* The coaching in Fair Education meant that many school leaders articulated that they felt less demoralised, embattled and isolated by the challenges they face daily within their schools. The opportunity to talk and

share experiences with others, including their coach, other teachers, or teachers from other schools, was perceived as a significant form of support. As 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.'*

Particularly within cluster projects, coaching was described as a key collaborative activity that regularly brought leaders together, especially when they did not already have an established collaborative network or forum. One leader 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.'* The Fair Education coaching gave school leaders the time to engage in reflective practices built upon conversation and shared reflection. The time to do this is absent in many schools (Australian Education Union, 2018). Typically, teachers are given less and less time to do things that they would actually like to do, and are often under pressure to undertake activities that they need to do for compliance reasons instead.

In the final and third year of Fair Education funding, some school leaders described how the coaching helped focus their thinking and reflect on what they would do when the additional support finished. One school leader said, *'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.'* The coaching conversations facilitated the time for school leaders to come together and talk, which gave them an opportunity to plan for their futures. Despite the initial uncertainty about the coaching, school leaders came to value it highly, together with the support it provided for them to be able to implement their project successfully. The coaching was viewed by nearly all school leaders as critical to Fair Education and the development of leadership capability to better work with their communities. The coaching intervention clearly had more traction in certain school communities, namely those which were open to the coaching and the project working together. Schools which were most successful in Fair Education took the two aspects of support together and saw both as an investment in ideas (as opposed to simply an avenue of funding to acquire additional resources).

Changes in the management of the Schools Plus coaching team occurred over the three years, a factor which proved challenging to some schools. Certain schools and clusters that transitioned between coaches lost a sense of cohesion about their involvement in Fair Education. Challenges were also largely associated with mismatched understandings or expectations between coaches and some school leaders. Coaches brought their own individual style to their work with schools. Although the coaching had a standardised structure, each coaching session was mostly adaptive to each school and their coach's specific interest. The style of some coaches matched better with some school leaders than others. Some schools were eager to engage in open-ended discussions while other school leaders expressed a reluctance to participate in 'philosophical discussions'. One school leader 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.'*

Aguilar (2013) suggests that the conditions need to be right within an educational context for coaching to be effective. Similar to the problems associated with project implementation, at times the environment within participating schools was too challenging for the coaching to have a positive effect. Staffing changes affected teaching and learning within schools as well as overall

school management, and also set back the gains made in the coaching sessions. Some school leaders seemed reluctant to make time to attend the sessions. One described how *'coaching felt at times like an imposition. It was stressful for us to organise work for classes when it was coaching time.'* If school leaders did not see the need or appreciate the value of the coaching sessions, they tended to prioritise other matters and did not make the most of the coaching support. Coaching also had a limited effect in some larger clusters, due to their size. One cluster of secondary schools described the coaching as 'low-level' and as a result, participants in the coaching sessions gradually dropped off over time. In conclusion, the benefits of the coaching were unable to be realised uniformly across all schools.

### Summary of Fair Education impact

This section addresses the impact of Fair Education and whether it supported disadvantaged schools to realise improvements and respond to the challenge of parent and community engagement.

Fair Education, as an example of Australian philanthropy, was designed to complement, and supplement, rather than replace, the efforts of government. The two-pronged model of support encompassing the coaching and the project-specific funds are a unique feature of Fair Education. It was apparent that greater impact was realised in schools where the coaching and project were perceived as mutual activities working towards the same objective. School leaders were less familiar with 'coaching' and more used to receiving additional project-specific funding when they started Fair Education. Yet by the end of their involvement in Fair Education, the gains from coaching were identified by some schools as their main derived benefit. The coaching provided by Schools Plus and Fair Education treated the school leaders as professionals, capable of driving school improvement in their own communities. **For many schools, the reflective practice engendered in the coaching contributed to the successful implementation of their project and attainment of their objectives for school improvement when they applied for Fair Education.** 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.'* Another school leader's insight was that coaching *'changed the way that the school operates.'* Other schools indicated that they even intended to continue to pay for a coach to come into their school and work with them once Fair Education ceased.

Targeted interventions to improve socioeconomically disadvantaged schools and students typically include project-specific funding. However, there are fewer examples of targeted funding for disadvantaged schools, either from the state or other philanthropic programs, which include both project-specific funding and coaching like Fair Education. **Interventions or additional support for disadvantaged schools which only include project funds run the risk that the additional funds will simply become subsumed into the school budget and their intended benefit not fully realised.** One school leader described the coaching session as a helpful 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.'* The benefits of the coaching within Fair Education may be less evident in improved student achievement or student attendance data, but it is significant that coaching gave school leaders the opportunity to better understand their situation and what they do.

**The independence of Fair Education provided disadvantaged schools with the chance to drive the intervention that they felt would work for their community.** The freedom given to schools

by Fair Education, as a philanthropic contribution, sits in juxtaposition to many generic government initiatives that are perceived by school leaders and teachers as preventing them from doing what they would actually like to do. Departmental initiatives, which as one school leader said, *'do not always match with what the key issues of the school are'*, are typically not tailored to context. This finding mirrors evaluations of other equity intervention programs including the Priority Action Schools Program, which similarly established *'that local "solutions" are more likely to meet local challenges than a "one size fits all" model'* (Groundwater-Smith & Kemmis, 2004). Quam's (2015) work in the United States affirms that philanthropic initiatives need to work with communities and in tandem with their needs, which is what Fair Education has done here. Fair Education did not impose a model of reform; instead, it respected schools' autonomy and the fact that school leaders knew what was working best to improve their school and its relationship to their community. Fair Education also supported schools to work together to develop initiatives that alleviate the impact of socioeconomic disadvantage, both as clusters and through peer-to-peer learning facilitated through events such as the conference. Fair Education provided the environment for schools to work together and for school leaders and teachers to make broader professional connections. The Fair Education program worked to encourage schools to work cooperatively, contrary to the contemporary competitive market-driven government policy agendas that developed from the 1990s (Reid, 2019).

There were a few challenges in assessing the impact of Fair Education, which are important points of reflection. Firstly, even with the wealth of positive qualitative data, it is very difficult to attribute improvements and gains exclusively to Fair Education. Fair Education is but one intervention in schools which, with their level of disadvantage, 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 and their families. The various funding sources that come into disadvantaged schools at any one time makes it challenging to isolate the independent effect of any initiative, including Fair Education. Secondly, as mentioned, although the central purpose of Fair Education was to improve family and community engagement, various other aspects of school improvement were encouraged and supported as well. Many school-led projects improved aspects of curriculum and pedagogy, or drove policies that support student wellbeing, which are not directly related to family and community engagement. Whether Fair Education in all cases lead to an improvement in family and community engagement is less conclusive, due to the unique character of the initiative in every school.

The Fair Education evaluation frequently captured the commitment of teachers trying to remedy the challenging circumstances associated with severe and cumulative community disadvantage. **Rather than imposing models of reform or policy initiatives, the philanthropic model supported schools and trusted teachers to actualise school improvement.** The sense of ownership drove the willingness of teachers and school leaders to undertake coaching and invest many extra hours working on their Fair Education projects. Other schools encountered significant challenges during their time involved in Fair Education and the flexibility of Fair Education ensured that they continued to receive support to recalibrate accordingly.

The findings suggest that educational initiatives need to place greater trust and faith in teachers and school leaders, in recognition that they are professionals who ultimately are the ones with the experience of working within disadvantaged schools and supporting student learning.

What was learnt through Fair Education in NSW deserves wider attention and a broader audience, including playing a role in informing government policy.

## Implications for future development

This final section reflects on the potential for philanthropy to provide an additional source of support for disadvantaged Australian schools. Overall, we believe that:

- There is a role for philanthropy in Australia to support school communities that are dealing with the persistent and deep challenges associated with socioeconomic inequality and educational disadvantage. For many public schools, Fair Education funding allowed them to develop projects that they could not have otherwise been able to afford.
- The competitive selection process is an effective way to identify schools eager to become involved in Fair Education. However, it is also important to support disadvantaged schools that may have lesser capacity to engage in a formal submission process but have greater need for additional support, which may come from philanthropic sources.
- Every school faces various challenges in any given year, but certain challenges are particularly exacerbated within disadvantaged school communities, such as staffing and leadership continuity. As a result, not every school was able to realise the improvement that they intended or fully benefit from the project-specific funding and coaching provided by Fair Education. Most importantly from the point of view of participants, Fair Education did not name and shame these schools. Instead, leaders were continually supported to adjust and reimagine their objectives for school improvement to reflect their changing context.
- Schools are more likely to commit to school improvement when they are able to innovate on their own terms. Fair Education enabled and supported disadvantaged schools to drive improvement. In the interviews, school leaders conveyed how they often feel constrained in how they were positioned by government policies, which set them up to compete with one another and apply interventions that were imposed upon them. Most school leaders involved in Fair Education were eager to work with one another and learn from each other's experiences within disadvantaged schools. They showed great capacity and flexibility to innovate when they were positioned as professionals. As a result, some of the Fair Education projects garnered system-wide recognition due to their achievements.
- Fair Education provides an applied example of an educational intervention. It gives an insight into what works and what does not in supporting disadvantaged schools. This evidence from a recent program could be used by federal and state education systems to inform how they better support all disadvantaged schools through policies, funding and structural reforms to tackle inequality, which may reduce their need to have to source revenue from philanthropic sources to support their ideas for improvement.



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