

Evaluation of the Ardoch Western Linking Communities and Schools Project

For



Prepared by



Australian Council for Educational Research

Funded by



May 2011

Acknowledgements

This report was written by Michele Lonsdale, Jenny Wilkinson and Elizabeth Kleinhenz of ACER. We thank the following for their willingness to participate in the evaluation:

- The volunteers who completed surveys
- The kindergarten directors, school principals, school-based coordinators, and teachers who either completed surveys or participated in interviews with ACER
- Representatives from National Australia Bank, GE, Clayton Utz, The University of Melbourne, Volunteers West, and the Brimbank Council who participated in interviews
- Ardoch personnel who participated in interviews.

We appreciate the fact that each person found time to contribute.

Special thanks to Debbie Dadon and The Besen Family Foundation who invested in Ardoch's Western LinCS project for five years to make the project and its outcomes a reality and who also funded this evaluation.

Table of Contents

Executive summary	4
1. Introduction	5
2. Methodology.....	7
3. Findings	8
4. Critical success factors	14
5. Suggestions for sustainability	15
6. Conclusion.....	16

Executive summary

In Australia and other Western countries, there is growing recognition among governments, business and community groups that schools cannot deal with the complex demands of the twenty-first century on their own. There is an emerging body of evidence to show that school-community partnerships can make a positive difference to the outcomes of students in disadvantaged areas. There are still gaps in the evidence base however. More evidence of successful collaboration is needed and of the impact these partnerships have on student outcomes. The Western Linking Communities and Schools (WLinCS) project is one such example of a highly effective school-community partnership.

The western suburbs of Melbourne are among Victoria's most disadvantaged communities. The Ardoch Youth Foundation (Ardoch) aims to help schools, early childhood centres and communities to support children and young people who are unable to engage in or continue with education. Through its WLinCS project, Ardoch seeks to create a gateway through which local community and business organisations can be directly involved in the support of these educational settings and their communities.

ACER's recent evaluation of the WLinCS project shows that the objectives of the project are clearly being met and that schools, businesses and the broader community are all benefiting in tangible ways from the project. Among the key benefits identified by the seven schools and two early childhood centres that took part in the evaluation were the presence of positive role models; regular classroom help for students in reading, writing and general schoolwork; and improved student self esteem and confidence from regular and positive engagement with a trusted adult in the form of a volunteer.

A significant factor in the success of the WLinCS project, as identified by the stakeholder groups consulted in the evaluation, is the work of the Ardoch coordinators, who liaise closely with school staff to identify needs at the beginning of each school year and then coordinate and train volunteers to help meet these needs. Ardoch carefully matches volunteers with the specific needs of each school or kindergarten in the project and maintains regular contact with volunteers after placement. Ardoch also generates resources for the benefit of schools and students.

The evaluation confirms that the Ardoch WLinCS project is a highly successful collaboration that brings together the resources of schools, community groups, businesses and local government to create strategic and productive partnerships to support schools and kindergartens in the western suburbs of Melbourne.

1. Introduction

The benefits of school-community partnerships

Governments in Australia and overseas are increasingly recognising the importance of community and business support in helping schools to cope with the complex demands of the twenty-first century. At the policy level, there has been a shift globally towards more collaborative ways of working. For example, '[t]he rise of extended schools (United Kingdom), integrated schools (Scotland), community schools (United States), "joined up" services, place-based learning, community-based learning, social partnerships, asset building and networked learning communities are all part of the same shift towards shared responsibility for the outcomes of young people' (ACER, 2008).

Schools are increasingly looking to communities and businesses to help build capacity and improve educational outcomes (Berg, Melville & Blank, 2006). A study of 800 school-community partnerships, submitted as part of the inaugural Schools First Impact Awards in 2009, showed a wide range of benefits to students, teachers, parents, business employees, community groups, schools as a whole and the wider community. Many of these partnerships were established to support schools in disadvantaged areas. Commonly reported benefits for students included better vocational skills and understanding of the workplace, improved learning opportunities and enhanced physical and mental wellbeing. Teachers benefited from mentoring and professional learning opportunities. Parents benefited from collaborative activities that focused on the whole family. Young people were able to feel more connected to their communities through participating in community-focused projects or establishing ongoing relationships with older community members. Businesses reported professional learning opportunities for their staff, enhanced ability to attract suitable recruits because of the company's social responsibility commitment and personal satisfaction for corporate volunteers from seeing the impact of their relationships with students on student confidence and skills.

Governments are increasingly recognising the benefits associated with school–community partnerships and, in particular, are actively supporting greater involvement of business in education. In the United Kingdom, a number of organisations have been set up for this purpose. The National Council for Educational Excellence, for example, has recommended that employers support the delivery of a new National Framework for business education partnerships. The Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development has set up the Business Working with Education Foundation, an independent not-for-profit company that is intended to encourage a more strategic use of resources by fostering business and school partnerships. The Commonwealth Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) has established a Business–School Connections Roundtable to strengthen relationships between schools and businesses. DEEWR has also recruited Partnership Brokers to facilitate these partnerships nationally.

Outside of government policy setting, other stakeholders are also seeking to partner with schools to support improved outcomes for students. While philanthropy in Australian education has a long history, little research has been done into the impact that philanthropic work has had on education. In March 2011, ACER and the Ian Potter Foundation formally launched the Leading Learning in Education and Philanthropy (LLEAP) project, which will examine the impact of philanthropy in education. The aim of this three-year project is to build knowledge about how the philanthropic and education sectors can work together to improve outcomes for schools and philanthropic supporters.

Schools are increasingly looking to local business, community-based agencies, local government and education/health bodies for support. The types of relationships being formed are rich and diverse, ranging from one-off sponsorship arrangements to formal partnerships governed by Memoranda of Understanding and sustained over several years. Regardless of the form they take, these connections are clearly of benefit not only to students but also staff, parents, partners and the broader community (ACER, 2010).

The Linking Community and Schools project in the western suburbs of Melbourne, established by the Ardoch Youth Foundation (hereafter called Ardoch), and funded by the Besen Family Foundation, is an example of a successful partnership model that brings together philanthropic, business, local government and community organisations to support the work of schools in some of Melbourne's most disadvantaged suburbs.

The Ardoch Youth Foundation

Ardoch is a not-for-profit organisation aimed at assisting young people, including those experiencing homelessness and disadvantage, to be able to access education and use this to follow their chosen pathways. Ardoch recognises that young people from disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to disengage from learning, perform poorly and leave school early. Ardoch works closely with schools, local government, community and business organisations to facilitate community support for projects, processes and policies that assist young people to remain connected with the education system and engaged with learning.

Ardoch's mission is to:

- overcome barriers to full participation in education
- enable communities to support students in schools and early childhood centres
- advocate for systemic change that will make full participation in education a reality for all children and young people.

Ardoch seeks to fulfil its mission by developing strategic partnerships with businesses and community groups; supporting schools to manage volunteers and external partnerships with business; recruiting and training volunteers to assist in the classroom; and generating resources in response to the needs of each school and kindergarten in the WLinCS project.¹

The Western Linking Communities and Schools project

The Index of Relative Socio-economic Disadvantage – one of four Socio-economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA) used by the Australian Bureau of Statistics to measure disadvantage – is derived from Census variables such as low income, low educational attainment, unemployment, and dwellings without motor vehicles. SEIFA 2006 data show that Brimbank City Council, the site of Ardoch's western office, is the second most disadvantaged local government area in Melbourne, with (compared to the rest of Melbourne) high numbers of unemployed, a high proportion of low income families, low parent education levels, a high proportion of people whose first language is not English, and high numbers of young people aged 0 to 17.² Vinson (2007) confirms this pattern of disadvantage, using

¹ See Appendix 1 for more information about Ardoch.

² See Australia Bureau of Statistics. 2033.0.55.001 - Socio-economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA) 2006. <http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/DetailsPage/2033.0.55.0012006?OpenDocument>

both ABS and other indicators, such as levels of computer use, access to the Internet, disability/sickness support, domestic violence, criminal convictions and rental stress. Ardoch seeks to fulfil its mission in the western suburbs through the WLinCS project because this area of Melbourne experiences significant disadvantage. Ardoch's role is not only to assist children and schools in need but to help schools develop stronger connections with other groups in the community, including with business and community partners.

Ardoch's WLinCS project creates a hub for up to ten kindergartens, primary and secondary schools in a particular area. The project brings together schools, businesses and communities to support the education of children and young people. The cost of the project is subsidised through donations and grants from Ardoch supporters with participating schools contributing modest amounts according to numbers of students involved and school capacity to pay.

The project began in 2007 with five partner primary schools and an Ardoch WLinCS coordinator. In its three year history, the project has involved 11 education sites. One school started with the project and dropped off after two years and two schools merged with another school in late 2009. In 2010, at the time of the evaluation, the project supported nine sites (seven schools and two kindergartens) in the Brimbank-Maribyrnong areas. It now has ten education sites with the addition of another kindergarten.

Ardoch's WLinCS coordinators work closely with school leaders and teachers to identify needs and priorities for support.

The WLinCS project has three objectives:

- to assist schools, early childhood centres and communities to support children and young people, particularly those experiencing disadvantage – as a result of preventable or treatable problems, such as poverty, homelessness and domestic violence – who are unable to engage in or continue with education
- to provide educational support for selected sites in Melbourne's West
- to create a gateway through which local community and business organisations and individuals can be directly involved in the support of schools, early childhood centres and their students.

The purpose of the evaluation by ACER was to identify the extent to which these three objectives are being met. It is a timely project given the current high level of interest in exploring collaborative possibilities across the education, business and philanthropic sectors. This report is a summary of the evaluation's main findings.

2. Methodology

The evaluation was carried out over a three month period. ACER used a combination of questionnaires, telephone interviews and site visits to collect information about the project. The site visits involved face-to-face interviews with principals and staff. The key stakeholders for the purposes of this evaluation were identified as being:

- teachers, principals, kindergarten directors and coordinators at each of the participating schools and kindergartens

- a small number of additional teachers in each of the participating schools
- volunteers with the project
- the CEO of Ardoch and Ardoch's WLinCS coordinators
- business representatives involved in the project
- not-for-profit community groups involved in the project
- representatives of the local council involved in the project.

To avoid confusion in the report, partnership coordinators in the schools (usually teachers or school leadership staff) are called 'school coordinators' and those employed by Ardoch to manage the project are called 'Ardoch WLinCS coordinators'.

3. Findings

This section of the report is structured around the three objectives of the WLinCS project. These were identified in 2006 when the project was first being developed.

Objective 1:

Is the WLinCS project assisting schools, early childhood centres and communities to support children and young people, particularly those experiencing disadvantage – as a result of preventable or treatable problems, such as poverty, homelessness and domestic violence – who are unable to engage in or continue with education?

The WLinCS project targets schools and kindergartens in disadvantaged communities in Melbourne's West. It aims to support education settings in a ten kilometre radius. The evaluation shows that the WLinCS project is assisting schools, kindergartens and communities to support children whose families are experiencing disadvantage. Consistent with research that shows the importance of the early years in subsequent student attainment and retention, the WLinCS project has a strong, but not exclusive, focus on the early years. Currently, one secondary school is involved in the project.

Much of what happens in schools is 'data driven', pie charts etc. How do you put a figure on what Ardoch does? It makes life a hell of a lot better for a lot of people.

(School coordinator)

Through their regular discussions with schools, the Ardoch WLinCS coordinators identified the main needs of schools in the WLinCS project as being:

- improved literacy and numeracy
- access to role models, especially from the community
- resources – such as books, food, clothes, sponsored excursions.

The initial discussions with schools are critical in helping schools and Ardoch to plan the most strategic use of resources and support. Unlike some projects which assist schools through offering a specific program, a key strength of the WLinCS project is its adaptability. The content of the project and the ways in which it is implemented are shaped by the needs of the school.

The WLinCS project supports schools and kindergartens in several ways, including through the volunteer program, special programs and activities, and donated resources. Of these, the volunteer program is the most closely linked to educational outcomes according to stakeholder feedback.

Volunteers fall into three groups:

- community volunteers who have been trained and screened by Ardoch and who help in the classroom
- tertiary student volunteers who work in small groups to develop short term learning programs based on the identified needs of schools
- corporate volunteers who are also trained by Ardoch and who assist in an ongoing literacy improvement program (Literacy Buddies™) or with specific projects at schools and kindergartens.

The community volunteers commit to providing assistance in schools and kindergartens for a minimum of two hours per week. They support students in a range of ways, such as helping students complete writing activities, listening to students read aloud, clarifying instructions, assisting with specific classroom tasks set by the teacher, promoting team work and skills sharing, encouraging leadership skills, and helping students with particular subject areas such as art or science.

Tertiary student volunteers have developed and implemented learning programs related to literacy, the arts and health, usually including an event or excursion as part of the program.

Ardoch is integrated with everything we do. The volunteers are a huge part. They form a bond with the teachers and students – it's lovely ... In the Art room they don't just organise, they spend time with the kids. It is huge for us. We are 85% NESB (non English-speaking background), we have different cultures. The children see people from their own culture in schools. It links the community in. Parents see them and think 'Yes, people are welcome here.' Ardoch organises the volunteers There is an age, culture and gender mix.

(School coordinator)

Corporate volunteers play a critical role in the Literacy Buddies™ program. This program has a strong writing focus, and also connects students with diverse, positive role models. Corporate volunteers write letters to individual students on a regular basis. The students write back and talk about the things they like to do. Students and buddies meet twice a year, once in the school and once in the corporate workplace.

Volunteers from corporate organisations also assist with sponsored projects, such as building gardens, excursions or sports days. Some corporate organisations provide financial sponsorship for these activities.

One school coordinator reported that the company involved in their Literacy Buddies™ program 'has been very responsive':

They have donated books for the library and classroom games to support literacy. The letter writing project has significantly improved students' writing in terms of detail, care and effort: they are writing for a purpose, it is realistic. The modelled letters they receive from [the corporate partner] are inspiring for the children to see ... that someone puts in so much effort. The feedback from teachers and the [corporate] buddies themselves is very positive. Sometimes the buddies compared the first and last student letter so that the students could see the improvement. One buddy prepared a collage of all of the student buddy's letters so the student could track the improvement. From teacher and other feedback, student writing has improved: structure, grammar, general writing skills.

The volunteer program is highly regarded by all stakeholders and a core component of the WLinCS project.

Ardoch assists schools and communities in other ways too. Through the WLinCS project, Ardoch acts as an intermediary between its community and business partners on the one hand and local schools on the other. Donated financial and other resources, coordinated through Ardoch, have enabled children to go on school excursions, to be appropriately equipped for school, and attend one-off events. Schools appreciated Ardoch's capacity to help quickly and efficiently in the provision of resources or to meet family needs because of their extensive network and links. These resources also assist the students' families. Donated resources include books, clothing, food, various items suitable for small prizes, kitchen materials and furniture.

School coordinators suggested that the benefits to students come mainly in the form of increased confidence and engagement in schooling and, from this, flow improvements in academic performance, especially in the priority areas of literacy and numeracy, and the raising of young people's aspirations and goals. Volunteers assist with improving student skills indirectly by allowing the classroom teacher to spend more time on the core business of teaching and learning, and by working with individual students. The volunteers provide good adult role models and one-on-one attention for children who might not otherwise have this. The corporate volunteers expand children's horizons through enabling excursions to the circus or zoo or exposing them to other cultural and artistic experiences.

Parents and families benefit when children come home with new ideas and new ways of communicating. They also benefit from material resources, such as books and other learning aids. Having outsiders involved in the kindergartens was seen as beneficial because 'kinders can be insular places ... it is good for volunteers to link into different services in the community.' Stakeholders also commented on Ardoch's role in linking families to schools, especially in the transition between kindergarten and school: 'This kind of work can help parents build their relationships earlier with schools.'

Communities benefit from a pool of volunteers who can use the skills learned through the training provided by Ardoch and the classroom experience as the stepping stone for paid work. Parents see that they are welcome and can contribute their own skills and expertise. One school-based coordinator reported that, through the Ardoch project, the school can show the community that 'an individual can make a difference. You don't necessarily have to have something to give. You can give time ... We have shown our parents and immediate community that it's OK, we do want people in here. It is a school priority to open up to the community.'

The council interviewees believe that Ardoch deploys volunteers very effectively and is able to make decisions based on their identification of the needs of the community. 'The volunteers bring different perspectives to the kindergartens.' Through the involvement of business, Ardoch is able to facilitate broad-based support for communities.

The evaluation shows that the trained community and corporate volunteers and additional material resources are greatly valued as they enable schools and early childhood centres to provide strategic support for students and for families. Ardoch's skills in developing school, family and community links are also important to schools and the wider community. These findings indicate that Ardoch is clearly achieving its first objective.

Objective 2

Is the WLinCS project *providing educational support for selected sites in Melbourne's West?*

Educational support is provided in a physical, intellectual and emotional sense. Physically, schools receive goods and materials that support students in various ways, such as going on camps or beginning the day with a nutritious breakfast. Intellectually, students are supported through the provision of one-on-one volunteer tutors who can assist with student reading and writing. Emotionally, students gain from the one-on-one attention they receive from an interested adult. The corporate buddies provide motivation to improve literacy as students write their letters each month to their external buddy. Several classroom volunteers and teachers also commented on the improved self esteem and confidence that can occur when an interested adult gives positive feedback to a student.

Kids need any help they can get, especially in low socio-economic areas. [The main aim of the program] is to enrich the lives of those who are disadvantaged ... we need all the help we can get to give them a fighting chance [The main aim] is to support children, to make a difference to their lives, to give every child every opportunity.
(School coordinator)

The provision of screened, trained and appropriate volunteers is an important factor in helping meet the needs of all schools and kindergartens. This service is working very effectively because Ardoch:

- does all necessary preliminary work, such as screening volunteers and carrying out necessary checks.
- provides clearly effective and appropriate training.
- carefully matches volunteers with the specific needs of the school and adjusts if required.
- liaises with volunteers after the project commences.

Teachers cited specific major benefits from the presence of these volunteers, such as:

- the development of a positive relationship with the Ardoch volunteer
- the provision of positive role models
- one-on-one interaction and instruction
- interaction with adults other than teachers
- consistent help with reading during regular weekly visits
- extra support in general for both students and teachers.

Positive outcomes include the way the children connect with the volunteers: 'You can see the relationships building – they will seek them out ... Good adult role models are very important for the majority of kids here.'

One school runs an oral skills program, with volunteer support, for which it administers pre- and post-program tests. Post-testing showed big improvements. Like coordinators in the other schools, this school commented that it was always difficult to pinpoint a single reason for improved student outcomes, and that reasons could be varied. However, from the school's perspective, the presence of the Ardoch volunteers in the classroom has assisted in achieving these outcomes.

The educational support given to schools and kindergartens extends to staff. Teachers reported increased self confidence, improvement in morale, a sense of being part of something worthwhile, and of sharing efforts to improve students' education and life chances with like-minded people. They

benefit from seeing improvements in their students as a result of the program. They benefit from the presence of volunteers in the classroom, who relieve pressure and allow teachers to devote more time to both teaching and their individual students. They benefit from the provision of resources to be used in their classrooms and for individual students: 'It is about taking pressure off the schools and allowing them to focus on education while material and other needs are met.'

I love the program. To put it into words, I no longer feel I'm in this on my own. I am always dealing with welfare, family needs, negatives. To have a positive influence, someone saying 'We can help you' makes a huge difference.

(School coordinator)

A common theme in the feedback provided by school-based coordinators was the high calibre of the Ardoch WLinCS coordinators. They were variously described as 'passionate', 'committed', 'selfless', 'enthusiastic' and 'adaptable'. Schools appreciated the fact that they 'act very quickly when you need something. They are onto it very quickly. Our needs are met. [The Ardoch WLinCS

coordinators] are very open to whatever we need. They liaise and work out how to support us.' The feedback was about both the particular individuals filling these roles now, and also an acknowledgement of Ardoch's highly capable and dedicated staff more generally.

The evidence shows that Ardoch's WLinCS project is effectively meeting its second objective. Educational support provided by the WLinCS project encompasses physical, intellectual and emotional support and benefits students, families and school and early childhood staff at education sites in Melbourne's West.

Objective 3

Is the WLinCS project creating a gateway through which local community and business organisations and individuals can be directly involved in the support of schools, early childhood centres and their students?

The WLinCS project brings schools and local business and community organisations together. This 'gateway' takes the form of identifying the needs in local schools and then matching these with corporate and community support. Several schools and business/community partners commented on the key 'liaison' or 'mediating' role that Ardoch plays in this regard.

Corporate and other volunteers provide a range of activities and programs related to identified school and student need. For example, individuals and groups of volunteers have painted classrooms, developed garden murals and vegetable gardens, provided cooking lessons and enabled excursions to cultural and artistic venues that children would not otherwise have an opportunity to visit. Corporate speakers and other visitors to schools have helped to broaden students' horizons. The visits to buddy workplaces help create an awareness of a work culture and widen students' world knowledge.

There has also been strong corporate assistance for career skills and paths for older students. For example, careers support was organised in a collaborative effort between Ardoch and the Beacon Foundation. Ardoch organised mock interviews with corporate employees and community volunteers for a special program where students are taught appropriate communication skills for a range of situations.

Principals cited the extra support for students in the classroom to be a major benefit, providing extra help in learning. One principal cited 'a sense of hope and positive role models' as a major benefit.

Ardoch brings this about 'by providing a variety of volunteers that are consistent, positive and interested in our students' lives. For many of our students these elements are missing in their lives and [this] provides for them a sense of what is possible.'

In addition to the assistance provided by the community volunteers, corporate volunteers are assisting in literacy programs. One school-based coordinator commented that, as a result of the Literacy Buddies™ program,

There has been a huge improvement in literacy skills. At the beginning of the year students could write two lines. At the end of the year they are writing three to four pages. They can write a letter, they can be the most elaborate things. They are writing for a purpose, there is a huge relationship with the buddy. When the letters arrive from the buddies, you get mobbed. There are big spin-offs for literacy and numeracy especially, also socially and for self-esteem.

The corporate Literacy Buddies™ program is an important component of school programs in the WLinCS schools and supports teachers in working towards improving students' literacy skills. As described above, it is also having a positive effect on student wellbeing and on student engagement, self esteem and confidence.

One business interviewee described how their staff enjoy being volunteers in the Literacy Buddies™ program. They write to school students and meet with them twice a year. 'Information is basic, about hobbies and interests, for example.' The corporate volunteers are 'excited' about the program and look forward to meeting with the students. The interviewee believed the students developed self esteem by having someone in a workplace taking an interest in them. In the Literacy Buddies™ program in this organisation, around 80 volunteer staff members were paired with Grade 5/6 students as exchange partners in letter writing. Half way through the year, staff visit the buddies at school and at the end of the year the students visit the corporate workplace. The relationship is built up over the year. For the corporate volunteers the Literacy Buddies™ program can give deeper insights into the lives of the students and the challenges they face.

There can be another general benefit to students from the volunteering programs. Some school-based coordinators noted that the time committed to the students by volunteers meant that the students themselves could see value in volunteering and working within the community. The Ardoch volunteer programs have helped students to see that they are part of a wider group and that they too have something to offer.

The corporate days are beneficial for the students. When adults come into the school like this, it creates an awareness of a work culture, widens their world knowledge. They don't see a lot of professional people really – the chance to talk to them is beneficial.

(School coordinator)

In addition to the positive effects of the volunteer programs, there have been positive effects on student wellbeing and welfare through Ardoch's assistance in meeting basic material needs, such as food, clothing and school materials. Ardoch's liaison work in arranging for special performances or events was also cited as another important contribution that they make. These are things that enrich the lives and broaden the experience of the students, and which the schools and kindergartens could not offer without Ardoch. They include circus, zoo and magic show visits, opera and ballet performances.

One interviewee commented that Ardoch's role as intermediary is particularly important because often schools do not understand how businesses work and businesses do not understand how schools work. When the school students visit their buddies' workplace as part of the Literacy Buddies™ program, for example, students 'see where their buddies work and get to see the building and the whole of Melbourne from this building'. The corporate staff explain to students the work they do and correct inaccurate impressions of what employees do. Just as the corporate volunteers benefit from exposure to the world of teaching and schools, so do teachers also benefit from exposure to the corporate world. For one interviewee, this exposure 'has also given us (as teachers) experience in organising; we've learnt and got better at dealing with large groups [of adults]; we're not worried, we're confident.' The WLinCS project helps to improve knowledge of each sector for stakeholders.

Business interviewees noted other benefits. They agreed that participation in the Literacy Buddies™ program helped increase the self esteem of the volunteers from their organisations. Business volunteers are excited about being involved in such a 'feel good' program. 'Writing letters to a student is seen as a relatively easy thing to do but it has positive outcomes. Engagement with the program also helps staff remember what is important in life. They get to see the realities of these students' lives; they find the program inspirational and motivational.'

One business interviewee noted that this kind of volunteer work attracts graduates to become employed in the business and shows employees that the company is aware of having wider responsibilities in the community. 'The feedback we get from graduates is that the corporate citizenship program is very important to them ... It increases staff engagement with the employer, which is valuable for employees.'

Another benefit was team building: 'A special bond is created between the team involved in the program. It facilitates team building as the buddies can talk together and have an interest outside their daily work that they might not have otherwise had'.

The evaluation shows that businesses can benefit from partnering with schools in several ways, including taking pride in being good corporate citizens, having a sense of ethical purpose and enhanced staff morale, and attracting staff who want to belong to a principled organisation with a community focus.

Ardoch's role is seen as vital in ensuring that the support given is effective and tailored to school needs. Involvement of community and business with schools provides benefits to individual students, schools, the community and to the businesses themselves. The evaluation shows that Ardoch is clearly meeting its third objective of creating a gateway for local communities and business to provide support for schools.

4. Critical success factors

The evaluation highlights two key factors that stakeholders believe are fundamental to the success of the project.

The quality of the volunteers was identified as critical to the success of the WLinCS project. The recruitment, screening and training of these volunteers was seen to be a significant feature of

Ardoch's contribution to the project. Schools felt that the provision of quality volunteers is not something that they could easily or expeditiously arrange. Schools acknowledged that the loss of quality Ardoch volunteers, if Ardoch were to be no longer be involved in the project, would have a direct impact on children. The high quality of the volunteer training was repeatedly stressed.

Perhaps the most significant factor in the success of the WLinCS project was seen to be the quality, availability, approachability and efficiency of the Ardoch WLinCS coordinators. Without exception, school coordinators raised this as a major reason for the success of the project. The accessibility to, and ongoing support of, the Ardoch WLinCS coordinators and the organisation were seen as a distinctive feature of Ardoch when compared with other agencies.

5. Suggestions for sustainability

Stakeholders in the evaluation had few suggestions for improving the Ardoch WLinCS project but identified several features that could contribute to its sustainability. The following suggestions are based on the feedback received during the evaluation.

Maintain the Ardoch presence and project support at all current sites

School and kindergarten respondents in particular stressed that the programs would not be sustainable without Ardoch. While some aspects of the programs might still exist, the programs, and thus their impact on disadvantaged children, would be greatly diminished. Schools and kindergartens do not have the resources to provide the kind of support that is offered through Ardoch and its community partners.

Maintain current recruitment and training practices

Stakeholders identified the calibre and quality of the Ardoch WLinCS Co-ordinators as being critical to the success of the project. As described earlier in the report, the skills, expertise and commitment of these coordinators were greatly appreciated.

The volunteer selection and training program was also seen to be very effective. Schools do not have time to undertake this recruitment and training themselves.

For the project to continue to be successful, current approaches to the recruitment, screening and training of volunteers by high calibre Ardoch WLinCS coordinators need to be maintained.

Provide more Ardoch staff on the ground

Ardoch's work could be extended and enhanced if there were more staff 'on the ground'. It was suggested by a number of respondents that more could be accomplished if the number of coordinators were increased. Several interviewees warned against the dangers of Ardoch 'spreading itself too thinly'.

Ensure that communication is maintained with all site volunteers

The Ardoch WLinCS coordinators use various means – such as telephone calls, email, regular newsletters, invitations to workshops and events – to support volunteers and help them to feel integrated into the program. As a result of this, and the work of the school-based coordinators, most volunteers gained personal satisfaction from being involved in the project and felt as though they were providing real benefits to students. The provision of more Ardoch staff on the ground would facilitate the smooth integration of all volunteers into the schools.

Promote Ardoch and its work more broadly in the community in general

Various stakeholders made the point that Ardoch is highly respected in the community, not only by those in the WLinCS project but more broadly. However, respondents wanted more businesses, community organisations and people in general to know about the work of the organisation and the nature of its contribution to disadvantaged communities. They wanted more children, families and schools to be able to benefit from this work. This would clearly require an increase in Ardoch's staffing levels.

School coordinators think the community would benefit from being more aware of what Ardoch does and can do. With regard to the participation of more groups and organisations, they had several suggestions. One thought that those already involved in the project could tell their stories. This school-based coordinator speaks to the corporate buddies at the beginning of the year and receives very positive feedback. She commented that people often don't realise that 'schools have changed since they were there, that there are new difficulties and positive things also'.

Overall, the sustainability of the WLinCS project in the western suburbs was seen to depend heavily on Ardoch's continuing presence in, and commitment to, the project.

6. Conclusion

The evaluation shows that the Western Linking Communities and Schools project is clearly meeting its first objective of assisting schools, early childhood centres and communities in the western suburbs to support disadvantaged children who are at risk of not engaging in or continuing in their education. The volunteer program, donated resources, and Ardoch's skills in linking families, schools and communities are key factors in the success of the WLinCS project in this regard.

It is clear from the feedback provided by stakeholders that the WLinCS project is effectively meeting its second objective of providing educational support for selected sites in the western suburbs. The most significant educational support reported by schools was the presence of community volunteers in the classroom, the role of corporate volunteers as Literacy Buddies™, and the support given by corporate organisations for special activities and projects.

The data show that the WLinCS project is clearly meeting its third objective of creating a gateway through which external partnerships can support schools and kindergartens. Ardoch's role as an intermediary or facilitator in bringing together schools, businesses and local communities has been critical in helping to break down barriers between sectors and creating opportunities for collaboration to improve educational outcomes.

The evaluation shows how valued the work of Ardoch is, and in particular, the work of the Ardoch WLinCS coordinators. Recruitment of strong and capable staff to work closely with schools on the ground is a key feature of the Ardoch model.

There were very few suggestions for improvement, other than for the project to be better resourced than it currently is. Ardoch's approach is clearly highly effective, highly appreciated and demonstrably important for the education of the children at these schools and kindergartens in Melbourne's West. Schools were unanimous in their belief that Ardoch's presence is necessary to sustain the benefits. If Ardoch were to leave the WLinCS project, the ongoing benefits would not continue. This was a key message from those who participated in the evaluation. With more funding

and increased resourcing, which would enable more business and community partners to contribute, the Ardoch model could be expanded for the benefit of other schools.

Given that schools are increasingly looking to communities and businesses to help build capacity and improve educational outcomes, and that governments are keen to see greater community and business involvement in education, Ardoch's WLinCS project can be seen as a highly effective partnership model bringing together a diverse range of business, community and local government agencies and organisations to support the needs of students in schools and kindergartens in disadvantaged communities.

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Appendix 1: Ardoch Youth Foundation

Ardoch's vision:

Every child and young person's potential is realised through full participation in education.

Ardoch's Mission:

- To overcome barriers to full participation in education
- To enable communities to support students in schools and early childhood centres
- To advocate for systemic change that will make full participation in education a reality for all children and young people.

Ardoch's Strategic Aims:

- To identify issues impacting education of children and young people and **research** solutions to make education a reality.
- To develop, deliver and facilitate **programs** that enable access to all the benefits of education.
- To raise community **awareness** about the social and economic barriers and their solutions faced by children and young people.
- To generate and manage **resources** to make education more accessible, especially for vulnerable children and young people.
- To shape and **advocate** solutions to government and other key stakeholders to make the full participation of education a reality for children and young people.

Ardoch in the West (based on 2010 figures)

In 2010, Ardoch employed 1.4 EFT staff members, with responsibility for volunteer coordination, school relationship coordination and corporate relationships management. Head office provided additional support in the form of assistance with marketing, volunteer programs, basic needs and referrals, administrative and managerial support.

In 2010, Ardoch delivered the following resources to schools and early childhood centres in Melbourne's west:

- There were 851 corporate volunteers who contributed 1955 volunteer hours.
- The value of these corporate hours is estimated to have been \$48,875.
- There were 35 community volunteers providing 3163 hours.
- The value of these community hours is estimated to have been \$79,075
- The total value of in-kind donations (which include material non-financial donations such as food, books, toys, clothes) is estimated to have been \$61,784.