



Suspending welfare payments to promote school attendance: Strange logic, unlikely outcomes and a better way

Paper presented to the ACOSS National Conference, 2-3 April 2009, Sydney¹

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Abstract

In December 2008, the Parliament of Australia passed legislation which enables the suspension or cancellation of income support payments to a parent whose child is either not enrolled in school or has an unsatisfactory school attendance record. This paper examines the logic which has underpinned the introduction of 'benefit withdrawal' provisions in the welfare reform agenda as a means to encourage school participation. It reviews the outcomes achieved by comparable international provisions and considers what Australian policy makers can learn from these experiences. The paper argues that the causes of child truancy are complex and multi-dimensional and that interventions such as the suspension or cancellation of welfare payments, which do not address problems at their root cause, are likely to be ineffective and harmful. It proposes alternative approaches to improving school attendance in disadvantaged communities which are consistent with a genuine commitment to social inclusion.

¹ This is a revised and updated version of a paper first published in the *Refereed Proceedings of the 15th National Conference on Unemployment*, 35-44, University of Newcastle, December 2008. I am grateful to Professor Bill Mitchell - Director, Centre of Full Employment and Equity - for permission to reproduce substantial sections of this earlier work. I also acknowledge the insights offered by my colleagues in the Social Justice, Partnerships and Communication team at UnitingCare Children, Young People and Families, Jonathon Pilbrow (NTCOSS), Chris Hall and Melissa Del Borrello (UnitingCare West), and Jacqui Phillips (ACOSS).

1. Introduction

On 4 December 2008, the Parliament of Australia passed the *Social Security and Veterans' Entitlements Legislation Amendment (Schooling Requirements) Bill 2008*. Only the Australian Greens senators voted against the legislation which enables the suspension or cancellation of income support payments² to a parent whose child is either not enrolled in school or has an unsatisfactory school attendance record.

It is important to acknowledge that measures to promote school engagement and attendance are important if we are to diminish the risk of social and economic exclusion and provide all children with access to opportunities and the capabilities to capitalise on these (Hayes *et al.*, 2008: 9). It is the method of promoting school attendance rather than the objective which has motivated this paper. Children who do not attend school regularly, or who leave school early, are more likely to experience unemployment, poverty, homelessness and/or incarceration. All of these experiences serve to upset, at a fundamental and serious level, the normal processes of maturation and personal development (Withers, 2004: 8).

At the same time, there is a relative paucity of information which allows us to accurately estimate the extent of school non-attendance in Australia and the over-representation of students whose parents are in receipt of income support payments within this group. The "best estimate" of the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (Macklin, 2008a) is that up to 20,000 of the 2.69 million children of compulsory school age, are not enrolled in school or registered for home schooling according to state law. Data provided by State education departments suggest aggregate attendance rates within Government schools of between 91 and 93 per cent. In the Northern Territory, an estimated 2,000 children - or 20 per cent of compulsory school age Indigenous students - are not enrolled in school and about 8,000 Indigenous children attend school 60 per cent of the time (FaHCSIA, 2009a).

In the absence of more precise data we lack the capacity for robust analysis of the causes of truancy. Given that the Australian Government has commissioned research to develop a national picture of non-enrolments and non-attendance, with an additional focus on Indigenous school attendance (Parliament of Australia, 2008: 6), it seems puzzling that the Bill was introduced and passed into law before the nature of the problem to which policy aims to respond is known.

In exploring the likely impact of the legislation on school attendance and child and family well-being, the paper will be structured as follows. Section 2 provides an overview of the legislation and the logic which underpins the introduction of 'benefit withdrawal' provisions as a means to encourage school participation. Section 3 considers the discretionary exemption clauses and the extent to which these can provide adequate safeguards for individual families. Section 4 reviews outcomes achieved by comparable international provisions while Section 5 sets out the unintended and harmful consequences which may arise when measures to promote attendance lead to financial penalties or are inimical to building trusting relationships between parents and schools. Section 6 looks at alternative approaches which have served to improve school attendance and advance social inclusion in disadvantaged communities. Concluding comments are offered in Section 7.

² Income support payments include pension payments (such as the Age Pension, Disability Support Pension and Parenting Payment) and benefit and allowance payments (such as Newstart Allowance, Sickness Allowance, Youth Allowance and Austudy). The suspension and cancellation provisions within the Bill do not apply to income supplement payments such as Family Tax Benefit Part A, Family Tax Benefit Part B and Child Care Benefit (Parliament of Australia, 2008: 11).

2. Legislative overview and logic

The *Social Security and Veterans' Entitlements Legislation Amendment (Schooling Requirements) Act 2008* (hereafter 'the Act') amends legislation in order to: (1) allow for the suspension (of up to 13 weeks) or cancellation of income support payments to a parent whose child is either not enrolled in school or has unsatisfactory attendance at school; and (2) provide for the trial of the School Enrolment and Attendance Measure (SEAM) which was announced in the 2008-09 Budget and was to commence in eight locations in January, 2009. The Australian and Northern Territory governments have signed a Memorandum of Understanding which will allow the SEAM to be piloted in the Northern Territory communities of Hermannsburg, Katherine, Katherine town camps, Wallace Rockhole, Wadeye and Tiwi Islands commencing in February and March. However, the Western Australian Government has declined the Commonwealth's invitation to participate in the SEAM trial (O'Neill, 2009) which was to include a pilot in Perth's Cannington region. FaHCSIA (2009b) advises that two further trial sites are to be finalised for later commencement.

Under the pilot, parents in receipt of income support payments are required to notify Centrelink of their child's enrolment in school and to respond to notification (by Centrelink) of school non-attendance by taking reasonable steps to remedy this situation. The Act empowers Centrelink to suspend for up to 13 weeks and then cancel the specified payments where a child does not comply with the enrolment and attendance requirements. If parents meet the requirement within a 13 week period, payment will be restored and arrears paid (Parliament of Australia, 2008: 12). The Act does not address the non-enrolment or non-attendance of school-aged children whose parents are not income support recipients.

In her Second Reading speech, the Minister indicated that the suspension or cancellation of income support payments will be a measure of last resort and applied only if parents are not taking action to remedy their child's non-enrolment or non-attendance at school. Payment suspension will occur in instances where parents have not provided a reasonable excuse or where special circumstances do not account for their inability to comply (Gillard, 2008a). The capacity of exemption clauses to provide adequate safeguards for families is discussed in the following section.

The Explanatory Memorandum (House of Representatives, 2008) notes that the primary purpose of the SEAM is to engender behavioural changes in parents who are receiving income support. The implicit logic is that the threat of financial penalty will encourage constructive behavior on the part of parents in order that they enroll, or improve the attendance of, their child in school. While the Memorandum states that the legislation will allow for a range of methods to be employed by Centrelink social workers to achieve these important objectives - and to recognise that the circumstances and intentions of parents are varied - there is limited information provided on either the nature or scope of the methods to be used. As noted above, a resumption of suspended payments may be used as an inducement to encourage parental cooperation.

3. Discretion as adequate protection?

The suspension or cancellation of income support payments will not occur in circumstances where (i) a person has a reasonable excuse for their failure to provide evidence about a child's enrolment and attendance; or (ii) there are special circumstances in which it is not appropriate that a person's payment ceases. However, the means by which these exemption clauses will be

determined and made operational are not described in the Act and will be dependent on policy guidelines and legislative instruments.

The Leader of the Government in the Senate has advised that the legislative strategy for the SEAM will include discretionary provisions to ensure adequate safeguards for individual families. Policy guidelines will include examples of acceptable excuses and special circumstances; details of the types of verification that may be required to substantiate a claim of reasonable excuse; and suggested timeframes for review (Evans, 2008).

It is important to acknowledge that the statement made to the Senate includes categories of reasonable excuse which are critical if the Minister (or her delegate) is to exercise such discretion appropriately and consistently. These categories include:

- The school being unable to provide a safe environment for reasons including systemic bullying of a child;
- Parental illness or severe drug, alcohol and/or mental health issues (which could also trigger a re-assessment of care arrangements or referral to a statutory child welfare authority);
- The independent volition of a child in resisting or ignoring genuine attempts by parents to encourage engagement with education;
- Unavoidable caring responsibilities; and
- Domestic issues including domestic violence, homelessness and incarceration.

The highly personal nature of a number of these issues raises important questions about whether parents will be aware of circumstances (such as their child being bullied or the experience of mental illness) or willing to disclose circumstances (such as addiction, domestic violence, mental illness or their child providing parental care) which may afford them protection against financial penalty. It will be important for the SEAM evaluation to explore the ability and willingness of parents to disclose the information required to substantiate genuine claims.

In cases where excuses are deemed to be 'reasonable' - and where government maintains a genuine commitment to fostering the school engagement of all children - appropriate supports must be available to minimise disruptions to school attendance for children in distressed and complex circumstances. This will require greater government investment in mental health services, supported accommodation and refuges, drug and alcohol rehabilitation services, and support for carers in order to meet community need and to realise the Act's objectives. FaHCSIA (2009b) states that referral to local assistance services will be "particularly important in cases where families are experiencing issues related to mental health conditions, substance abuse or domestic violence". However, while the SEAM trial provides for a small pool of Centrelink social workers it does not provide additional resources to the services which will receive their referrals.

The Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA, 2009a) advises that beyond the 13 week suspension period, each case will be considered individually and it is proposed that one or more interventions will be applied. These may include:

- Referral to child protection authorities;
- Referral to government support services and programs for families;
- Liaison with school authorities;
- Rolling suspension and reinstatement in cases of sporadic attendance and compliance; and
- Cancellation of income support payments as a last resort.

The total amount allocated to SEAM in the 2008-2009 Federal Budget is \$17.6 million most of which will fund the administration of the twelve month trial including a small component for Centrelink social worker support and remote visiting teams (FaHCSIA, 2009a). The allocation does not provide additional resources for family or school-based supports or early intervention and prevention strategies. As we will discuss in Section 6, it is multi-faceted, intensive and ongoing support services of these kinds which have proved to be effective in preventing truancy and improving school attendance.

Finally, while the capacity to make determinations on a case by case basis is important, we must also consider the difficulties families presently experience when navigating the rules and regulations of the social security system. Research conducted by UnitingCare Burnside and the Anglicare Diocese of Sydney on the impact of welfare reform on families with complex needs cautions against systemic shifts which require vulnerable families to substantiate acceptable excuses or special circumstances. People who lack the protection offered by advocates frequently lack the knowledge, confidence and competence required to negotiate their way through reporting, verification, dispute resolution and appeal processes (Bellamy and Cowling, 2008: 9).

It is also important to note that the lack of protection - in circumstances where the onus of proof rests with income support recipients - may flow from systemic rather than individual failings. For example, in December 2007 the Commonwealth Ombudsman issued a highly critical report on the application of penalties in the welfare system. After examining 124 complaints about Centrelink's administration of the activity test requirements following the implementation of Welfare to Work reforms on 1 July 2006, the Ombudsman identified a raft of system failures where decisions and practices routinely implemented by Centrelink staff were inconsistent with social security law or publicly stated policy (Commonwealth Ombudsman, 2007 cited in Bellamy and Cowling, 2008). It is essential that these failings are addressed if legislative safeguards against the imposition of unwarranted financial penalties are to be adequate and reliable.

4. Suspending payments to improve school attendance - all evidence to the contrary

In her Second Reading speech on the Bill, the Minister for Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs claimed that welfare conditionality linked to school attendance was being trialed because "financial levers actually work" (Macklin, 2008b). However, the evidence cited by the Minister pertained to improvements in child immunisation rates when "personal responsibility" was linked to "financial reward" as opposed to the link with financial penalties under the Act. In this section we review evaluations of similar international trials which provide scant evidence that payment suspensions or sanctions are an effective lever through which to improve school attendance.

As discussed in Section 2, the primary purpose of the SEAM is to engender behavioural changes in parents receiving income support payments as a means to improve school enrolment and attendance. However, a 1999 study in the United States questions the extent to which welfare recipients alter their behaviour in response to the application of sanctions (welfare payment suspensions). It is argued that this premise underpins paternalistic models of welfare reform in which agents - such as Centrelink staff and schools in the Act - take the role of 'moral tutors' and sanctions are designed to reaffirm social values and encourage responsible behaviour (Wilson *et al.*, 1999). In the Australian case, such behaviour includes parents taking responsibility for the enrolment and satisfactory school attendance of their school-age child.

Wilson and her colleagues examined the Primary Prevention Initiative (PPI) in Maryland which aimed to improve the health and education of children whose parents were in receipt of Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC). Under PPI, school-aged AFDC recipients were required to attend school at least 80 per cent of the time and to receive immunisations and preventative health care. The researchers compared two models of client behaviour in response to the initiative. The first was the "moral lessons" model in which clients learn the values and behaviour intended by authorities and come to practice these in their own lives. The second was the "episodic attention" model which teaches clients to respond to demands of caseworkers. The goal of teaching moral lessons is displaced by the concrete need for clients to satisfy compliance requirements lest they incur sanctions. This does not require clients to develop program knowledge. The study found that the "episodic attention" model had a far stronger effect on client behaviour with clients being taught to obtain the required verification information and to cooperate with welfare caseworkers to maintain eligibility for AFDC payments (Wilson *et al.*, 1999). These findings have implications for the logic implicit in the SEAM pilot. The logic states that the threat of the suspension or cancellation of income support payments will induce responsible behaviour and advance understanding of why school attendance is important and the role parents can play in fostering a child's engagement in education. That the Maryland reforms did not change clients' orientation as much as organise clients' lives to respond to administrative demands (Wilson *et al.*, 1999: 473) does not bode well for promoting sustainable and constructive changes in behaviour in line with the SEAM goals.

Similarly, a 2004 study by Hasenfield, Ghose and Larson tested assumptions which underpinned welfare sanctions in California. The relevant legislation assumed that welfare recipients were able to comply with eligibility requirements and were aware of sanction rules and able to make rational calculations of the relative costs and benefits of compliance. The record- and survey-based study of California welfare recipients found that recipients who had their payments suspended faced significantly greater barriers to meeting payment requirements compared to non-sanctioned recipients. The Australian legislation would waive the imposition of payment suspensions under a range of discretionary provisions. However this assumes that clients are well informed about suspension rules and are able to verify claims that they have a 'reasonable excuse' for non-compliance or confront 'special circumstances' which make compliance difficult or impossible. These conditions did not hold in the California study which found that clients were not informed about sanction rules and were frequently unaware that sanctions had been imposed (Hasenfield *et al.*, 2004). This occurred despite the provision of case work and counselling by local welfare officers which would appear to be similar to the provision of direct support by Centrelink social workers (Macklin, 2008b) in the SEAM pilot.

Finally, a significant paper examining the effectiveness of seven programs in the United States linking welfare cash assistance to satisfactory school attendance provides cautionary lessons for Australia. Campbell and Wright (2005) looked at seven programs which had been rigorously evaluated using experimental designs and included both process and outcomes analysis. The programs were categorised into one of two broad types. The first type (three programs) relied primarily on sanctions or the threat of sanctions to achieve intended outcomes. These programs were found to have a negligible effect on school attendance. The second type (four programs) used the threat of sanction as one tool in a broader treatment plan that could include intensive and individual case management, the provision of support services, or both. While these programs achieved positive results, their impact was still very limited and the reported gains were most usually observed in the percentage of program participants who were enrolled in school rather than in improved rates of attendance and graduation (Campbell and Wright, 2005: 4).

With respect to the second tranche of programs, the key weakness that was identified was the lack of significant additional funding to support effective case management services and the provision of family support. As noted in Section 3, funding allocated for the SEAM principally supports the administration of the trial as opposed to providing significant resources for the provision of tailored support services. Campbell and Wright (2005) recommended that US policy makers give serious consideration to whether the costs of maintaining a welfare school-attendance program are worth the marginal gains. It is incumbent on Australian policy makers to grapple with this question and consider options for the more effective use of funds.

The US study argues that while attendance monitoring can be a useful tool to trigger social service interventions, effective programs require:

Welfare agencies and schools to engage in results-oriented partnerships with parents and community organisations that move away from a narrow adherence to welfare rules and toward establishment of new routines and role definitions.
(Campbell and Wright, 2005: 21).

Determining what kinds of programs and partnerships will be most effective requires a more sophisticated understanding of the factors which drive poor school attendance by students in Australia. It is worth noting that Campbell and Wright (2005) found that problems such as illness, bullying and poor school performance had a greater impact on attendance than irresponsible or lazy parenting and truancy. In the absence of a more sophisticated understanding of the drivers of poor school attendance it is naïve to think we have a sound basis for remedial policy. The international evidence indicates that an emphasis on the threat of payment suspension or cancellation as a means to improve school attendance is likely to have limited, if any, impact.

With respect to Australian evidence, the 2006 evaluation of a small scale voluntary trial in Halls Creek (an Indigenous community in Western Australia) is the only domestic example of a scheme which linked welfare payments to school attendance. It is important to note that the Halls Creek *Engaging Families* trial aimed to increase parents' participation in job-oriented activities and to encourage parents to try and make their children attend school regularly (Department of Employment and Workplace Relations, 2006). The trial did not involve the threat of payment suspension after an earlier incarnation - in which parents were required to attend a Centrelink interview to discuss their child's truancy - was stopped. The trial was aborted due to the absence of provisions under the *Social Security (Administration) Act 1999* to suspend payments for failure to turn up to an interview when the interview was not regarding payment eligibility or issues relating to participation (Behrendt and McCausland, 2008: 11).

The evaluation of the *Engaging Families* trial found that the school attendance of children in participating families did not improve over the course of the trial and stressed that socio-economic disadvantage in the forms of limited employment options and the lack of suitable housing and associated overcrowding made it difficult for parents to engage in functional community life. Professor Penman concluded that "the parents of Indigenous children are not the only 'lever' or 'method of engagement' that can be used to get the children to attend school" and pointed, instead, to the pivotal role that "teachers and the school 'culture' itself plays in a community where children decide their own time use patterns from a very early age" (Department of Employment and Workplace Relations, 2006: 3). Given that six of the locations for the SEAM trials are Northern Territory communities with a significant proportion of Indigenous citizens the decision to evaluate a single payment suspension lever seems ill-advised.

In terms of early data relevant to the SEAM trial, the most recent enrolment and attendance statistics published by the Northern Territory Department of Education and Training (2009) show that average student attendance in February 2009 for Northern Territory schools participating in the SEAM trial did not vary to any significant degree from average attendance rates recorded in February 2008.

5. The risk of harm

Legislators need to be concerned about the impact of the suspension or cancellation of income support payments on families who are more likely to live in circumstances of relative, if not acute, disadvantage. In the absence of sound evidence about the effectiveness of payment suspension in inducing behavioural change what will be the impact on parents and children when income support is withdrawn? How do these unintended impacts improve the likelihood of improved school attendance or do they amplify risks?

With respect to increased risk of harm, a disturbing study by Paxson and Waldfogel (1999) found that tougher sanctions for non-compliance with welfare rules in the United States are related to higher levels of substantiated cases of child maltreatment and physical abuse and neglect. In the context of the Australian Government's commitment to the development of a National Child Protection Framework there is a discord between the provisions of the Act and this evidence base. Research from the US demonstrates that the imposition of payment suspension or cancellation on families experiencing pronounced distress and dysfunction may also lead to young people facing a higher risk of harm, homelessness or removal to out-of-home care when parents (correctly or incorrectly) attribute loss of income to decisions made by their child or adolescent.

Curtis (2002: 246-47) cites evidence from the Children's Defense Fund in the United States which shows that for sanctioned families, loss of income can precipitate a crisis in meeting basic needs and lead to eviction or other circumstances that can compound a family's problems. A major US study of the impact of being sanctioned on material hardships and health among mothers on Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and their children produced similarly troubling results. Reichman and her colleagues (2005) found that, compared to non-sanctioned mothers, mothers who have their payments suspended are at higher risk for hunger, homelessness, utility shutoffs, inadequate medical care, material hardship, poor health and relying on families and friends for housing. Importantly, the associations of sanctioning with these effects persist after controlling for individual level risk factors, state fixed effects and the mother's experience of the corresponding hardship prior to the penalty being imposed. The study also notes that the hardships which derive from sanctioning are not borne by the family alone. Care and financial burdens are also placed on extended family and friends and emergency relief services. The second reading speeches of the Minister and her Government colleagues on the Bill did not indicate how they envisage effected families will cope when income support payments are suspended or in the event of payments being cancelled. It was simply claimed that this was expected to be a very rare occurrence.

A further US study based on a stratified random sample of low-income families in Boston, Chicago and San Antonio also examined outcomes for children in families sanctioned for non-compliance with the rules and regulations of the TANF program. While both pre-schoolers (aged 2-4 years) and adolescents (aged 10-14 years) in sanctioned families scored lower on cognitive and behavioural test outcomes than children and young people in non-sanctioned families, the authors argue that the poorer outcomes might be explained in two ways. First, being sanctioned

might increase financial hardship and familial stress, thus negatively affecting child outcomes. Alternatively, patterns of parent and family functioning might lead to both the sanction experience and the child's at-risk development. For example, low education, single parenthood and health outcomes might make a parent less able to comply with welfare rules while also being associated with poor developmental outcomes for children (Lohan *et al.*, 2004). Whether or not it is sanctions which drive the poorer outcomes, the authors argue that it is important for governments to explore the most effective ways to identify and reach out to the most disadvantaged and high-risk families and to look towards greater provision of additional supports including mental health services, academic enrichment, after-school programs and other family support services.

Of additional concern is the potential for the SEAM to facilitate a relationship between Centrelink and state education authorities and schools which is focused on verification and reporting. Correspondence received from FaHCSIA (2009b) advises that in instances where a child is not attending regularly, the relevant state, territory or independent education authority may notify Centrelink. While the role of schools will be negotiated in a memoranda of understanding with schools in each of the trial locations, FaHCSIA (2009) argues that participating schools or school systems will be expected to play a more "active role" in relation to school attendance. Activism per se is not a proxy for fostering positive engagement in education. While schools will continue to follow their existing processes to help parents and children resolve truancy issues, FaHCSIA anticipates that the prospect of suspension or cancellation of payments will encourage parents to be more actively involved with these processes. Again, international evidence should not excite such anticipation.

For parents who may have had poor or limited engagement with the education system, forging and maintaining a trusting relationship with schools is important if a positive approach to learning is to be cultivated in the home environment. Where schools are either perceived or conceived as a monitoring or verification body - as opposed to a community hub which supports learning and development - there is a risk that families who are already difficult to reach may become perennially disengaged. This point has been underlined by Professors Fiona Stanley, Margot Prior and Sue Richardson (2005) who stress the importance of providing tailored support services to those in need in ways which foster trust. In the context of the Government's commitment to social inclusion, creating a trusting service environment is critical to fostering social connection (as opposed to exclusion and stigma) and improving the conditions for healthy child development.

6. Promoting school attendance within a social inclusion agenda

The Federal government has identified the development of a social inclusion agenda as an overarching policy priority. Silburn (cited in Hayes *et al.*, 2008: 50) shows that responsive parenting and responsive schools play key roles in building 'pathways to resilience' through promoting educational participation and attainment. A genuine social inclusion approach has a number of advantages which can be applied to supporting the needs of children who do not attend school or attend school irregularly. These include addressing the multiple barriers that these children often face and stressing the importance of joined up services and local partnerships in responding to interlocking problems in a coherent and effective way. However, approaches to social inclusion may also serve to stigmatise disadvantaged groups and to add a "moralistic flavor" (Hayes *et al.*, 2008: 21) when the experience of exclusion is cast as the result of the actions of an individual or, in the case of the Act, their parents.

In formulating inclusive policy as a means to promote school engagement it is important to consider what works and to re-shape or better coordinate current policy settings. With respect to policies which are designed to increase school engagement for Indigenous children it is similarly important to recognise that concepts of 'wellbeing' and 'inclusion' are cultural constructs which may involve different values, meaning and behaviour (Daly and Smith, 2003: 1). The policy question is how we respond to these differences in order to foster both social and cultural inclusion. In summary, where legislative change increases (albeit unintentionally) the risk of harm to children and families it is policy change, as opposed to 'inclusive' re-branding, which is required.

The international evidence presented in Section 4 shows that suspending income support payments to families and making access to payments contingent on a child's school attendance has been singularly ineffective in reducing truancy. By contrast, approaches for which there is sound research evidence for promoting positive school engagement and reducing truancy (see Sheldon, 2007; Stanley *et al.*, 2005; and Decker Gerrard, Burhans and Fair, 2003) include:

- Facilitating access to quality early education and care;
- School-wide attendance programs based on school, family and community partnerships;
- Intensive ongoing interventions involving well-defined attendance policies, parental engagement via home visiting programs, and strengths-based family counseling;
- The development of individualised learning plans; and
- The employment of highly trained school staff who are able to build relationships based on mutual trust and respect and provide education that is relevant to the cultural background of the community within a focused learning environment.

It is important to note that the Commonwealth Government has announced a number of education policies to promote access to early education and care for which there is robust evidence with respect to program effectiveness. These include a commitment to providing access to 15 hours of quality early childhood education programs per week in the year before a child commences formal schooling; the roll out of the Home Interaction Program in 50 disadvantaged communities as a means to improve the school readiness of local children aged three to five years; and the establishment (in partnership with State and Territory governments) of an additional 260 Early Learning and Care Centres. While these initiatives are to be applauded, they will come on line relatively slowly and in the case of the Early Learning and Care Centres will be located in areas of unmet demand for child care. This will restrict the number of Centres in areas where parents have limited engagement in paid employment or are unable to afford child care gap fees.

The pillars of reform which underpin the Commonwealth's commitment to improving the quality of school education continue to be developed and the additional resources required to facilitate improvements have yet to be fully specified. The Government has stated that it will accord priority to improving the quality of teaching; providing greater transparency (and comparability) in reporting school performance; and increasing investment and educational achievement in disadvantaged school communities (Gillard, 2008b; Macklin, 2008b). As part of the Fiscal Stimulus Package announced in February, the Commonwealth Government has allocated \$14.7 billion over three years to support the dual objectives of providing economic stimulus through the construction and refurbishment of school infrastructure and creating more engaging learning environments (Australian Government, 2009). It will be important to monitor the extent to which significant capital investment serves to foster improved school attendance.

With respect to evidence-based approaches to improving Indigenous student outcomes - including attendance, progression and rates of completion - a major study of 84 projects funded under the Indigenous Education and Strategic Initiatives Program (IESIP) found that the following three factors were consistently present across successful programs (McRae *et al.*, 2000; Bourke *et al.*, 2000):

1. Successful IESIP projects recognised, acknowledged and supported Indigenous culture through (among other things) respecting the validity of Aboriginal languages and Indigenous patterns of discourse and involving Indigenous teachers, parents and community members in all aspects of the schooling process. The announcement by the Northern Territory Government that it will restructure the Department of Education and Training to place a greater focus on teaching English and will require all Territory schools (including bilingual schools) to conduct the first four hours of each teaching day in English (Scrymgour, 2008) runs counter to the body of evidence on 'what works'.
2. Successful projects were characterised by the development of requisite skills through the provision of professional development and cultural awareness training of staff; early intervention strategies to ensure adequate acquisition of literacy skills; establishing high expectations of students; and providing meaning and purpose to what students were learning through the choice of teaching materials and learning activities relevant to students' experiences and interests.
3. Successful projects achieved adequate levels of participation by creating a safe and secure school environment which was welcoming to Indigenous students, parents and community members; empowering students by involving them in planning the learning context in collaboration with staff; and enabling the use of computers in order that students felt in control of their learning situation and could work at their own pace and level.

Given the raft of evidence-informed options available to the Commonwealth, as means to improve the school attendance of Indigenous students, the conduct of the SEAM pilot in six Northern Territory communities seems unduly narrow and punitive. More promising - though inadequate in scale - are supplementary contributions made by the Australian Government to support a small number of additional classrooms and additional teachers in remote area schools and the provision of \$8.4 million in 2008 for a Quality Teaching and Accelerated Literacy measure.

7. Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper has raised serious concerns about the provisions contained within the *Social Security and Veterans' Entitlements Legislation Amendment (Schooling Requirements) Act 2008*. These include the logic of introducing provisions to suspend or cancel income support payments when international evidence shows that these measures have been ineffective in improving school attendance and commissioned research showing the patterns and underlying causes of poor school attendance in Australia is yet to be finalised; lack of certainty regarding how exemption clauses will be determined and made operational; and the consequences which are likely to flow (albeit unintentionally) from payment suspension or cancellation including financial hardship, diminished trust in educational institutions and authorities, and a higher risk of harm, homelessness or removal to out-of-home care for young people with poor records of school attendance.

We have argued that the causes of child truancy are complex and multi-dimensional and that interventions, such as those stipulated in the Act, which do not address problems at their root cause are likely to be ineffective or harmful. A genuine social inclusion agenda requires government to consider alternative approaches for which there is a robust evidence base and

which ameliorate rather than aggravate risks of harm. A number of these approaches have been cited in the paper. While the Government is putting some valuable foundations in place, additional resources are required to hasten implementation and allow for improved synergies between the education, health and child and family support systems. Promoting school enrolment, attendance and genuine inclusion is a critical objective. Its realisation will require significant and long-term investment in approaches which work rather than dependence on parents experiencing socio-economic disadvantage responding to the threat of financial penalty.

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