Making the Connections School Retention Action Plan (SRAP) – Securing a better future for all young South Australians

In 2002, the newly elected South Australian Premier, Hon Mike Rann MP introduced the Social Inclusion Initiative as the main driver of social policy reform for his government. The aim of the Initiative is to assist in the creation of a society where all people feel valued, their differences are respected, and their basic needs – both physical and emotional – are met, so that as citizens they are empowered in their participation and contribution.

The leadership of the Social Inclusion Initiative is through the Social Inclusion Board, chaired by Monsignor David Cappo. The Social Inclusion Board has the role of tackling some of the most pressing social issues facing South Australia and advising Government on new ways to achieve better outcomes for the most disadvantaged people in our community. Central to the Board’s approach is finding new and better ways of whole of government working and linking social and economic policy.

As one of the first Social Inclusion Initiative ‘References’, the Social Inclusion Board was asked by the Premier to provide advice about ways to increase the number of young people who stay at school and successfully complete year 12 or equivalent.

The Board saw this as an “opportunity to respond to this concern and to make recommendations which would secure a better future for young people in SA”. This is the primary goal of the initiatives that form part of the Social Inclusion Making the Connections School Retention strategy, more commonly known as the School Retention Action Plan (SRAP).

The 7 SRAP initiatives were constructed around a group of strategic directions determined by the Social Inclusion Board. The research and practice evidence at the time (2003) strongly indicated that these directions were key components for increasing engagement in learning and therefore school retention over the longer term. These directions were:

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1 The term young people is used as inclusive of children throughout this paper.

2 Monsignor David Cappo, Chair, Social Inclusion Board in “Message from the Social Inclusion Board”, Making the Connections, January 2004
• Increasing local community involvement in leading innovation that supports the achievement of school retention outcomes at a local level.
• Better connecting young people with their communities by facilitating youth development and youth participation, along with promoting and recognising community based learning.
• Making learning environments more responsive to the needs of young people by:
  • Ensuring students’ voices are heard and influence schooling practices;
  • Developing a working model for community access to school resources;
  • Increasing the availability and quality of career advice; and
  • Providing quality alternative learning opportunities for young people at risk of disengaging or who have already disengaged from education and training.
• Ensuring young people receive the necessary individual and specialist support to remain engaged in learning.
• Addressing the specific needs of Aboriginal young people.
• Sharing good practice and improving cross agency linkages.
• Supporting families with children in the early years through the development of a whole of government early childhood strategy and the implementation of early childhood services.3

The issue

School retention was the short hand phrase coined to encompass a much more complex series of ideas and theories about the importance for all young people of their engagement and re-engagement with learning, whether at school or a vocational education and training environment, and their achievement of identified learning outcomes prior to and during early adulthood.

The impetus for focussing on school retention as an issue was the growing body of evidence that demonstrated improved outcomes in later life in key areas, such as employment and health and well being, that were experienced by people who had successfully completed year 12 or its vocational equivalent as a young person. As well, a sound basis in literacy and numeracy, IT, problem solving and communication, for example, are critical to be able to learn new skills, an essential requirement of a labour market where job redesign and career change are going to be characteristic of the working lives for many people in the future.

South Australia’s most disadvantaged young people account for the largest number of early school leavers and are most often Aboriginal4 young people, those who

3 Action relating to the Board direction focussed on the early years has been subsumed into other major State Government initiatives, such as ‘Every Chance for Every Child’, the Early Years Literacy strategy and the Ministerial Inquiry into Early Childhood Services, and so is not included in the discussion here. However, reinforcing the importance of this work to young people’s longer term connection with schooling and educational outcomes remains a key underpinning direction.
4 The term ‘Aboriginal’ is used in this report as inclusive of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.
experience poverty and/or those who live outside Adelaide. A young person’s education does not occur in isolation from the other parts of a young person’s life, although the traditional government systems often respond this way.

It is acknowledged that not all young people who leave school prior to completing Year 12 will be at risk of long-term unemployment. Some of these young people engage in apprenticeships or further study towards successful career paths. However, evidence is clear that those young people who disengage from their schooling and leave the system early are not well prepared for the work force or further study and are at significant risk of long-term unemployment.¹

Because of the complexity of the issue, a suite of 35 priority indicators has been developed to track progress over time in improving the education, training and employment participation and outcomes for young people, essential for securing a better future for all young South Australians.

The indicators are grouped under 5 outcome areas:

- An increase in the proportion of young people staying at school to Year 12;
- An increase in the proportion of young people taking up vocational education and training;
- An increase in the proportion of young people successfully completing the SACE or equivalent;
- A decrease in the proportion of young people being suspended or excluded from school or other learning environments;
- An increase in the proportion of young people in full time employment, education or training.

The trend for most of the priority indicators for all young people from the baseline in 2001 to 2005 is positive. Two sub-set suites of indicators have also been developed for Aboriginal young people and regional young people. The sub-set indicators track the results for these two groups and, as well, identify the gaps – positive or negative - that may exist with the results for all young people.

The need for a greater understanding of young people’s experiences as ‘part-time’ students and the relationship with retention and successful completion led to the interest and involvement in the Australian Research Council Linkage Project Limits of choice? examining part-time secondary schooling in SA.

**Whole of government approach**

For the SRAP to make a difference and have an impact on school retention, a whole of government approach and action were required. 9 portfolio areas were represented on the Inter-Ministerial Committee on School Retention, convened and chaired by the Minister for Education and Children’s Services. (See Diagram 1 for the governance arrangements for Social Inclusion Board References).

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9 government agencies with a key connection to young people were part of the implementation planning and program development of the SRAP. While the primary emphasis was on young people in the public education system, Catholic Education and the Association of Independent Schools of SA have been involved with aspects of the SRAP.

**Key government SRAP partner agencies:**
- Department of Education and Children's Services (DECS)
- Department of Further Education, Employment, Science and Technology (DFEEST)
- Department of Health (previously within the Department for Human Services) (DoH)
- Department for Families and Communities (also previously within the Department for Human Services) (DFC)
- Department of Aboriginal Affairs and Reconciliation (DAARE)
- Office for Youth (OfY)
- Justice portfolio agencies
- Senior Secondary Assessment Board of SA (SSABSA)
- Department of the Premier and Cabinet – Social Inclusion Unit (DPC)

6 of these agencies took on a ‘lead agency’ role for the programs providing a direct service to young people. (See Chart 1) Lead agencies took responsibility for program implementation, monitoring progress, financial acquittal and providing regular quarterly reports to the Social Inclusion Board and to the Inter-Ministerial Committee.
60% of the SRAP participants were in programs where the Department of Education and Children’s Services was the lead agency, and a further 16% were in programs led by Department of Further Education, Employment, Science and Technology. All agencies were partners in a number of other SRAP programs and reported a greater emphasis on consulting with each other and working together.

Partnerships with non-government, business and community agencies were seen as a critical part of the implementation of the various programs. In particular, this has been a key feature of the Innovative Community Action Networks (ICANs).

**The SRAP programs**

The series of programs that have been put in place through the 7 SRAP initiatives recognise the complexity of achieving the goal of securing a better future for all young South Australians. The test of the social inclusion benefit is the advantage gained by the most disadvantaged young people through the work of the initiatives; in this instance those young people experiencing difficulty connecting with learning and pathways to further education, training, employment and community contribution.

In determining the range of programs for inclusion under the SRAP it was necessary to identify key interventions that were likely to have an impact on the apparent school retention rate in the short term and, in the longer term, improve education, training and employment outcomes for all young people, but particularly for those young people who were more at risk of being significantly disadvantaged.

The interventions needed to increase the capacity to make a difference to school retention through three intervention areas:

1. Contribute to increasing the number of young people staying at school and completing year 12. These interventions have the most impact on increasing apparent school retention rates.
2. Assist those who are currently ‘lost’ or at high risk or being ‘lost’ to schooling through disengagement well before the school leaving age. While this is a relatively small group of young people and so does not have much impact on school retention rates, interventions with these young people that lead to greater engagement with learning make an important difference to their individual life outcomes and society.

3. Assist young people who have left school early, often with little educational attainment, to re-engage with education and/or training. As these young people may not be returning to a school environment, interventions for these young people have a positive impact on the MCEETYA participation measure\(^6\) rather than apparent school retention rates.

While the majority of SRAP programs needed to focus on direct benefit to young people, there also needed to be a systems focus on policy, program and professional development and cultural change.

In the development of the SRAP programs, emphasis was placed on the benefit to Aboriginal young people from all the programs, not just those programs under the initiative with a specific focus on Aboriginal young people and their education. Educational achievement and success by Aboriginal young people has been identified as a critical factor in improving the health and well being and overcoming the significant disadvantage experienced by Aboriginal people and Communities comparative to the rest of the Australian population.\(^7\)

As well, provision within SRAP programs needed to be made for regional young people, another significant group of young people who tend to leave school early.\(^8\) A third group of young people was also identified as a priority – those young people under the Guardianship of the Minister, another group with poorer educational outcomes compared with the total youth population.\(^9\)

A wide diversity of programs was funded through the SRAP. While the generic term ‘program’ is used throughout this paper, because of the difference in scope and range, the programs are not directly comparable. They include:

- A discrete program at one location targeted at a specific group of young people, such as the Young Mums program in Whyalla;
- A discrete program over a number of locations targeted at a specific group of young people, such as the Year 12 Retention and Engagement program;
- A range of programs across one or several sites, such as the Youth Education Centre short course programs;
- A range of programs over multiple sites such as the Alternative Learning Options Programs;

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6. This measure counts young people in the 15-19 year age group who are engaged in full time work, full time study or a combination of part-time work and part time study.
9. Information from CREATE Foundation research www.create.org.au
• Young people involved in an aspect of a statewide program, for example the SSABSA Recognition of community based-learning;

• Action research and other research studies, such as the Good Practice Action Research: Aboriginal Students Retention; and

• Review and policy development such as Responding Better To The Needs Of High Risk Learners; training and development such as The Career Guidance, Advice And Labour Market Information program.

Although the programs are grouped under specific initiatives, many of the programs contribute to the objectives of other initiatives as well.

The programs varied considerably in the number of young people who participated in them during the period from July 04 – June 06, ranging from 12 young people in one discrete program in one location to 1,545 in one program with multiple sub-programs over multiple locations. As well, over 1,700 young people received additional support through the Year 12 Engagement and Retention initiative, funded through the SRAP in 2005 and 2006.

Over half the SRAP programs were new programs that required full development and establishment. The remaining programs were either the application of an existing program model adapted to a new environment or the enhancement of an existing program, such as offering new learning options in a program or expanding to new regional locations.

Intervention methods

Another insight into the range of SRAP programs can be gained by identifying and clustering the programs under similar intervention ‘methods’. (See Table 1) While many programs offer elements from a number of different methods, the programs have tended to use one of the following as the primary starting point for their intervention:

• Youth development – programs that aim to enhance young people’s positive personal attributes and increase their skills in specific areas of interest and their connection to their community, and enable their participation in decision-making.

• Experiential or alternative approaches – programs providing a more ‘hands-on’ and often innovative approaches to learning through particular topics or skill areas often in different learning environments to the school classroom or that are designed to the specific needs of groups of young people.

• Intensive support – programs that provide individual young people (and often their families and carers) with the intensive support necessary to enable young people to re-engage or continue their engagement with learning.

• Research and/ or policy development – action research directed at informing good practice and programs that focussed on trialing new procedures and processes.
Table 1 Percentage of Total Number of Participants in SRAP Programs
July 04 - Jun 06 by SRAP intervention method cluster

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SRAP Intervention Methods</th>
<th>No. of programs with participant numbers #</th>
<th>Participants for intervention method as percentage of total participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Youth development</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>12.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• school/community programs</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• student ‘voice’</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experiential</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• ICANS</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• alternative programs</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intensive</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>45.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• counselling &amp; community dev.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• education &amp; training program based (experiential)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• mentoring</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research &amp;/or policy development</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall Total</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

# A few of the initiatives (5 of the 41 programs) were focussed primarily on staff development and training; and research and policy development that did not include a number count of student/young people participants.

State wide developments

The implementation of the SRAP has been a catalyst, enabling the acceleration of the development of a number of initiatives with state wide impact including:

- Clear direction that increasing school retention is a government priority and that it is the business of all schools and the education system;
- Greater consideration of young people’s development and needs in a holistic way in the delivery of learning and other programs rather than only through the narrow lens of the agency concerned, leading to the young person being placed at the centre of some service development;
- Increased recognition of the value of inviting young people to actively contribute to decision making processes, including in schools and government service provision;
- New policies and structures set in place for the formal recognition of community based learning;
- Improved availability and quality of career advice for young people that is better linked with labour market projections for South Australia;
- Greater attention given to more inclusive schooling practices including refocussing behaviour management, suspension and exclusion practices to incorporate a stronger restorative practices focus;
- Strengthened mechanisms for planning and developing education and training strategies from a whole of government perspective; and
- Increased development of government community partnerships in meeting young people’s learning and development needs and acknowledgement of the added value this can bring.

**Involvement of non-government, business and community organisations.**

Partnerships with non-government, business and community organisations were seen as a critical part of the implementation of the various programs. 178 different organisations across South Australia were noted by at least one program as being a partner by December 2005. Several organisations were involved in 5 or more different SRAP programs. This is also likely to be an under count as in a number of instances, partners were not specifically named but simply referred to as ‘local businesses’ or ‘local organisations’.

It is the diversity of organisations involved in the SRAP programs that is the most striking. (See Chart 7) Peak and advocacy groups, community houses, community health centres, business associations, community service groups, sporting groups and arts groups were all represented. Non-government organisations and employment and training providers were also contracted to deliver some of the SRAP programs. Others offered specialist skills and knowledge through experiential learning modalities to the young people involved as specific components of the programs.

**Chart 7**

*Number of SRAP Program Partner Organisations by Category (other than Lead Agencies and TAFE) July 04- Dec 05*

A number of the organisations noted as partners are reliant on volunteer contribution as an integral part of the functioning of their organisations and involvement in the SRAP program has meant drawing further on volunteer time and effort.
The community partners surveyed made a direct connection between the contribution they were making and the overall intention of SRAP programs to engage, re-engage and retain young people in learning/education. They saw themselves as contributing to one or more of the following:

- re-engaging young people with education by offering positive learning experiences to those whose previous experiences had been negative;
- empowering young people to develop stronger self-confidence and self-esteem by giving individual support to young people who needed positive input;
- empowering young people to identify their talents and aspirations so they can contribute positively to their community; and/or
- helping families to overcome hardship, lack of education and improve relationships that provide young people with a positive home environment.

Increasing community involvement in education more broadly has been another aspect of the connection with community work. The effectiveness of community led innovation in supporting the achievement of school retention outcomes at a local levels is being tested and demonstrated by the work of the Innovative Community Action Networks (ICANs). ICAN Committees, comprised of local community organisations, businesses and community members with an interest in young people are operating in three metropolitan and one country regions. (For further information about the ICANs visit www.ican.sa.edu.au)

**Outcomes for young people**

The SRAP programs have made a difference for the young people involved in a range of ways. For some young people it has been help to improve their literacy and numeracy skills; for others it has been making a successful transition from primary school to high school; for others it has meant that they have stayed at school; and young people who had dropped out of school have become interested and involved in learning again.

Through the implementation of the SRAP, significant progress has been made in working toward creating more inclusive learning environments, that, both the SRAP demonstrations and the research evidence suggest, will lead to increased engagement and retention in learning. These include:

- Increasing engagement through monitoring attendance and progress and the value of individual 'young person centred' learning plans.
- Recognising the signs of disengagement and developing early intervention responses, including tools that assist this;
- Identifying and applying the successful elements of responsive and flexible learning programs to other more 'mainstream' learning environments; and
- Providing intensive support that meets both 'learning' and 'life' needs of young people.
Collaboration and partnerships

The implementation of the SRAP programs has required significant work on the part of a wide range of people with an equally wide range of skills and expertise. It has provided a good demonstration of greater agency collaboration and partnerships with community, focussed around a particular purpose: that of young people’s development that will potentially lead to better life outcomes and a more inclusive community.

This collaboration has occurred across agencies, at the local, regional or central level. In some instances, the joined up ways of working and partnerships are still in their infancy, while for others they are more fully developed. There has been a range of different ways that the partnerships have formed and evolved over the past two years including better coordination of services to clients ‘in common’; common training and staff development; and joint planning and implementation of education and training strategies. Generally it has been considered a positive move by both SRAP programs and their partners to be working together, contributing different perspectives and ways of doing things, as well as additional expertise and resources that may not have been available otherwise.

Because of the significant value of community partnerships, it is important that a strategic approach to forming partnerships is taken that clearly outlines the purpose and parameters of the partnership arrangements. Further work is currently underway on this topic.

Conclusion

Evaluation findings during 2006 have indicated that the implementation of the SRAP has led to an increased capacity to respond and an increased capacity to make a difference to the engagement, re-engagement and retention of young people in learning. The direct outcomes, to date, have been four fold:

- the specific benefit gained by young people from participation in the SRAP programs through their improved engagement in learning and learning achievements;
- the demonstration of what can make a difference to the engagement, re-engagement and retention of young people in learning and more effective ways for doing this;
- the changes to a range of different policies, procedures and practices within systems, that have benefited and continue to benefit both specific groups of young people and young people more generally so that they are more likely to remain engaged in learning, and successfully complete year 12 or its vocational equivalent; and
- the development of mechanisms for working more collaboratively across agencies and in forming new partnerships with community.

Further evaluation work in relation to the processes, impact and outcomes of the SRAP will be undertaken during 2007.