





Dr Michelle Anderson is a Senior Research Fellow in the Policy Analysis and Program Evaluation area at ACER.

Maximising the impact of philanthropy in education

New research is investigating the impact of philanthropy in education. **Michelle Anderson** explains the Leading Learning in Education and Philanthropy (LLEAP) project.

An estimated 5000 trusts and foundations distributed \$1 billion in grants and donations in Australia last year.

A significant proportion of this was directed to education. In the 2010 Philanthropy Australia members' survey, more than 60 per cent of respondents nominated education as a specific funding priority. This is great news for schools – but it's not the whole story.

Most of the Philanthropy Australia survey respondents said the biggest challenge they face is evaluating the impact of grants. Many also identified challenges in collaborating with other funders and communicating with applicants and grantees. From a grant seeker's perspective, there are also challenges relating to everything from

gaining access to information through to finding the time and confidence to apply to or even contact a grant maker.

A new research project, Leading Learning in Education and Philanthropy (LLEAP), aims to address these issues by exploring whether the full potential of funding and partnerships available to Australian schools is being achieved. The project aims to find ways to improve the quality of grant seeking and grant making in Australia, with a focus on identifying better ways for the philanthropy and education sectors to connect and collaborate.

The LLEAP project is an initiative of the Tender Bridge in partnership with The Ian Potter Foundation. The Tender Bridge seeks to direct funds into schools to support educational projects and is a service of ACER.

LLEAP

In its first year, the LLEAP project will collect information through interviews with leaders in both education and philanthropic sectors, followed by an online survey and focus groups. This will help form a clearer picture of the impact of philanthropy on education projects.

LLEAP is a three-year research project that seeks to build knowledge about the impact of philanthropy in education. The first national study of its kind, it will evaluate the relationship from both philanthropic and education perspectives. The project will also build pathways for sharing this information.

Over the next three years, the LLEAP project will document and share best practice approaches to improving educational outcomes. Each year as the project continues, a practical, progressive guide will be published about how to grow great educational projects for maximum impact.

LLEAP will:

- identify perceptions and current practices within grant making and grant seeking
- build understanding of effective engagement
- inform decision-making and share successes, and
- explore opportunities for greater collaboration to build capacity in the education and philanthropic sectors.

Throughout the project, LLEAP will be underpinned by three key questions:

- What are the current perceptions and practices of philanthropic engagement in education?
- How is successful philanthropic engagement in school education defined and configured in practice?

- Who benefits from philanthropic engagement, in what conditions and to what effect?

Context

Improving educational outcomes for students involves a raft of relationships and resources. Philanthropic organisations can play a key role.

There are nearly 9500 schools in Australia. Great educational projects could be coming from any one of them – but we know, from the research and from experience, that that's not the case.

Schools have very different starting points in terms of their capacity to secure philanthropic grants and to use these for maximum impact in their schools and communities.

What happens to schools that don't have good networks or the skills and experience in grant writing, and not to mention the time and resources to devote to grant applications?

We need to know more about how schools enrolling disadvantaged students are gaining access to and using grants, to ensure these schools are able to make the most of the resources available to them.

We also need to understand the impact of philanthropy. What happens once schools have secured grants? How can schools plan, implement, monitor, improve and maintain effective programs? What expectations do philanthropics have of grant seekers and are these being met? How do these expectations align with the values and priorities of schools?

In her address at the LLEAP launch, The Ian Potter Foundation Chief Executive Officer Janet Hirst noted the need to use funds strategically.

'When supporting education programs, the Governors of The Ian Potter Foundation have often questioned, and rightly so, whether the programs we are being asked to support are actually meeting a need for the schools,' she explained.

'We should be concerned as a community and as funders if schools are simply (and quite understandably) attempting to access whatever funding is available in order to bring investment into their communities – especially if those communities are disadvantaged.

'There is a power dynamic that we in philanthropy do not often speak about, but that as funders we should be aware of. Philanthropy works at its best when it seeks out and provides support to those who are best placed to innovate within their communities. Philanthropy is less effective as a vehicle for change when it is attempting to set the agenda. The relationship between philanthropy and education is often complex,' she said.

Making informed decisions

Ultimately, what schools, systems and philanthropic organisations need is good data to make informed decisions about the impact of philanthropy in education. They need assistance to create networks in a systematic way, so that like-minded schools and organisations can connect and collaborate. The Tender Bridge service is working towards achieving this.

They also need to know what projects have succeeded in the past, and why and how. LLEAP is working towards improving our understanding in this area.

If we believe that filling a knowledge gap about the impact of philanthropy in education is important – and the long

Education reform for **powerful learning**

history of philanthropy in education and the significant dollars it provides suggests that it is – then we need to grab with both hands this project and shake it for all it's worth. The LLEAP project will provide us with reliable, independent, national data, which in turn will enable us to collectively improve the quality of grant seeking and grant making in Australia; identify better ways of connecting and collaborating to maximise positive outcomes for students; and understand what the impact of philanthropy in a great educational project looks like in practice.

On the road to filling this knowledge gap, the project in its benchmark year will seek to answer such questions as:

- How many schools are accessing philanthropic grants, either directly or in partnership with other organisations?
- What projects are schools seeking philanthropic grants for? Who do these projects aim to benefit?
- Is this similar or different to what those in the philanthropic sector state are their areas of focus?
- What helps and hinders those in education and philanthropy to maximise the impact of a grant?

These are fundamental questions to be answered collectively. This is because at the end of the day, there is a need to provide a space for great educational projects to be examined, not just great grant writers to be funded.

Schools and philanthropic organisations are invited to express their interest in the project by contacting the LLEAP team via email to tenderbridge@acer.edu.au

For further information see www.acer.edu.au/lleap ■

A cooperative approach to educational reform can significantly improve outcomes for disadvantaged students, according to a new book published by ACER Press.

Powerful Learning: A strategy for systemic educational improvement is a case study of the reform program carried out in 195 schools located in areas of high socioeconomic disadvantage in Victoria's Northern Metropolitan Region between 2008 and 2010. The region's School Improvement Strategy supports all teachers to improve their practice, in order to create the conditions for powerful learning which allow all students to achieve at high levels. The book outlines how teachers from the region were selected for training focusing on literacy, numeracy, assessment and student management, which they could then use to coach their colleagues.

The reform strategy is an inside-out approach to school improvement based on the commitment to every student reaching their potential, and is not just about improving literacy or numeracy but also the desire to learn. It is seen as an ideal model for educational system reform due to the innovative approach and successful results. There has been strong government support and wide interest across all states about the program and its success.

This book helps identify and, importantly, adapt appropriate teaching strategies, organisational structures and policy options to support

improvement plans in any given school. Ultimately, school principals, administrators, policymakers and the teachers themselves will see a discernible reduction in the variance of student performance, an overall rise in school standards, and a narrowing of the educational divide.

Powerful Learning is co-written by Emeritus Professor David Hopkins of the University of London's Institute of Education, Victorian education department regional director Wayne Craig and Dr John Munro, Head of Studies in Exceptional Learning and Gifted Education in the Graduate School of Education at The University of Melbourne.

The book is available to purchase from www.acerpress.com.au ■

