



The Ian Potter Foundation

Grantee Key Learnings

Early Childhood Development

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Early Childhood Development Grantee Learnings

Introduction

This document is intended for future applicants and grantees in the Early Childhood Development program area. It contains the summarised learnings of all the Foundation's Education grantees over the past seven years.

The information documented here has been taken from the final reports of Education grantees which were submitted to The Ian Potter Foundation following the completion of their projects. As such, the views expressed here do not necessarily represent the views of The Ian Potter Foundation.

The funding guidelines for the Early Childhood Development area are:

- To support innovative programs and sector initiatives in early childhood (0–8 years old), including programs that recognise and foster parental engagement in their children's learning and development.

Program design

When planning a program be mindful of the age range for your program. When it comes to children, a three or four year age gap can mean a significant variance in maturity and ability. Likewise, plan for differences in learning needs.

A one size fits all approach is not always effective. One grantee found that adjusting their program according to the group size, age and English skills of children ensured success. Likewise, consider developing targeted resources for different groups (e.g. parents and playgroup leaders).

It can be challenging to combine two different pedagogical approaches into the one program, especially when volunteers and program staff have experience in either one approach or the other. Ensure you provide adequate time for training of project facilitators.

Be prepared to review and revise your program as it is being delivered, incorporating input from different stakeholders and participants. Don't be afraid to adjust what isn't working.

When planning a project allow time to test and refine resources with end-users (even after piloted) and for data rehearsal.

Technology

When using digital technology in the classroom, budget for and provide teachers/educators with specific professional development in the use of technology, and factor in time to plan for this, ensuring lesson plans are aligned to the curriculum.

Consider using online platforms that allow you to update websites as new technology and services are rolled out (e.g. open-source Wordpress CMS).

Expertise/specialised knowledge

Relevant academic and/or specialist expertise should inform program development (e.g. young children's language and literacy development).

Consider engaging university students as skilled volunteers (e.g. in speech pathology), as the training and experience are invaluable for volunteers and having skilled volunteers adds value to the program.

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Working with children

Children are relational learners. One grantee found that children looked forward to reading to the same volunteer each week, and this served as a better incentive for children to continue with reading than a gift bag.

Children learn best if they are not intimidated and feel comfortable around a volunteer. If volunteers return each week, it's more likely that even the shyest kids will eventually be able to express themselves by building trust. This means that volunteer retention should be prioritised – consider how to support and encourage your volunteers to remain involved.

Parental engagement

Be sure to communicate the importance of parental participation in home-based programs and activities. In the case of one program that incorporated iPad technology, the grantee noted that some parents believed that the technology in and of itself was the key to student learning and did not see the need for adult prompting and support in the learning process.

Do not just assume that families will follow up with referrals or recommendations beyond the life of the program. Have mechanisms in place to make it easy for families to pursue referral pathways and to ensure schools/teachers follow up with parents.

CALD communities

Cultural sensitivity is imperative. Research the cultural protocols and practices that need to be applied when entering a Cultural and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) community and be respectful.

Be aware of the practicalities of delivering a program to CALD communities. One grantee initially hoped to deliver a playgroup program with the ratio of one parent to one child but quickly realised that this ratio wasn't realistic given many mothers had multiple children under five, including some under three.

Parents of bilingual children are better off reading to their offspring in their community language than not reading at all. In terms of literacy programs, this means children receive the benefit of learning their community language and still being read to in English at playgroups by volunteers/staff.

Having a local community elder present can add value to sessions, validating the importance of school and education.

Consider providing information resources in a universal format (lots of pictures, minimal text) to accommodate CALD families or low literacy levels.

In the case of delivering reading and literacy programs to CALD communities, distribute books in community languages as there will likely be some parents who struggle to read to their children in English.

Be aware of cultural or psychological sensitivities. One grantee had to make changes to program collateral in line with the sensitivities associated with children in out of home care.

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Working with schools/educational institutions

Successful program implementation is critically dependant on careful planning and developing genuine relationships with participating schools, particularly principals and classroom teachers.

Do not underestimate the resources and time required to establish trust and generate social change within schools, let alone replicating that social change within the wider community. Ensure that multiple leaders within the service/school are engaged to avoid the loss of momentum/knowledge when there is staff turnover.

Another grantee reports: ***'Where our initial consultation and scoping for a project has not involved all the relevant stakeholders, we have had to invest more time and resources into managing the relationship throughout the project. We have found the most successful programs have been the ones that have involved students, teachers and support staff, as well as school leadership, in the initial stages of consultation and planning. This has prompted us to develop a process for determining school readiness and confirming their commitment in terms of staff and time.'***

Gaining access to student report cards and other assessments and tests can be problematic. One grantee found accessing this information difficult, often relying on carers and case managers to obtain copies of report cards due to schools initially refusing to share information. Even though a program information letter – containing the Department of Education and Training endorsement – was distributed to all schools, there remained a small number that was reluctant to or opposed information sharing.

If working with a university in delivering or evaluating a program, be aware that they have to work within university timelines and processes which can sometimes slow down the project.

Teachers

Dedicated teacher training and professional development are necessary for teacher buy-in, and for programs to be successfully implemented and maintained beyond the pilot. Teachers are time poor and need to be able to see and understand the value of the program they are being asked to deliver. One grantee noted that teacher attitudes and interventions were the biggest obstacle to self-directed play and positive playground experiences (which were the main program objectives). In the case of another grantee's reading program, they found that unless monitored, some teachers used program volunteers as a general classroom aide, rather than a dedicated helper for one child.

It's essential to link programs to the curriculum and budget for the time of teachers and experts involved. One grantee reported that two staff members spent over 20 hours and while they made some progress in the outlining of the project there was still a need for considerable additional consultation with a literacy expert concerning the curriculum and how the project would fit in that framework.

The latest national data from the Australian Government suggests an average of 5.7 per cent of teachers leave the profession annually, and many more teachers move between schools and roles. This turnover renders it difficult to embed change into schools. If you want to embed a program within a school in

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order to make it sustainable, it needs to become a part of the school culture with multiple staff involved at different levels. Parent engagement can also encourage the school to remain involved.

When providing mentoring to teachers in remote areas, one grantee found that an online program did not work. Instead, they moved to in-school mentoring and found both uptake and feedback improved under the new model.

Collaboration

Multiple partnerships

The logistics of working with different service organisations and their limited resources can be complex. Here are some tips:

A process map can help each agency understand their commitment before signing up to your project. Similarly, MOUs can make expectations between parties clear.

Streamline processes. If your organisation has streamlined processes internally, this can also assist in managing and being responsive to different stakeholders.

You don't have to limit yourself to working only with your initial partners. Consider offering your program to a broader remit of organisations if appropriate. For instance, one grantee initially only offered their program to Out-of-Home-Care facilities, but extended the program's reach to children in pre-placement prevention and supervised parent meetings based on need and demand.

If delivering a program across multiple agencies and regions, consider having a key contact (or program 'champion') in each agency to prioritise your service.

It is important to assign an agency-wide coordinator with responsibility for all aspects of the program. Ideally, this person can sign off on any necessary paperwork to ease the burden on regional agencies.

Sector collaboration

Providing systematic opportunities for different stakeholders to engage and give feedback when developing and delivering a project is key to ensuring it meets the needs of its target group.

In terms of sector-wide initiatives, quick wins (such as building on key networks and providing public forums and training) are important because determining collective priorities and agreement to commit to change take time. Quick wins also help to maintain funding momentum.

Government

Be sure to meet the conditions and reporting requirements associated with government funding. One grantee had trouble gaining regulatory approval after the principal of the school where the pilot took place failed to provide the requisite report to Government. This affected work in the 18 other participating schools.

If your program is reliant on government-funded services, contingency plans are essential. In the case of one grantee, several of their key stakeholders were defunded after both federal and state governments changed, which resulted in service silos and fragmentation in the delivery of their program.

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A diverse funding pool is important to ensure sustainability. One research program found it difficult to sustain government support with changes in policy focus. Likewise, diversified research increases the likelihood of attracting funding.

There may be challenges associated with getting community-specific programs to fit into government outlines and budgets. One grantee resolved these challenges by seeking alternative funding to cover the shortfall, and encouraging government representatives to acknowledge the different levels of need in the area.

Engaging participants

Community groups

Developing relationships with local community groups is an effective way of reaching prospective participants. One grantee found that this type of collaboration meant the number of marginalised young people who accessed their program increased.

Working with only one community group may mean they bring the same group of young people repeatedly rather than different groups. If this is the case, you may want to revise your project goals and deepen your engagement with this group.

School groups

In terms of out-of-school programs, be sure that there is a demand for your service. Likewise, have a robust and smart marketing strategy in place, as teachers and schools are generally very busy. Pay attention to what is working in the community and or schools you are working in and communicate accordingly.

It is more difficult for school groups to attend out-of-school programs/facilities than it is to have programs come to them.

Factor in the cost of transport and relief teachers in planning. One grantee found that despite offering a free museum visit for school groups there were often last minute cancellations and some teachers even had to refuse the offer as the grantee was not offering to pay for a relief teacher.

Maintain relationships with existing partners. It is easier to get a repeat visit than a new one.

Evaluation

Developing frameworks

Consider drawing upon expertise and views of different stakeholders (teachers, researchers, etc.) when developing an assessment framework.

If delivering a program across multiple agencies and regions, ensure you have a robust and centralised evaluation framework. This is particularly important in terms of communicating program outcomes and seeking further funding.

If participants do not like your evaluation framework, consider refining or adjusting, rather than eliminating it entirely.

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As a general rule, measuring long-term outcomes in education reform programs needs to include:

- School assessment against the National School Improvement Tool (collected during school selection and revised assessments collected on an ongoing basis)
- School-based assessments of average student growth
- Comparison between NAPLAN results.
- Teacher engagement (via teacher satisfaction surveys)
- Student engagement (via student surveys, school records of attendance, behavioural incidents and learning behaviours)
- Parent engagement (e.g. participation via survey on child progress to inform baseline and follow-ups)

Resources

Here are some resources our grantees have found useful in planning and assessing their projects:

- The Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA), a scale that represents levels of educational advantage or disadvantage, is a useful tool. For more information, you can visit the [My School website](#) or refer to this [ICSEA guide](#).
- [The Australian Early Development Census \(AEDC\)](#) similarly maps children's vulnerability and provides a snapshot of children's development that can inform communities and support planning, policy and action.
- The ABS website (<http://www.abs.gov.au/Education>) contains up-to-date education statistics.
- The University of Canberra has mapped its [Child Exclusion Index](#): This can be used to target high-needs areas.
- Communities for Children (CfC) provides Government funding to evidence-based programs. The [criteria to be approved are listed here](#).

Data collection

Consider asking staff, volunteers or caseworkers to assist families with completing preliminary surveys at the beginning of a project. Offering competition incentives to complete surveys may entice more people to complete entries.

Where relevant, collect data for local government areas. This means data can be utilised for local planning or government and allows for uniqueness and complexity of regions to be properly represented.

Dissemination

Consider how you communicate the project's outcomes and who your target audience is. One grantee reported that the relationships developed with early childhood specialists and parents helped them communicate positive program outcomes in the relevant language and frameworks for both parties.

Wherever possible, data should be made accessible to the public — data talks, especially to parents and interested stakeholders.

