

Section 1

Context and purpose

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Introduction

Over the last fifteen years, numerous reports and studies have highlighted substantial variations in the wellbeing of the South Australian population, and the gap between those who are 'well off' and those who are not ⁽¹⁾. These differences are readily apparent within the metropolitan area of Adelaide and across the rest of the State.

There is mounting evidence of the significant impact of both economic and social inequalities on various groups in society, and government and community concern about the need to address them. In this atlas, the term 'socioeconomic' refers to the social and economic aspects of a population, where 'social' includes information about the community and its level of education, welfare, housing, transport and so forth. It is not used in the context of 'social' as in 'social skills', 'social capital', 'social ability' or 'social behaviour' of community members. Therefore, an area described as having 'a high level of socioeconomic disadvantage' does not imply that the area has low cohesion or lacks strength as a community; rather it identifies a relative lack of resources or opportunities that are available to a greater extent in more advantaged communities.

The South Australian Government has identified addressing inequality as a state priority. This atlas highlights the extent and significance of inequalities in learning and development across the community, particularly those associated with wider social and economic influences.

The Smith Family, as an independent non-profit organisation, works in partnership with others to assist disadvantaged Australian children and their families. Their work supporting children's learning is one of the most effective means of breaking the cycle of disadvantage and ensuring all children have the same opportunity to develop and learn, and to be all that they can be.

This atlas is a joint project between The Smith Family and PHIDU, University of Adelaide, supported by the SA Department of Education and Children's Services (DECS). It focuses on learning and development, and the avoidable differences in these outcomes across communities in South Australia. It is hoped that the atlas will highlight communities and groups within the population where further effort is needed to improve outcomes in learning and development, both for individuals and for populations.

Background to this report

Recent international research on wellbeing, human development and learning highlights the importance of investing in the earliest time of life and the years

of childhood and beyond, for lifelong learning ^(2, 3). The quality of a child's earliest environments and the availability of appropriate experiences at the right stages of development are crucial in determining the strengths or weakness of the brain's architecture. Supporting optimal early childhood development greatly increases children's chances of better learning outcomes, greater employment opportunities and good health ^(3, 4). A lack of vital emotional, social and economic resources during critical periods of development can lead to significant disadvantage and poorer life outcomes for those who are adversely affected ^(4,5).

The South Australian Government has invested in bringing together different sectors of government and the community to find solutions to address economic, social and environmental issues facing South Australia at the present time, and into the future.

To this end, a number of initiatives have been set up across government, and in partnership with local government, the non-government sector and private enterprise. For example, in March 2002, the Premier established the Government's Social Inclusion Initiative and appointed the Social Inclusion Board with the objective of 'recapturing South Australia's confidence and self esteem by tackling some of the most pressing social issues facing the State' ⁽⁶⁾.

In November 2002, the newly formed Economic Development Board presented the *State of the State Report* ⁽⁷⁾. This was a comprehensive examination of South Australia's current economic performance relative to other Australian States and Territories, and it identified that South Australia lagged the nation in most key economic indicators.

The follow up report, *A Framework for Economic Development in South Australia*, identified that South Australia needed robust economic growth to 'deliver the social outcomes that we all want: for example, protection of our natural environment and appropriate investment in schools, hospitals, police and key infrastructure that will maintain our high quality of life and well-being' ⁽⁸⁾.

In order to flourish, South Australia must maintain a workforce which has the skills, knowledge and creativity to support a community that is inclusive of all its members. With respect to learning and development, the Government has a significant reform program, which includes legislative change in a number of areas; retaining young people in school, work or training to the age of 17 years; setting up a new South Australian Certificate of Education (SACE); extending formal regulation in a new *Education and Care Act* to all services that cater for the learning and development of children from birth

to the end of schooling; improving student outcomes on literacy and numeracy; requiring all services to be registered and meet standards of operation to ensure children are safe and provided with high quality services; government, providers and families having a shared responsibility for outcomes for children; and making preschool and school governance arrangements more flexible to meet the needs of local communities.

Other programs recognise the importance of early childhood as an influence on human development, learning and overall wellbeing. An inquiry into Early Childhood Services led to a state-wide plan for early childhood services, including the establishment of Children's Centres, in-home family support programs and Aboriginal family centres; and the provision of scholarships for more Aboriginal people to study to become early childhood teachers⁽⁹⁾. The *Keeping Them Safe* strategy for child protection also focused on early intervention and prevention in cases of child abuse and neglect, and aimed to minimise the longer term, adverse consequences for these children and their families⁽¹⁰⁾.

The SA Strategic Plan also contains a range of targets for education and learning and the influences on them⁽¹¹⁾. Making progress towards these targets is a major focus for government action and policy direction, and the atlas contains a number of the Plan's indicators.

The pursuit at state level of equity in education and early childhood has received additional support at the national level with two recent developments. In December 2008, the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA) endorsed the *Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians*⁽²⁴⁾. The Declaration's first goal is "Australian schooling promotes equity and excellence" and sets out a more detailed commitment to action that reinforces the key reforms underway in South Australia.

In addition, the Council of Australian Governments' (COAG) *National Reform Agenda* includes similar priority areas, especially for children and young people: child protection, early childhood learning, preschool and schools, the gap in wellbeing between Aboriginal peoples and other Australians, social inclusion, health and hospital services, health promotion and illness prevention, housing, productivity, and vocational education and training.

The National Education Agreement contains the following outcomes of schooling⁽¹²⁾:

- All children are engaged in and benefiting from schooling;
- Young people are meeting basic literacy and numeracy standards, and overall levels of literacy and numeracy achievements are improving;

- Australian students excel by international standards;
- Schooling promotes social inclusion and reduces the educational disadvantage of children, especially Indigenous children; and
- Young people make a successful transition from school to work and further study.

These reflect a commitment to addressing the issue of social inclusion, together with responding to Indigenous disadvantage, and are underpinning principles for the other outcomes in the Agreement. In committing to the Agreement, governments recognised that the collection, provision and publication of data on student outcomes and school performance were essential for public accountability and would provide data information to help to improve students, schools and education systems over time.

To provide communities with information about the early development of their children before they start school, the Australian Government has funded the use of the *Australian Early Development Index* (AEDI)⁽¹³⁾. The AEDI has also been adapted to ensure its relevance and sensitivity to the needs of Aboriginal children. The AEDI is aimed at helping communities understand how their children are doing developmentally, and compared to children nationally and in other communities. It identifies the strengths of community resources and services, as well as areas where improvement may be needed⁽¹³⁾.

The AEDI checklist consists of questions across five developmental areas: Physical Health and Wellbeing; Social Competence; Emotional Maturity; Language and Cognitive Skills; and Communication Skills and General Knowledge⁽¹³⁾. These are used by teachers to assess children on entry to school. The AEDI results are then mapped to provide communities with a picture of the early childhood development strengths and vulnerabilities in each community and on each of the developmental areas. By understanding children's development as they start school, communities can consider the resources and services which may be affecting children's development, and their effects⁽¹³⁾.

Therefore, the AEDI provides communities with an opportunity to strengthen collaborations between schools, early childhood services, and local agencies to support children and families. Along with a range of other community indicators, the AEDI can be used by policy makers to plan and evaluate place-based initiatives for children. Communities can use the AEDI to develop and evaluate their efforts to improve children's outcomes⁽¹³⁾.

The Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations has invested \$20.4 million to 30 June

2011 to implement the AEDI nationally, and South Australia participated in the first round of national data collection in 2009 ⁽¹⁴⁾.

Another major initiative under this Agreement is the National Partnership Agreement on Literacy and Numeracy, which aims to deliver improvements in literacy and numeracy for all students, with a particular target on cohorts of students at risk, by focusing on the key areas of teaching, leadership and the effective use of student performance data.

The literacy and numeracy focus saw the introduction of the National Assessment Program - Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) with all Australian students in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9 being assessed using national tests in 2008 in the areas of reading, writing, language conventions (spelling, grammar and punctuation) and numeracy: the Program was repeated in 2009. Students who achieve at or above the national minimum standard are deemed to have demonstrated the basic elements of literacy and numeracy required for that year level. Results are provided to schools, providing teachers and systems with data to review their programs, their teaching strategies and the need for additional support. Results are also provided to parents.

These policy directions highlight the importance of linking social and economic policy solutions, and these initiatives, and others like them, set the context for this report.

Overview

Learning, development and wellbeing are the product of many different factors. Some of these include individual characteristics such as the genes that we inherit from our parents, and aspects of our own beliefs, behaviours and coping abilities. Other significant influences come from our families, neighbourhoods, communities, culture or kinship groups, and society as a whole. The social and economic environment is a major determinant of the population's learning, development and wellbeing in South Australia ⁽¹⁵⁾.

The purpose of the atlas is to deepen our understanding of the impact that social, physical and economic factors have on learning, development and wellbeing, and to describe the distribution of these factors across the South Australian population.

Over the last two decades, there have been major social and economic changes in South Australia, especially in the areas of work, learning and communication, resources for families, community supports and the balance between them ⁽¹⁾. These changes are not unique to South Australia, occurring in other Australian States and Territories

as well as in other countries. Some examples of these are:

- Marked alterations in the nature and amount of available work and in opportunities for the employment of young people, with globalisation and technological advances, placing greater demands on education and skills development ⁽¹⁶⁾;
- Rapid technological change bringing new ways of learning, communicating and interacting across communities ⁽¹⁷⁾;
- Greater challenges in balancing work and family responsibilities ⁽¹⁸⁾;
- Pressures on affordable housing, particularly public housing ⁽²³⁾;
- Significant economic hardship and joblessness for many households ⁽¹⁹⁾;
- Changes in rural and remote communities, and the dramatic impact of climate and water issues;
- A rise in those affected by addictions to alcohol, drugs and gambling ⁽²⁰⁾;
- A greater awareness of the effects of stress on children and young people as a result of serious family problems ⁽⁵⁾; and
- The persistence of significant disparities in learning, development, health, and other aspects of wellbeing across the population ⁽¹⁾.

These changes in society have been widespread and the ensuing disruptions experienced by individuals, families and communities, substantial. The rate of change has been rapid and without precedent in its scope and impact on different segments of the population ⁽²¹⁾. We are witnessing greater disparities in economic and social outcomes, as individuals, families and communities attempt to adapt. The transitions appear to be continuing, and the long-term impact of such a rapidly changing society is not known ⁽²⁾.

Such serious economic and social changes have heightened the need for up-to-date skills and knowledge ⁽¹⁷⁾. The complexities of modern societies require people to be open to new ideas and adept at doing things differently. Those who are not able to anticipate and adapt to change – to continue learning throughout their lives – are likely to become increasingly marginalised in economic and social life ⁽²²⁾.

Thus, we need to understand better the complex interactions between individuals and their families, the pressures exerted by their environments and social structures over a lifetime, and how these factors influence the learning, development and

ultimately, the wellbeing of current and future generations of South Australians.

One way of doing this is to choose a number of indicators to describe the levels of different aspects of wellbeing of the population at the present time and, by using them, to highlight the extent of existing inequalities in learning and development.

Indicators are useful for:

- Informing people about social issues, including access to and outcomes in education
- Monitoring these issues to identify change, both between groups in the population, and over time; and
- Assessing progress toward goals and targets, or achievement of policy objectives.

These purposes suggest that indicators need to:

- reflect the values and goals of those who will use and apply them;
- be accessible and reliably measured in all of the populations of interest;
- be easily understood, particularly by those who are expected to act in response to the information;
- be measures over which we have some control, individually or collectively, and are able to change; and
- move governments and communities to action.

The indicators presented in this report and on the World Wide Web were selected because they describe the extent of inequality in educational access, participation and outcomes, in the context of the demographic and socioeconomic composition of South Australia. They are also those for which reliable data are available which can be mapped to show variations by area, across Adelaide and country South Australia.

The indicators represent areas where considerable inequalities exist and some are measures from the SA Strategic Plan. They provide only a partial picture of the existing social and economic inequalities in learning and development in South Australia. However, it is hoped that this report will raise awareness of the extent of these inequalities and their impact on different sections of the population.

Aims

The report has a number of specific aims:

- to describe some of the factors that have important influences on learning and development for the South Australian community;

- to identify significant differences (or inequalities) in learning and development across the South Australian community, and to assess possible trends in such inequalities over time;
- to map and describe changes in a selection of indicators chosen for this report;
- to provide information in a form that will support discussion and action by communities and organisations at local, regional and state levels; and
- to raise awareness in the wider community about the extent to which South Australia is an unequal society, and the impact of this on the wellbeing of the whole population.

It has been prepared for the use of all those wishing to know the extent of inequalities in learning and development in South Australia, and wanting to do something about them.

It is hoped that people will draw on the report:

- to understand the extent of inequalities across South Australia;
- to identify trends over time;
- to develop activities that will reduce these inequalities; and
- to track emerging issues of concern to particular communities or groups in South Australia.

Action following on from this report

The report will be distributed widely to South Australian organisations and communities to assist in the development of an understanding of the extent and impact of socioeconomic inequalities in learning and development across the State; and to encourage the direction of greater efforts to reduce these inequalities for children, young people and other groups with identified learning needs.

The Smith Family and DECS will use this document to engage with families, communities, local service organisations, business leaders, education providers, teachers and others towards this end. The findings of the report will also be useful to DECS in their policy development and strategic planning processes.

For further information, contact:

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Sources of information

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