

Briefings

Thought leadership for the independent schooling sector

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AGAINST ALL EXPECTATIONS

From the Executive Director

Just over twelve months ago, Australia (and the world) was thrown into massive disruption as the impact of COVID-19 took a powerful grip on our economy and our way of life.

Queensland schools had their first shutdown in the last week of Term 1, 2020 and remained closed for several weeks into Term 2 as online learning was rolled out across the state.

There was much “doom and gloom” as the economy went into a deep and rapid decline. Not unexpectedly, there were widespread fears for independent schools and the sector given the role of parents in contributing to the costs of schooling through the payment of fees.

It was not uncommon to hear predictions of a transfer of students out of the sector and potential financial difficulties for schools.

Contrary to these widespread fears, my *Briefings* article for May 2020¹ gave some reasons for optimism citing the resilience of the sector during past economic downturns.

Against all expectations, one year on from the start of the global pandemic, the independent school's sector has not only survived the challenges of COVID, but in fact has thrived as evidenced by recent enrolment data.

Coming into 2020, enrolment growth was very strong for the independent sector in Queensland with a 4.2% increase in student numbers between the February Census 2019 and the February Census 2020. This compared to enrolment over the same period for the Catholic sector of 3.5% and for state schools 0.5%.

All sectors had a boost in enrolments in 2020 resulting from the exiting of the Prep half-cohort at the end of 2019. This was the group of students who entered the Prep Year in 2007 associated with a change in school starting age. It meant for the first time in 13 years, 2020 saw a full cohort of students across all schooling year levels.

For the independent sector, it is estimated that the Prep half-cohort effect accounted for around 1-1.2% of enrolment growth in 2020.

The 2020 August Census data showing the independent sector enrolling over 130,000 students for the first time confirmed that the sector has thrived throughout COVID with a 4.5% increase in enrolments over August 2019².

This was the highest enrolment growth in 2020 of any schooling sector throughout Australia. It mirrors the

growth experienced in Queensland during the early 2000s when Queensland was benefiting from high demographic growth.

To further illustrate the resilience of the sector during COVID, domestic student enrolments increased in Queensland independent schools by 1% during the period February to August 2020.

Independent schools have successfully navigated – not without challenges and hard work – an extraordinarily difficult year and it is clear parents have embraced the provision of independent schooling.

Many factors are involved in parental choice of an independent school, however, three are highlighted as being key during the past twelve months.

In times of uncertainty, people look for certainty. Parents have embraced independent schools and the quality education they provide, recognising that independent schools are safe, welcoming, and secure environments lead by dedicated staff delivering high-quality teaching and learning. Most schools did an exceptional job in providing online learning during the early stages of 2020 and this, coupled with high levels of pastoral care and strong communities, has been welcomed by parents.

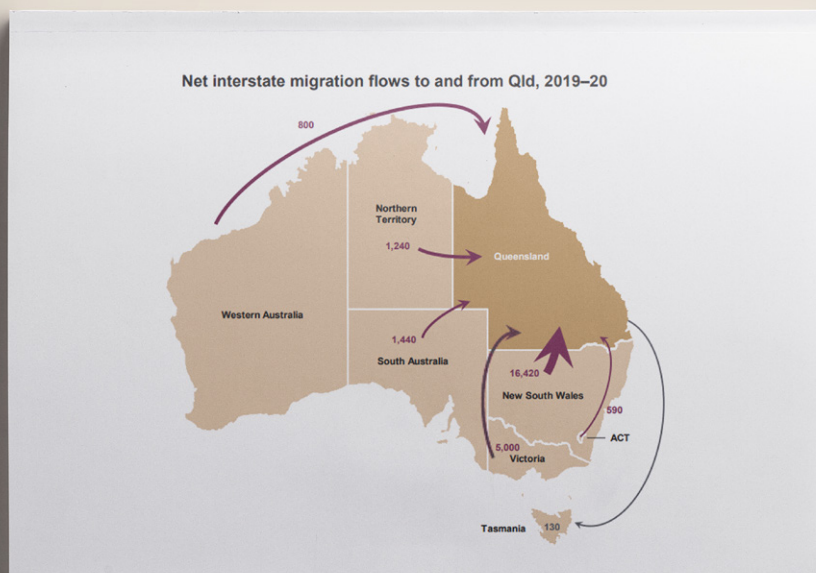
The work of independent school leaders and staff is to be commended. I have previously written (*Briefings* November 2020, Vol 24 Issue 9)

1 *Briefings* Vol 24 Issue 3, available at https://rms.isq.qld.edu.au/files/Weblive_Briefings/Briefings_24_3.pdf

2 Available at <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/education/schools/2020>

AGAINST ALL EXPECTATIONS

Figure 1: Interstate migration to Queensland



Source: Queensland Government Statistician's Office

is demographic trends. Despite a decline in birth rates and the collapse of overseas migration, Queensland is enjoying strong demographic growth with the net interstate migration of over 26,000 for the twelve months to June 2020.

During the September quarter in 2020, more than 7,000 persons relocated to Queensland. This included nearly 2,000 0-14-year-olds, most of which needed to enrol in a school. As illustrated in Figure 1, the majority of interstate migration is from New South Wales followed by Victoria⁴.

The interstate migration is having an impact right across the state with nearly half moving to areas outside of Greater Brisbane.

This interstate migration coupled with the return of many Australians from overseas is no doubt driving increased enrolments in schools.

Whether this trend is sustainable will be worth monitoring closely. The ability to work from home potentially opens up for more people moving away from the major cities, further fuelling the “sea-change” and “tree-change” demographic movements that have been happening for some years.

The challenges associated with COVID are far from over.

Our boarding students still face a high level of uncertainty in relation to potential borders closures. With nearly 700 boarders in Queensland from other States/Territories, this remains a nervous time for parents and students who always look forward to returning home to family during school holidays.

Our international students are also challenged with most not having seen their families in over twelve months and little prospect of returning to Australia in the short-term if they do decide to visit home. There has been no intake of international students during the period of COVID and there

about 2020 being the year of the teacher where the work of dedicated, professional, and innovative staff bought much respect and regard for the teaching profession from parents and the community³.

A further factor is the swift economic recovery in the second half of 2020 with many economists believing that as we entered 2021, overall economic activity was getting back to pre-COVID levels.

There was considerable economic stress for many families in Queensland during 2020 (adding to the ongoing challenges of the longer-term drought in many communities). However, independent schools, as they regularly

do, stepped in to financially assist families, wherever possible, with fee discounts, payment plans and other measures. The reputation of the sector for looking after their communities and families during difficult times was much enhanced during 2020.

There are independent schools with significant proportions of families who depend on tourism, hospitality recreation and other industries still being impacted by COVID. The willingness and ability of independent schools to provide continuing support for families across these areas is exceptional.

The third factor currently influencing enrolments in independent schools

3 Briefings Vol 24 Issue 9, available at <https://rms.isq.qld.edu.au/files/ISQ%20Briefings%2024-9.pdf>

4 Available at <https://www.qgso.qld.gov.au/issues/3071/population-growth-highlights-trends-qld-2021-edn.pdf>

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are fears for how long it will take to see the return of these most welcomed students to our communities even if, and when, Australia’s international borders are open again.

Schools, like the broader community, still face several restrictions in terms of how they operate, particularly in terms of public and community events. However, we should be thankful as in many countries, schools have yet to return to face-to-face teaching.

Future demographic trends are also uncertain. Whilst Queensland is enjoying current strong growth, 2020 saw a significant decline in birth rates meaning that the number of school aged children in the next decade may be smaller than the current numbers.

Despite the challenges of COVID, the independent school’s sector in Queensland has continued to grow, not only in student numbers, but in its reputation for the provision of quality education. Based on the exceptional leadership, innovation and strong communities built around independent schools, I am confident the future remains bright and parents will continue to enjoy choice across a great diversity of schooling options with the aim of ensuring their children have the best possible future in what will continue to be an uncertain world.



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VULNERABILITY, THE IMPACT AND POTENTIAL TO HELP NURTURE YOUR YOUNGEST STUDENTS



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The 2021 Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) opens in May.

Schools will receive their leader and teacher packs during March. Please contact ISQ for further information.

‘Evidence-based decision-making’ has become the catch cry for school leaders and board directors when justifying their decisions in the highly regulated and scrutinised education sector. It is understood that schools are the gatekeepers and generators of vast amounts of data. More than just student performance data, this also includes school processes, demographics, and perceptual data (Bernhardt, 2017).

Schools are required to carefully navigate the requirements concerning data security and privacy legislation, which creates copious amounts of compliance related administration for schools.

However, the important work of educators hinges on access to accurate and reliable sources of information about their students. They are asked frequently to justify their decisions using the narrative of the data to bolster credibility and instil confidence amongst their key stakeholders. This trend has been markedly evident with the implementation of the National Quality Framework (NQF) in 2012, which provides a national approach to regulation, assessment and quality

improvement for early childhood education and care, and outside school hours care services across Australia (Australian Children’s Education and Care Quality Authority, 2020).

The proliferation of technology in the past 20 years has subsequently led to schools operating in an ‘age of accountability’ (Aasebø, et. al, 2017). According to Mandinach and Schildkamp (2020), data use has evolved as a critical area of focus in education, in part, because key policymakers have emphasised the need for education to become an evidence-based field. Consequently, school leaders and educators depend on data and research evidence, and “not just experience and intuition” (p. 1). Accountability in the education sector has evolved from today’s globalised economy and is largely based on what the data tells our communities about our current students, as well as who and what they could be in the future. As noted by Matters (2006):

“To keep jobs and to maintain current living standards, governments need to constantly improve the skill levels and productivity of their existing workforces. But to guarantee that future living standards are maintained, those governments must also ensure that today’s students are educated to the highest achievement standards possible. And schools must be held accountable for that achievement if those standards are to be met” (p. iii).

According to Collier et al. (2020), a child’s early life experiences are critical to ensuring healthy development during childhood, adolescence and later into adult life. Investment in






the Early Years has been the focus of both state and federal governments in recent years (Commonwealth of Australia, 2018). The development of important emotional, cognitive, and behavioural skills takes place early in life. These foundational skills are not only important for a successful transition to school, but also for later academic achievement and social adjustment (McClelland & Smith, 2020). Therefore, it is imperative that schools consider the developmental progress of their youngest students.

The Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) is a national measure of children's development, as they enter their first year of full-time school. The AEDC is undertaken every three years, it commenced in 2009, with the 2018 AEDC being the fourth round of data Collection. The fifth Collection Cycle will commence in May 2021. Associate Professor at the Royal Children's Hospital's Centre for Community Child Health, Sharon Goldfeld said:

"Australia was the first country in the world to measure the development of the entire population of children starting school. The data is used to help schools, communities and government identify the services and resources that are needed to best support children and families. There is a unique opportunity to use the data to investigate and respond to trends in early childhood development over time. The AEDC is about our children, our communities, and our future. It gives us the evidence we need to support health, education and community policy and planning" (AEDC, 2015).

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Table 1: AEDC Domains

Domain	Icon	Description
Physical health and wellbeing		Children's physical readiness for the school day, physical independence, and gross and fine motor skills.
Social competence		Children's overall social competence, responsibility and respect, approach to learning and readiness to explore new things.
Emotional maturity		Children's pro-social and helping behaviours and absence of anxious and fearful behaviour, aggressive behaviour and hyperactivity and inattention.
Language and cognitive skills (school-based)		Children's basic literacy, interest in literacy, numeracy and memory, advanced literacy and basic numeracy.
Communication skills and general knowledge		Children's communication skills and general knowledge based on broad developmental competencies and skills.

The census involves teachers of children in their Prep Year (in Queensland), completing a research tool also referred to as 'The Instrument'. The Australian version of the Early Development Instrument (AvEDI) was adapted from the Early Development Instrument (EDI) first created in Canada (Janus & Offord, 2007). The Instrument is made up of 100 questions, which takes a teacher approximately 20 minutes to complete, per student. The AvEDI is completed based on the teacher's knowledge and observations of the children in their class. Children are not required to be present while teachers complete the AvEDI and schools participating in the AEDC are provided with funding for teacher relief time (TRS) through the federal government (Commonwealth of Australia, 2019a).

The responses provide information on the five 'domains' (refer to Table 1), these include:

- physical health and well-being
- social competence
- emotional maturity
- language and cognitive skills (school-based)
- communication skills and general knowledge.

To determine whether an individual domain score is 'developmentally on track', 'developmentally at risk' or 'developmentally vulnerable', national 'cut-offs' were established during the first national data collection in 2009. To create the national cut-offs in 2009, all the children's domain scores were ranked from lowest to highest. Scores ranked in the lowest 10% were classified as developmentally vulnerable. Scores ranked between 10% and 25% were classified as developmentally at risk. Scores ranked in the highest 75% were classified as developmentally on track. These national cut-offs have been applied to all data collections, to provide a reference point to track children's developmental outcomes across

VULNERABILITY, THE IMPACT AND POTENTIAL TO HELP NURTURE YOUR YOUNGEST STUDENTS CONTINUED

Figure 1: 'Cycle Four' Results – Queensland Independent Schools, 2018

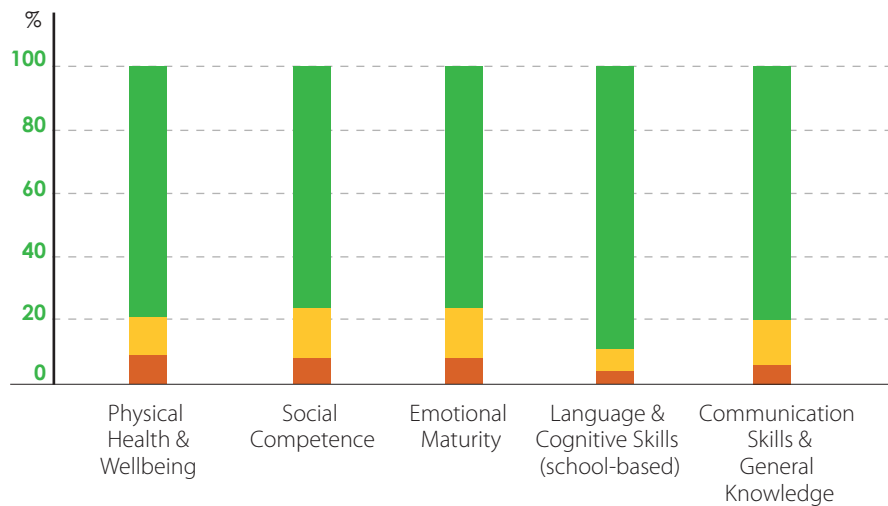
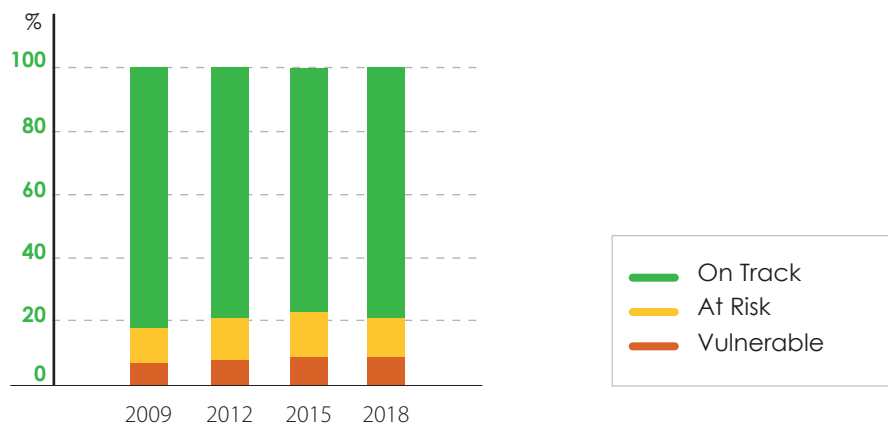


Figure 2: 'Physical Health & Wellbeing' Domain – Queensland Independent Schools, 2009-2018



Australia over time through the AEDC program (Commonwealth of Australia, 2019a).

Data is collected for individual children and then reported for a group of children at a community, state/territory, and national level. The AEDC provides schools (with more than six Prep students) a confidential AEDC School Profile. Results include details about the number and

percentage of children considered to be developmentally vulnerable, at risk or on track of each of the five AEDC domains. The AEDC School Profile can be used to compare their 2021 data with their own data recorded for previous collection periods, if the school has participated in past AEDC collection periods from 2009-2018. The school can also compare its data with the overall community level data for

the area where the school is located and could compare its data with a cross-section of other communities (Commonwealth of Australia, 2019b). The AEDC domains have been shown to predict later outcomes in health, wellbeing, and academic success. According to Brinkman et al. (2013), of the five AEDC domains, the “Language and Cognitive Development” and the “Communication Skills and General Knowledge” domains are the best predictors of scores on NAPLAN assessments (p. 698).

What has the data told us about Queensland Independent School Students?

The 2018 data collated for Queensland independent schools that participated in the fourth Cycle indicated the following (refer to Figure 1):

- The domain with the highest percentage of children who were developmentally ‘vulnerable’ (9.3%) was ‘Physical Health and Wellbeing’.
- The domain with the highest percentage of children who were developmentally ‘at risk’ (15.8%) was ‘Emotional Maturity’.
- The domain with the highest percentage of children who were developmentally ‘on track’ (88.8%) was ‘Language and Cognitive Skills (school-based)’.

Looking more closely at the domain of Physical Health and Wellbeing (refer to Figure 2), the data collected since 2009 shows an increased percentage of developmental ‘vulnerability’ (1.5%) between 2012 and 2018.

There are some similarities between the Queensland Independent School Sector and the general national trends related to physical health outcomes for young people. According to the Australian Government’s Institute of Health and Welfare (2019):

- one-in-four children aged between five to 14 are overweight or obese, with the proportion remaining relatively stable between 2007–2008 (23%) and 2017–2018 (24%)
- most children (96%) aged between five to 14 do not eat enough vegetables, with the proportion meeting the guidelines for vegetable consumption only increasing slightly between 2014–2015 (2.9%) and 2017–2018 (4.4%) (p.vii).

While the general trends of AEDC data in the Queensland independent school sector are interesting, delving deeper into individual School Profile data can yield critical insights for school leaders to support their decision-making processes.

Case Study Targeting AEDC Domain: Physical Health and Wellbeing

Chapman Primary School (ACT)

Source: Commonwealth Government Australia (2019c)

Chapman Primary School is in the suburb of Chapman in Weston Creek, an area about 15km from Canberra, Central Business District (CBD) in Australian Capital Territory (ACT). Weston Creek has 22,746 residents, including 1,924 children aged 0 to 5 years.

What did the results show?

In 2012, 12.7% of Weston Creek’s children were developmentally vulnerable in the Physical Health and Wellbeing domain, compared with the

national figure of 9.3%.

In Chapman, Weston Creek’s most affluent suburb, the proportion of developmentally vulnerable children in this domain was even higher at 15.4%.

Bringing about change

The results of the 2012 Cycle were presented to Chapman Primary School’s staff in mid-2013.

Teachers noticed that many children starting school were not used to doing things themselves, such as getting dressed and looking after their belongings and bags. During school-based physical activities, children were having trouble with activities, such as crawling, reaching for objects and other gross motor skills. Teachers had heard some parents say it was often easier and quicker for them to complete tasks for their child.

Research suggests that movement is not only important for ongoing physical development in children, but also for developing strategies that underpinned other skills, such as emotional development, language, and cognition (Vidoni et al., 2013). To address the vulnerabilities indicated in the AEDC data, a gross motor movement program was developed for school starters at Chapman Primary School. The program aims to strengthen children’s perseverance and resilience, which are also key factors in developing children’s emotional maturity.

About the movement program

To encourage children to explore and extend their physical capabilities, the school purchased innovative gross motor play equipment which can

be used individually, in pairs or in groups. Teachers encourage children to persevere in their mastery of the equipment. The equipment challenges children in a range of areas such as hand/eye and lower limb coordination, balance, and spatial orientation. It includes a hand-held maze, a walking frame that two children can use together, a 90cm high rock-climbing wall, a climbing frame, a swing bridge, and a spinning disc.

A lead teacher involved in delivering the program noted the children were enthusiastic about being involved in the activities and teachers had already noticed improvements:

“One big thing we have noticed is that the children are remaining focused on tasks and attempting to complete activities, such as putting on their own shoes and socks, and having a go with writing.”

What does the data show now?

In the fourth Cycle of AEDC in 2018, the results for Weston Creek (including Chapman) have indicated a significant improvement regarding vulnerability in the Physical Health and Wellbeing domain (Refer to Table 2).

Table 2: AEDC Domain Data – Weston Creek Community (ACT), 333 total children

Physical Health and Wellbeing domain			
children rated as developmentally vulnerable			
2012	2015	2018	
12.7%	11.1%	6.6%	

The evidence suggests that initiatives that specifically target the domains of vulnerability indicated in AEDC results can have a significant positive impact in reducing vulnerability of children in those key areas over time (Commonwealth of Australia, 2019b).

While the general trends of AEDC data in the Queensland independent school sector are interesting, delving deeper into individual School Profile data can yield critical insights for school leaders to support their decision-making processes.

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AEDC 2021 Preliminary School Snapshot

This year, Queensland will be participating in a national trial of early release school trend data, which will provide all participating primary schools with a AEDC 2021 Preliminary School Snapshot. The rationale for this trial is in response to cross-sector feedback, that earlier provision of this information will make it more useful to schools for planning the coming academic year.

The AEDC 2021 Preliminary School Snapshot will comprise a line graph of trends in vulnerability by domain based on 'raw' data from the 2021 census. It will only contain trend information in line graph format and will be available for schools to download for the duration of the national collection period (May to end July), immediately after finalising census requirements. The reports will not include demographic data or community data, which appear in the standard school profile and addendum, respectively. All eligible schools will still receive an AEDC School Profile in November 2021, followed by the school profile addendum in March 2022, as per previous cycles.

Implications for Queensland Independent Schools

There are multiple ways in which ISQ member schools can benefit from participating in the AEDC collection this year and using the data to drive

specific initiatives to target the domains that indicate vulnerability for our youngest students. For ISQ member schools with Prep Years, the results for this cohort in 2021 remain relevant and significant for the next six to 12 years of school planning.

The AEDC data may align with a strategic focus for the school such as:

- improving transitions to school for young learners by creating community partnerships with organisations and services
- reviewing processes and policies for supporting individual student needs in the early years
- implementing pedagogy with a developmental focus for areas of need identified within the school through reflection on the AEDC data.

With four sets of AEDC national data collected in 2009, 2012, 2015 and 2018, now there is indication of the national progress towards improving the development of Australian children. With each successive wave of data collected, the AEDC will provide a more comprehensive understanding of the state and progress of early childhood development in Australia (Commonwealth of Australia, 2019a).

ISQ encourages all member schools to participate in the 2021 Collection Cycle. Participation in 2021 is vital to ensure the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on children's development is captured and understood. In previous years, ISQ has supported 90% of all eligible schools to undertake the AEDC Collection Cycles. This year, we aim to increase participation of our schools to

95%. ISQ staff will engage with schools from March 2021 before the May-July Collection period commences.

In 2021, ISQ will be piloting a project which involves a team of ISQ staff working with a selection of AEDC participating member schools. We will collaborate with schools to review their 2021 AEDC data and support the development of key initiatives that specifically address identified areas of vulnerability. Through this work, ISQ will develop a series of Queensland Independent School AEDC Case Studies to highlight how our members can meaningfully use their data and highlight the benefits for our member school in participating in future AEDC Collections. Please contact ISQ if you are interested in participating in the pilot project or hearing more about this opportunity.

Conclusion

Participation in the AEDC provides a unique and rich data resource to support early childhood development across the country. For Queensland's independent schools the value of participating in the AEDC is significant in creating opportunities to deliver student-centred and evidence-based education programs, that enhance our point of difference in education provision. School leaders can implement data-driven strategies that create long-term positive outcomes for current students and the wider community.

The benefits of participating in the AEDC collection include:

- AEDC results predict NAPLAN results from Years 3 to 9
- AEDC predicts social and behavioural outcomes at school
- providing a common language and publicly accessible data for all services to engage with making it easier for schools to forge critical partnerships with other community organisations and services

- allowing a school to examine how school assets can better support early childhood development before children arrive at school and throughout their school journey.

This paper uses data from the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC). The AEDC is funded by the Australian Government Department of Education, Skills and Employment. The findings and views reported are those of the author and should not be attributed to the Department or the Australian Government.

For more information

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The next AEDC data collection starts in Term 2, 2021

Your school's data makes a difference

The AEDC gives us a complete picture of the development of children in their first year of school. The data is used by schools, communities, and governments to plan services and supports that give our kids the best start at school.

Every school counts and it's through the commitment of all schools that the AEDC is a success. Thank you for playing your part in the AEDC data collection.

Find out more at www.aedc.org.au

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