



Learning for the future in Sydney's West.

a. the program/project/cause objectives.

Starting school is a significant event where childhood learning should flourish. It should be an exciting and important developmental milestone and opportunity for any young person.

Unfortunately, there is a hidden reality that many young children face when they enter the mainstream education system. Many children start school with an undiagnosed learning difficulty or learning disability and are therefore developmentally vulnerable and at risk of falling behind. In fact, research shows that up to 15% of children are affected by learning difficulties and disabilities (Learning Difficulties Australia, 2014).

These young people are quite often affected by conditions such as ADHD, Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), dyslexia, dyscalculia, anxiety, depression, fine and gross motor delays and speech and language delays. More generally, they may struggle to understand their emotions, communicate with others, and complete basic tasks.

The reality is there is no financial assistance or extremely limited government funding available for children with learning difficulties to access the extra support they need. As a result, the education system is struggling to cope with the complexity of the challenge and often lacks the expertise to know how to help these children in the classroom.

Over 27 registered clubs across Western Sydney are responding to and addressing this serious educational gap for young children with learning difficulties and disabilities and their families by partnering with not-for-profit organisation Learning Links.

Learning Links has nearly 50 years of experience in helping kids learn and is recognised as a pioneer in the area of inclusive early childhood education and specialist support for learning difficulties and disabilities. Learning Links provides a range of evidence-informed educational programs implemented through their team of highly qualified Speech and Language Pathologists, Occupational Therapists, Education Specialists and Psychologists. Thanks, in part, to the generous support of Western Sydney Clubs, Learning Links reaches 4,000 children across NSW every year.

Western Sydney Clubs work in conjunction with Learning Links to achieve a clear mission. The objective is to assist Learning Links in providing young children with learning difficulties the skills, services, and family support they need to thrive.

With the mission to prevent learning difficulties from causing disadvantage in children across Western Sydney, Clubs are providing significant support for a number of Learning Links' school-based programs.

The evidence-informed school programs supported by Clubs cover an array of learning areas including speech therapy, psychology, numeracy, and literacy. The Clubs have also funded critical educational resources for up-to-date learning materials and professional development for teachers.

Without early intervention, these difficulties can affect every aspect of a child's life and lead to disengagement from learning, low self-esteem, poor memory, and negative behaviours, such as bullying. As adults, they're more likely to suffer from mental health issues, unemployment, drug and alcohol dependency and incarceration. The real cost of this is quite staggering with a fiscal cost of \$315.3M and a social cost of \$580.7M every single year (Lamb & Huo, 2017).

b. the support the club provided, i.e. was it financial, in-kind, staff volunteers or use of club facilities?

Today in Australia, a diagnosis of a learning disability or a learning difficulty does not entitle a child or their family to financial assistance. This means that access to the support they need rests solely on their family's ability to pay for critical assessments, therapies, educational support, and targeted behavioural interventions. For the one in five families living in poverty, this is often impossible, which means children miss out on vital services.

From March 2019 to date, a total of 27 Western Sydney Clubs have collectively contributed nearly \$1M dollars (\$970,000) to Learning Links through ClubGRANTS. During this time, these life-changing funds have reached over twenty Western Sydney schools and helped support children who are most at risk of falling behind. Over the last 12 months alone, this support has enhanced the quality of life and helped improve future outcomes for nearly 630 young children struggling with learning difficulties and disabilities.

As part of their respective employee volunteer programs, Clubs staff and patrons also make a direct impact in their local community by volunteering in a range of Learning Links programs, particularly the Reading and Counting for Life programs.

Many of the contributing Western Sydney Clubs also host Charity Housie in-venue with Learning Links as the exclusive benefiting organisation. Charity Housie is Learning Links' biggest fundraising arm with over half a million dollars in net profit made from November 2019 to date from contributing Western Sydney Clubs.

c. a timeline of activities/events.

The most accurate timeline from program initiation and Club introduction through to delivery is approximately 15 months. A typical blueprint of engagement, including adequate planning, strategy and rollout across the respective Western Sydney Clubs consists of:

- ✓ Program initiation – key localised issues identified within respective Clubs LGA.
- ✓ Portfolio build of identified schools with selected vulnerable and at-risk children.
- ✓ Structured program delivery cemented – ensuring priority areas addressed.
- ✓ Submission of ClubGRANTS application and approval.
- ✓ Facilitation and rollout with identified local schools.
- ✓ Key stakeholders, including Learning Link professionals, recruited.
- ✓ Commence program rollout.
- ✓ Mid-year engagement and feedback provided to respective participating Clubs.
- ✓ Annual outcomes report provided and subsequent follow up with participating Clubs.

d. any developments made since implementation

Despite immense challenges, Learning Links navigated COVID-19 with outcomes achieved and sustainability intact, thanks in part to the ongoing support provided by Western Sydney Clubs. No employee loss occurred during the period, simply proving the organisation's robustness, durability, and sustainability.

Support for specialised learning needs is now more urgent than ever. This is reflected in the high, double-digit growth Learning Links saw in their demand for services across their seven Learning Centres in 2020.

One of the great outcomes from the investment of Clubs is Learning Links' Professional Development for Teachers program. After being provided with specialist knowledge and skills in children's learning, development and family support, many teachers of Sydney's West now have enhanced capabilities to support children with learning difficulties and disabilities. These raised capabilities not only support their current students but are also taken with them for the lifespan of their teaching career.

With Learning Links new three-year strategy, *Impact for Kids*, continued support will triple the number of children Learning Links supports.

a) how the project, program or cause was first presented to the club.

Unfortunately, there are many children located in Western Sydney who come from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, where access to learning interventions can be particularly challenging.

To intensify this issue, there is a very strong correlation between Australian children who are financially disadvantaged and learning difficulties. A staggering 17% of Australian children (774,000 Australian children) live in households of poverty (Australian Council of Social Services and UNSW Sydney, 2020). Meaning, children who are born into a more financially stable household have a significant advantage over those who don't.

Clubs of Sydney's West are acutely aware of this issue and understand there is a genuine community need. Local families not only lack the financial means to pay for interventions, but they may also lack the ability to provide the practical support their children need due to the hereditary nature of some learning disabilities and difficulties.

In response, Learning Links identifies critical educational gaps and present such research and evidence to key club representatives at each respective Western Sydney Club. The internal club personnel can range from Board level to Executive and CEO status through to Marketing or Community Relations personnel.

Generally, support is requested within a ClubGRANTS submission, where applicable for each respective Club, during their qualifying grant round period within the current grant year.

b) Why it was important to the club to support this community need.

Very limited government funding exists to directly support children with learning difficulties and disabilities; they are the children who fall through the gaps. Without support, vulnerable children participate in a mainstream classroom where resources and expertise are stretched.

The support provided by Western Sydney Clubs ensures at-risk children receive services they otherwise would not have the financial means to access.

Many young children across Western Sydney come from lower socio-economic areas, often from non-English speaking households. Many have not attended preschool or early education services prior to school entry. Such children not only face significant communication barriers, but they also have poorly developed foundational skills necessary for literacy development.

This claim is supported by an analysis conducted by the Department of Education in 2019 which showed a massive pressure on specialist support classes clustered in Sydney's West. Specialist support classes in public schools are heavily concentrated in the most disadvantaged parts of Sydney, with 92 in the Blacktown local government area alone. In contrast, throughout the Northern Beaches, Ryde and Sydney council areas, there are half as many specialist support classrooms as there are schools.

This divide suggests socio-economically advantaged parents are better able to navigate available systems and pay for early intervention services, such as speech pathology and occupational therapy before their children began school.

Western Sydney Clubs are filling this gap by ensuring hundreds of young children and families, along with hundreds of classroom teachers who are spending considerable time modifying programs to adequately support children with a learning difficulty or disability, do not continue to experience such an injustice.

Provide an outline of the positive impact the club's contribution had on the community.

The COVID-19 pandemic certainly created distressing and unforeseen impacts on the quality of education received by young children with learning difficulties and disabilities across New South Wales and indeed across the whole country. In response, Western Sydney Clubs, despite their own challenges, continue to underpin Learning Links vital services, producing tangible and positive outcomes for vulnerable children.

Program outcomes are evidence-based, and with the support of Clubs, are quite extraordinary. Children are making measurable gains with literacy and numeracy, together with significant improvements in their social, emotional, and behavioural skills. Teachers are also returning to the classroom upskilled with a boost in confidence to address additional learning needs.

Time and time again, children with learning difficulties and disabilities have been shown to make a six-month improvement for each year they attend school, while their peers progress a full 12 months. With Learning Links' interventions, on average significant gains of up to 19 months have been achieved in just as little as eight months in areas of literacy and numeracy.

Collated evidence from two key Learning Links programs, Counting for Life and Reading for Life, both heavily backed by Western Sydney Clubs, demonstrate outstanding results.

The Reading for Life literacy program has seen children in Years Two to Four progress their reading comprehension and accuracy by six months. Unfortunately, those who receive no support maintain an average gain of just two months in the same period, proving young children can progress three times faster with Learning Links intervention.

The Counting for Life numeracy program is just as impressive. During this program, on average, children in Years Three to Five improve their mathematical reasoning, addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division by a staggering six months in just 10 weeks. Again, those who receive no intervention, only maintain an average progress gain of one month in the same period, proving young children can progress six times faster with Learning Links intervention.

Ultimately, Western Sydney Clubs are partnering with Learning Links to set up the foundational life skills for vulnerable young children to truly participate in society well beyond the classroom. Adequate levels of numeracy alone are essential for rudimentary daily activities such as money handling, taking medication or even cooking. More prominently, it is also associated with labour market participation, employment and earning a respectable income.

With a vision to create a community where learning difficulties are no longer a barrier to a fulfilling life, Western Sydney Clubs are supporting Learning Links as a priority to close this gap for children. As highlighted in Learning Links' 2019/2020 Impact Report, 92% of family's that are supported by Learning Links would recommend the service to others.

Behavioural issues, anti-social behaviour, school dropout and substance abuse are all often linked and associated with unaddressed learning difficulties. In fact, 30% of juveniles in correctional centres have learning difficulties (Learning Difficulties Australia, 2014).

Learning difficulties are common and without intervention the gap simply widens with age. This is a compelling case for change, and one that Western Sydney Clubs are leading at the forefront.