EVALUATION OF THE SMITH FAMILY’S GIRLS AT THE CENTRE PROGRAM
CENTRALIAN MIDDLE SCHOOL, ALICE SPRINGS

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Evaluation of The Smith Family’s Girls at the Centre Program
Centralian Middle School, Alice Springs

ABBREVIATIONS

ASHS Alice Springs High School
CMS Centralian Middle School
CSC Centralian Senior College
DEEWR Department of Employment, Education and Workplace Relations
G@C Girls at the Centre
NTDET Northern Territory Department of Education and Training
TSF The Smith Family
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY & RECOMMENDATIONS

Associate Professors Tess Lea and Catherine Driscoll of the Department of Gender and Cultural Studies at the University of Sydney were commissioned in August 2011 to complete an evaluation of the Girls at the Centre (G@C) program for The Smith Family (TSF) and through them, the Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR). Dr Penelope Robinson from the Faculty of Education, the University of Sydney, provided invaluable data sourcing and coding assistance.

EVALUATION OBJECTIVES AND SCOPE

The evaluation team were asked to undertake an assessment of the G@C program, specifically to:

- Measure the extent to which the Girls at the Centre program meets its objectives to improve the literacy, develop life goals and life skills of young Indigenous women at Centralian Middle School (CMS) in Alice Springs, identify the significant success factors and document the success stories.
- Assess the scalability of G@C for adoption to other high need sites such as large regional centres and urban locations.
- Provide information on the effectiveness of the program’s strategies to increase retention of young Indigenous women to Year 12.

APPROACH AND METHOD

The evaluation framework was developed in conjunction with TSF at the outset of the commission through consultations which contained the following elements:

- A distillation of key program objectives for G@C.
- Nomination of existing and potential data sources and existing performance measures.
- Nomination of and introduction to key stakeholders, especially participating girls and their families.

Data gathering commenced in late August 2011, and involved a focused literature review; consultations with key stakeholders; field work observations and case study development. Full ethics approval was received by Human Research Ethics Committee of the University of Sydney [Protocol No. 09-2011 / 14071] and permission to conduct the research within Centralian Middle School was obtained from the Northern Territory Department of Education and Training.

REPORT CONTENTS

The Introduction establishes the evaluation and its methods in greater detail, followed by a section elaborating the history of the program and its location at CMS, the context for and design of G@C activities, current participant numbers and the state of the program now. An overview of pertinent data from our literature review is followed by a section describing the evaluation’s findings in detail. The report ends with our overall conclusions and recommendations.

FINDINGS

In the main report, our conclusions and recommendations are presented in the final chapter under the following headings:

1. Achievement of program objectives
2. Potential for improvements and relationship to other programs
3. Issues for scalability

A total of nine recommendations have been made. The fuller rationale for each set of recommendations is detailed under ‘Findings’ within the report and briefly reiterated in the concluding section. We note that there are
overlaps in the recommendations as some of the tasks that are important for the existing program’s sustainability are likewise important for scale-up.

In summary

- The program is highly valued by school staff, girl participants and their families
- The program positively impacts on life goals and skills in demonstrable ways
- The program appears to positively impact on Year 12 retention
- The program’s unidirectional impact on literacy is more equivocal as the program’s academic emphases are indirect (which is not necessarily a shortcoming)
- The program clearly impacts on community engagement with the school, especially through families, although this unique outcome is not listed as a specific objective
- The program significantly impacts on school attendance although this is not listed as a specific objective
- The program’s coaching team, holism and inclusivity are highlighted by many as success factors. Other key success factors in the program design include:
  - Parental engagement
  - Girls’ input into decision making
  - Resources and Facilities
    - Access to a girls room
    - Spacious area to engage with parents
    - Access to bus and other school facilities/equipment
  - Decentralisation/independence from school and government
    - Discrete funding and management
    - High quality ‘back stage’ program management
  - Site characteristics and wider school integration
  - Constituency of supporters
    - Formal partnerships and strategic alliances, networks and coalitions
- In terms of achieving program objectives, presuming current funding levels can be maintained, the program’s overall impact certainly justifies its continuance.
- Further, presuming sufficient funding can be generated, the program has potential to be expanded to other sites, including urban, large regional, and non-Indigenous settings, but time is required for The Smith Family to ensure the rationale and recommended procedures behind all key aspects of the program are made clear for third and fourth party implementers. A useful guide to assist this activity is available at http://www.msiworldwide.com/files/scalingup-framework.pdf.
- We also note that, at the local level, it is widely suggested that the program is needed for girls at Centralian Senior College (CSC), and there is some suggestion a “boys” version of the program is needed at CMS.
- The work of preparing for scaling up would also help make the current CMS-specific implementation model more robust, so many of the suggested activities could be considered as ‘program improvements’ regardless of intention to expand. Above all, for scalability, the program needs greater clarity about what it sets out to do, when and why.

RECOMMENDATIONS

ACHIEVEMENT OF PROGRAM OBJECTIVES

Recommendation 1
That the success of the G@C program, in terms of achieving its more realistic primary objectives and additionally achieving the unlisted yet important outcomes of improved attendance and family engagement, be acknowledged and endorsed as a successful means of supporting girls in the middle years of schooling.

Recommendation 2
That TSF reconsider the isolation of ‘literacy’ as a goal for the program. Given the program’s clear targeting of and notable gains in the highly strategic areas of attendance and engagement, we recommend that ‘family engagement’ and ‘improved attendance and participation’ would be more realistic and accurate fits for the program’s activities and measurable effects.

POTENTIAL FOR IMPROVEMENTS AND RELATIONSHIP TO OTHER PROGRAMS

Recommendation 3
That, given the essentiality of high quality coaches and effective support team to the program, that processes for recruiting, training and supporting new coaches to deliver consistently well in new sites are developed. Such training would include enhanced knowledge of child and youth development; advanced skills in anticipatory guidance, negotiating, role modeling, holistic case management, and working in mixed school teams; and focus on the skills and attitudes needed for working “with” and not against girls. Such assessment of required competencies and associated training and support are needed for delivery of quality G@C services. As part of this, TSF should critically examine the case management ratio (1:25) in terms of the human resource implications of current workloads, articulate the rationale and provide useable frameworks for guiding the necessary and inevitable deviations from this standard.

Recommendation 4
That the G@C program is supported to gather and maintain consistent data on retention from year to year within and following the program through the high schools into which G@C graduates are most likely to feed. This requires TSF designing rigorous procedures for data collection and maintenance, and systematising these so there is less duplication and more consistency. This is ideally an iterative task set up in consultation with coaches and support staff as primary input points.

Recommendation 5
That TSF support the development of operational protocols, in close consultation with G@C field staff, so that any new implementers are guided in what they do. Inevitably and desirably, local discretion will be needed to adjust these recommended protocols to suit individual and everyday circumstances. But making these adjustments also depends on understanding what levels of exposure to different activities yield desired impacts on girls most effectively, thus ensuring that local variations are operating within a clearly articulated theory of practice.

Recommendation 6
That G@C communicate its logics and approach to CMS staff on a regular face to face basis and participate more fulsomely in CMS planning. This includes addressing confusion about the different “on site” support
programs made available for girls and/or Indigenous students, clarifying their points of distinction, and communicating clearly and regularly to all CMS staff the aims and the content of the G@C program.

**Recommendation 7**
That TSF consider the successes of other scaled models (such as Clontarf) and additionally explore grounds for program improvement and coordination within and between such programs.

**ISSUES FOR SCALABILITY**

**Recommendation 8**
That a preparatory program of analytical work for scaling up is embarked upon which focuses on the scale-up target and purpose; institutionalisation processes such as recruitment, training, support, program measurement and data systems; and the leadership processes and organisational capacity for achieving and sustaining buy-in from stakeholders and knowledge of site characteristics necessary for successful implementation.

**Recommendation 9**
That TSF clarify the core elements of the G@C program through attention to the following tasks:

- Articulate the theories behind activities and approach for third parties
- Outline steps for new site development and protocols for implementation
- Specify roles and responsibilities of different stakeholders (TSF program managers; coaches; schools; parents; girls)
- Tighten goals and targets (without losing emphasis on fun for girls)
- Clarify governance structure and strengthen mechanisms for community input into program
- Outline necessary marketing and constituency buy-in processes.

**LIMITATIONS**
In presenting and confidently standing by the above recommendations, we would also alert readers to certain limitations:

- The data is neither longitudinal nor comparative given that Centralian Middle School (CMS) has only officially existed since 2011 and the still-young G@C program was inaugurated in exceptionally turbulent conditions.
- The evaluation was not expected to undertake an assessment of the program’s cost and efficiency. We thus cannot answer the question whether current methods of delivering the program are the most efficient means of doing so.
- We did not conduct a market assessment of demand for the program, although we make note of widespread suggestions that the program is needed for girls in the senior school, Centralian Senior College (CSC); and calls for a “boys” version of the program.
- We did not have the time to develop the relationships of trust that would enable deeper exploration of some of the issues that are suggested by specific aspects of this report. This includes more extensive exploration of the perspectives of young girls, observations of their worlds in practice, discussion with girls who do not participate in the program or discerning which if any girls are in fact hostile to the program.
- Finally, time and budget did not allow us to rigorously compare the G@C program to other programs with similar aims, although a desk-top survey of analogous program evaluation data was undertaken.
This said, there is another existing iteration of the G@C program in the Tiwi Islands, which selectively uses components of the G@C program and takes a notably different form through its adaptation to local conditions. It is thus an existing example of the program in a quasi-scaled form. Analysis of this program would be invaluable.

Additional limitations are discussed in the context of the report’s analysis and findings.
1. INTRODUCTION

EVALUATION OBJECTIVES AND SCOPE

The Smith Family (TSF) sought an experienced evaluation team to undertake an assessment of its Girls at the Centre (G@C) program, specifically to:

- Measure the extent to which the Girls at the Centre program meets its objectives to improve the literacy, develop life goals and life skills of young Indigenous women at Centralian Middle School (CMS) in Alice Springs, identify the significant success factors and document the success stories.
- Assess the scalability of G@C for adaption to other high need sites such as large regional centres and urban locations.
- Provide information on the effectiveness of the program’s strategies to increase retention of young Indigenous women to Year 12.

Associate Professors Catherine Driscoll and Tess Lea, from the Department of Gender and Cultural Studies at the University of Sydney, were commissioned to undertake this assessment. We were assisted by Dr Penelope Robinson from the University of Sydney’s School of Education.

EVALUATION METHODS AND APPROACH

A hybrid of different evaluation models was used for this evaluation. We focused on program improvement methods within a participatory framework which engaged stakeholders in establishing key questions and refining answers. Program improvement involves an assessment of how the program is being implemented: Is it being implemented according to plan? Are target populations being reached? Are the right people receiving the intended services? Are staff adequately qualified/trained/supported? How well do external agencies understand the program and its targets?

We also aimed to assess the program’s outcomes or impact (that is, what it has actually achieved) bearing in mind the program's early stages of development. From the outset we anticipated that the program is neither large enough nor has it been in place long enough to generate causal analyses, only inferences. Therefore we looked at impact in terms of both now standard measures (e.g. the number of graduates in relation to anticipated targets; retention improvements as far as these could be ascertained) and more innovative measures (such as using personal stories of transformation and success from participating girls and their families).

Key stakeholders were defined as participating girls, parents, G@C and TSF staff, CMS personnel; other youth support agencies; other schools potentially interested in the program; and policy formulators and community advisors who had been involved in the initiation and/or subsequent development of the G@C program. By talking to key stakeholders when designing the assessment framework we also borrowed from participatory evaluation techniques, which aim to foster ownership, partnership and participation in the evaluation process.

Researchers Driscoll and Lea made three field trips to Alice Springs in August and September 2011. The first of these enabled familiarisation with key stakeholders, including a brief introduction to the girl participants and their families, observation of G@C activities and wider Alice Springs community, and a gap analysis of existing data. To help highlight the program's internally understood logics, in addition to reviewing program documents, we workshopped the G@C program theory with TSF management and G@C staff to surface assumptions and theories about how G@C activities and outputs contribute to achieving desired goals and thus highlight the program’s impact pathways. Over two half-day sessions we interactively explored: (i) how projects and activities are chosen relative to the program’s stated goals, the student cohort, and team-member’s skills; (ii) causal chains of activities, outputs and outcomes through which a project is expected to achieve its purpose and goal; and (iii) networks of evolving relationships between project implementing organizations, stakeholders, and ultimate beneficiaries that are necessary to achieve the goal.

Through this process we were able to map the relevant stakeholders for the G@C program, targeting these for consultation. We also ensured we spoke to people who might have a negative perspective on or perception of the program. Groups targeted included:
The Smith Family's Girls at the Centre Program
Centralian Middle School, Alice Springs

- Girls who have, are, or chose not to be, part of the program
- Families (parents or guardians)
- Executive, teaching and support staff at CMS and CSC (including program representatives from the Girls’ Academy at both schools)
- Indigenous Education and Employment Taskforce members
- G@C Advisory Group members
- Community, government and industry representatives.

The second and third trips enabled live data gathering through interviews and field observations. For interviews held on school grounds, we adopted an opportunistic sampling strategy, targeting participating girls, teaching staff, school leaders and Indigenous liaison officers when interested stakeholders were available, whereas a ‘snowballing’ technique was used to interview parents at a location of their choosing. We also conducted in-depth interviews with policy officers from a range of organisations, principally but not confined to government departments and agencies, and community leaders, taking on average one and a half hours each. Available quantitative data and measures were analysed. An exploratory case study method was used to identify critical success factors, relying in particular on the testimony of participating and graduate students from the G@C program and the people who most directly observed their transformations: parents and educators.

Ethics clearance was obtained through the institutional processes of the University of Sydney, including approval of consent documents and processes. Stakeholders were given different information statements describing the evaluation task and process in wording designed specifically for professional staff, parents/guardians, and minors. There were also targeted versions of the consent form, meaning an ‘agreement form’ in the case of minors, and no minor was interviewed without also obtaining consent of a parent or guardian. In this process we assured G@C staff, girl participants and their families our aims were not hostile but focused on identifying program strengths and options for improvement. We also assured confidentiality to the extent that no person’s comments or response would be personally identifiable in any version of our report or in any other use of the data gathered. As part of the consent process, we asked all those we interviewed if they would like feedback on the report and in what form. The majority indicated their interest in being emailed the findings.

With consent, most interviews were tape recorded and a selection fully transcribed. In all, a total of 40 formal interviews were recorded, together with a smaller number of unrecorded, informal discussions. These interviews were semi-structured, drawing upon a list of topical questions to guide discussions whilst also allowing participants to spontaneously nominate issues. In the context of the Federal Government’s NT Emergency Response, establishing a safe and trusting space for parents to be candid about their children’s educational experiences was paramount. When interviewing students every effort was made to ensure that the space for the interview was both familiar and selected by them, that they were not recorded without express willing consent, and that their interviews were privately conducted in ways that could not be observed by professionals involved in the program, their school, or by other students.

Limited ethnographic observations of G@C interactions were made at such key events as the Families and Schools Together (FAST), Breakfast-with-a-mentor, and other programmed events, and in one instance, for comparison, at a “Girls Academy” Breakfast-with-a-mentor (see below). We also paid close attention to the discrete spaces that are part of the program, such as the G@C room, and arranged to sit in when this was least disruptive. Observations of the wider school setting, transport routes, shopping centres and other entertainment areas, and surrounding suburbs were also made. Observational and interview data were recorded through audio recordings and hand written jottings and select digital recordings were fully transcribed. Additionally, the available literature on Indigenous education, Indigenous girlhood, girls in schools, family participation in schools was collected and analysed along with policy and program documents.

The data sets accumulated in these ways were then coded into themes, categories and emergent patterns. A key strategy was to try and disentangle phenomena that might result from the G@C program without over-emphasising the possibility of precise cause-effect analyses in the absence of experimental research trial data. Initial analyses were presented to The Smith Family in November 2011. This feedback session was integral to testing and confirming the findings presented here.
LIMITATIONS

The data we could gather or analyse is neither longitudinal nor comparative given that CMS has only existed for a short period and was not established as a research trial. CMS was established in 2010 and had four principals in its founding year which additionally complicates the collection of useful data and mapping of relations between G@C and its context. There was even higher turnover within the education bureaucracy’s leadership structures in Central Australia in the same period. Within the G@C program, itself only in existence since 2008, data collection and maintenance has also been impeded by changes to staff and by the restructuring of two high schools into one middle school. It is also the case that while good data have been collected, as a pilot project, consistent processes for data collection and maintenance are still being established (see discussion below).

Assessment of the program’s cost and efficiency was not attempted. This includes any in-depth analysis of cost drivers and of other forms of intervention and activity foregone because of this program. We cannot answer the question whether this is the most efficient means of delivering the program. Nor did we conduct a needs assessment which would establish how many eligible girls are in the central Australian or other area cohorts.

There were also some limitations required by the timeline and budget. The research team did not have sufficient time to develop significant independent relationships with girls and families, or with staff, that would have encouraged quantitatively more and qualitatively more complex participation in the research. The number of girls or parents/guardians wanting to be interviewed for an evaluation of the program by unknown researchers, whilst relatively small, was significant enough to support our indicative findings. Within the time constraints of the study we could not access girls who had deliberately chosen not to be part of the G@C program, which would have added an important perspective to our analysis. And we did not interview girls who are flagged as problematic by CMS leadership, which would also have offered important perspectives on the program.

Finally, it was not the task of this evaluation to rigorously compare the G@C program to other programs with similar aims, although a desk-top survey of analogous program evaluation data was undertaken. This said, our interviews soon revealed that there is another existing iteration of the G@C program in the Tiwi Islands, which selectively uses components of the G@C program and takes a notably different form through its adaptation to local conditions. Analysis of this program would have been invaluable because it was established by the same staff with the same aims and using some of the components that have been seen as integral to program success at CMS. It would thus be an excellent example of the possibilities and challenges to the program’s scalability. Neither the timeline nor budget of this evaluation permitted us to visit the Tiwi Islands but such an analysis would be a useful future step for trialling scalability.
2. THE GIRLS AT THE CENTRE PROGRAM

BACKGROUND

According to TSF briefing documents, Indigenous girls in Alice Springs face a range of challenges, including high levels of family unemployment, poor housing, being five times more likely to be teenage mothers than non-Indigenous girls, less likely to be employed after they leave school, and more likely to be the victims of violence. These obstacles can negatively impact their school attendance, academic achievements and life goals. This view is confirmed by other observers. As one educator put it to us,

... the reality is we have a lot of special needs kids due to alcohol, drug abuse, substances – we have a disproportionate number of kids that have either organic learning difficulties or just poor school attendance, English is a second or third or fourth language – there’s a whole bunch of reasons that there’s a lot of challenging behaviour. So … that’s why it is good to have these programs and also why it’s so critical to provide [G@C] support and those social skills.

The G@C program began in 2008 with aims to improve the attendance, retention and academic success of Indigenous girls in Years 7 to 9 at Alice Springs High School (ASHS) and Anzac Hill High School. In 2010 the two schools merged to become Centralian Middle School (see below).

The Smith Family established G@C at the request of the Alice Springs Indigenous Education and Employment Taskforce, a multi-party voluntary committee with representation from industry, philanthropy, community organisations and government. The Taskforce was concerned to redress the absence of focused programs for adolescent girls in Alice Springs, in the context of programs such as Clontarf, which target young Indigenous men through the enticements of football (see http://www.clontarffootball.com/), and the Graham (Polly) Farmer Foundation, which supports potential high achievers to pursue secondary schooling through to tertiary studies (see http://www.pff.com.au/).

As the G@C website puts it

Many programs are one offs or just provide one aspect of support. The Smith Family knows from our research that vulnerable students need the wrap around support and high expectations that a multilayered program like Girls at the Centre can provide. The challenge for the community was seeing so many young indigenous girls with so much potential ending up “pushing prams” at age 14. The community decided they wanted a better future for these girls and so the Alice Springs Indigenous Education and Employment Taskforce asked The Smith Family to develop and run this program. (http://cms.nt.edu.au/Careers/Girls--the-Centre/)

The Taskforce invited TSF to design a program which might meet the needs of girls ‘in the middle’ – girls in Central Australia who are neither so high risk that they need specialist management nor so well supported they would achieve their aspirations without additional support. It seems there was some ambiguity about the desired target group and different definitions of ‘at risk’ were in circulation in these initial discussions. There is also suggestion that the program was more strongly focused on Indigenous girls in this initial phase.

The resulting program aims to counteract the high absenteeism and school drop-out rates of teenage girls and to support them to build constructive, mature relationships with each other, their schools, families and the broader community. Both Indigenous and non-Indigenous girls are welcome to participate; and self-select their involvement based on the program’s reputation and presentations by program, school, and staff comprising the CMS ‘wellbeing team’ of school and specialist support staff. Presentations and program material are provided to girls at the beginning of each school year and students coming to the Middle School for pre-enrolment orientation sessions are also briefed.

In April 2008 a coordinator for the G@C program was appointed to start the groundwork for setting up the program. In June 2008 the first Girl Coach was recruited. A Community Reference Group was also established in early 2008. This group is “made up of a cross section of people from the Alice Springs Community. The group acts in an advisory capacity and champions the program in the community. They meet once each school term and TSF presents a regular update at these meetings and gathers feedback” (TSF to DEEWR report, Dec 2008).
CENTRALIAN MIDDLE SCHOOL (CMS)

Alice Springs High School and Anzac High School were merged in 2010 to become CMS. Prior to this, the G@C program had been operating in both sites, and was reintroduced into the new CMS structure. Institutionally during the merger phase, there were many staffing changes, extensive building and refurbishment, and changes to timetabling. In the words of one, “the merger was traumatic. We had stand-in principals, half the staff left. We lost gifted teachers. We were promised state of the art everything and all we got was a mess.” Changes in leadership at CMS saw the Principal on leave after Term 1 and acting principals holding the position in Term 2 of Semester 1 and again in Semester 2. In effect, four principals rotated through the position during CMS’s establishment year. It is of note that both CMS educators and families observed that the continuity of presence offered by the G@C (especially the familiar coaching team) was an important part of assisting girls and their families cope with the stresses and conflicts of the merger. G@C program staff are considered part of the school’s wider wellbeing team and coordinate their family linkage work with the school’s Home Liaison Officers (HLO) and Aboriginal and Islander Education Worker (AIEW).

In August 2010, 362 students were enrolled at CMS. By mid 2011 that number had grown to 401. The current principal, Andrew Leslie, has stabilised the post-merger school and committed to a program of reform in which CMS is able to effectively compete with private schools to be the middle school of choice in Central Australia. As part of this, in 2012 CMS will be among the first NT schools to offer the national Australian curriculum for English, Maths, Science and History (http://cms.nt.edu.au/). The Principal has also been vigilant about keeping higher quality profiles of the students so that more proactive pastoral and academic intervention can be mustered as required: attendance, academic performance, suspension and behavioural data are now more coherently documented and analysed.

Among other actions this has seen attention paid to more accurately defining the nature of learning disadvantage within the CMS cohort. For instance, dissatisfied with the long wait for government-arranged psychological assessments of students identified as at-risk, Principal Leslie organised cognitive assessments to be undertaken by an independent specialist, using system-congruent instruments. The extent of learning need led to extra resources, as it met the criteria for such under the mandated funding formulae. As a result, the pool of staff able to assist with verified learning disorders and adaptive behaviour issues has grown since his arrival. (It raises the question of how so many students were able to reach Year 7 without their needs being assessed properly in earlier years).

CMS offers a range of programs for its diverse student cohort, including a number in partnership with externally funded operators. These include G@C, the Mparntwe Academy (Clontarf), and Centralian Girls Academy. Of these, there are two programs specifically available to girls: the G@C program run by TSF; and the Centralian Girls Academy, an initiative of Role Models and Leaders Australia. Role Models and Leaders Australia “provides leadership, sports and education programs to assist Australian youth, particularly Indigenous youth, who suffer from poverty, sickness, misfortune, or a disconnectedness from their community” (http://www.girlsacademy.com.au/)

The two programs

At first blush, G@C and the Centralian Girls Academy might be perceived as the same program. But there are subtle differences. The Centralian Girls Academy targets Indigenous girls more exclusively and emphasises sports. G@C, people repeatedly told us, is more holistic (see ‘Success Factors’ below). From the perspective of participating girls, the two programs are entirely distinguishable, because for them this distinction between a holistic family support and activities program (which can include sport), and a sports-based coaching program which can include other elements, is categorically different in experiential terms.

The simultaneous presence of two girl-focused programs in the one site has a history. When the G@C program was established, it was the first in field. It had to be driven by the advocacy and experiences of TSF program designers, notably Tricia Rushton and Catherine Phillips. At the same time, the Australian Government was aware of the over-emphasis on sports for Indigenous boys and the lack of complementary programs for girls. So while G@C was being inaugurated, budget allocations for incentivising Indigenous girls through sports using the government’s existing Sporting Chance funding line was in the wings (see Literature Review below). The Indigenous Employment and Education Taskforce helped establish the Centralian Girls Academy based on the Sporting Chance formula with clear reference to the pilot success of the G@C program (which the Taskforce has also facilitated). But any sense that there is ongoing duplication between the programs is refuted by professionals, including teaching and administrative staff at CMS, as well as by girls in both programs and as graduands of G@C, all of whom clearly agree that the girls who enrol in either would not be served by or even...
necessarily interested in the other and that the relevant programs are quite distinct in their addressing of similar and complementary but not identical aims.

In considering the fact that there are currently two girl-specific programs at CMS, respondents also put it to us that, as the only remaining public school, the onus is on CMS to expand the range of options available within the school. In other words, because families depending on (or preferring) public education no longer have any choice of schools in the post-merger environment, diversity of opportunity needs to be provided on campus; and having two programs for girls to choose from helps meet this need.

G@C PROGRAM OBJECTIVES
As they are currently articulated, the aims of the G@C program are to:

- help improve literacy
- develop life goals
- develop life skills
- make the Alice Springs community more supportive of emerging young Indigenous women.

We have taken these aims, as well as the terms of the consultancy outlined above, as a framework for our analysis. G@C activities and its articulation with CMS, TSF, and other support agencies are more clearly addressed to some of these goals than others and particularly to the related (but unlisted) goals of improving school attendance and targeting family engagement. We return to these ambiguities and contradictions below.

STRATEGIC ORIENTATION
Strategic program statements frequently assert a focus on Indigenous girls: “The focus is to keep young Indigenous girls, in Years 7 to 9 engaged in their learning, provide them with positive educational experiences and role models, improve literacy, develop life goals, life skills and establish a positive pathway from school to further study and work/careers” (G@C Data Collection June 2010). However, as indicated above, the program is inclusive of non-Indigenous girls. This aspect is considered to be a core strength of the program by all stakeholders, and this important contradiction will also be discussed below.

SERVICE DELIVERY MECHANISMS
In terms of interventions, G@C can be classified as a prevention rather than a crisis management program. The full complement of field staff includes two ‘girl coaches’ and one coordinator (who also contributes as a coach). The field team is in turn supported by the NT Regional Partnership Manager and until recently, by TSF’s National Manager, Indigenous Policy. Together, the team help participating girls improve their attendance at CMS and their retention to Year 12 by providing motivations and rationales for being at school. Incentivisation efforts come in the form of girl-directed activities (such as a focus on scrap-booking, painting, football, or cooking), community liaison activities (such as the Work-Shadowing program or Breakfast-with-a-mentor), and programs which are brokered in by TSF (see listing below).

These activities and programs target different life skills such as financial management, goal setting, health awareness, self-esteem, conflict resolution and negotiation skills, or work experience. These outcome domains are not strictly targeted to year levels, but it can be said that for Year 7 students, the focus is on building expectations around appropriate G@C behaviours, team work and mutual regard. To attract girls into the program and familiarize them with its routines, emphasis is also placed on democratic program planning – for instance, it was at the behest of Year 7 students that cooking was a feature activity in 2011. Year 8 students undertake the ‘Core of Life’ program, a pregnancy awareness package which is co-run with a qualified midwife. Year 9 students are exposed to cultures of employment and notions of career aspiration through the Work-Shadowing program.

Decisions about what programs are brokered in and how the aims of the program are best served are guided by:
The strategies identified in the program logics that aim to address specific modifiable risks for engendering female resilience are informed by professional practice wisdom and the knowledge of girl participants.

In terms of case management loads, the program has an operating ratio of 25 girls per coach although, as discussed below, this is more notional than fixed; and managing the potentially limitless demands to be a resource represents one of the more challenging staffing issues facing the program, both for continued operations as is and for any future growth.

Key activities and components of the program 2008-2011

The program goals of improved literacy, life goals and life skills are developed through multiple experiences/initiatives, such as:

- Girl Coaches
- Availability of the Girls Room
- Breakfast-with-a-mentor
- Families and Schools Together (FAST) program
- Core of Life program
- Tuesday after school activities (e.g. cooking, deportment)
- Experiential Mentoring (major trips)
- Aspiration or Action Plans
- Work-Shadowing.

The Girl Coaches are such an important element of the program that they need extensive discussion under ‘Success Factors’ and ‘Scalability’ below, but the remaining elements are outlined here.

Girls Room

Following sustained advocacy from TSF managers in Darwin and Adelaide, a dedicated room has been made exclusively available to G@C participants, coaches, and invited guests. This ‘Girls Room’ forms the spatial core of the program. It functions as a retreat, a sanctuary, a transition space between home and school and a contact node for the G@C network. All G@C participants identified the existence of this discrete ‘girls only’ place as vital:

*Because we just – if we’re feeling sad and stuff, we can just come here and like talk to the coaches and feel safe here (Girl participant)*

*So I think having that safe place is really important, because I have seen the girls, they’ll come down the breezeway and they’ll be fighting and pushing each other. As soon as they walk in they just calm it down because they’re not going to diss the space, and I think that’s probably a really vital thing (Program observer)*

G@C staff record the average attendance in the Girls Room in Semester One 2011 at 43 individual girls using the space each week. The program involves the girls in a range of activities in this room which is also used as a
Evaluation of The Smith Family’s Girls at the Centre Program
Centralian Middle School, Alice Springs

general social space before, during, and after school. For example, once a week the Girls Room hosts Breakfast-with-a-mentor (see below) where an invited guest comes to speak to the girls. In 2010 the Girls Room was upgraded to include a kitchen, office space, a lounge and room for a pool table. These resources are singled out by girls, both at CMS and at the secondary college where past G@C girls favourably compared the CMS resources to the resources available for senior “Girls Academy” girls, despite the latter having a television and “wii” which “works but no-one uses it”. Resources alone, therefore, are not viewed as positively as resources combined with an engaged and supportive atmosphere in which girls feel free to use the space for their own activities in negotiation with G@C staff. Locker space is also provided in the G@C Girl’s Room, further minimising the potential for negative interplay in school corridors.

While participation in G@C activities is a general expectation of membership in the program, which we will discuss further below, the Girls Room is not a substitute “Home Room” at which girls must officially register their school attendance. In this it is also distinct from some other girls support programs including the Girls Academy, where an attendance roll is kept, school attendance is visibly recorded on a wall chart, and girls who do not regularly attend the room as well as school are asked to provide justification for their continued inclusion.

Breakfast-with-a-mentor

Most weeks (now usually Wednesday mornings), a guest of the program shares breakfast with the girls and gives a short speech, usually about the opportunities that life might offer, after which girls are invited to ask questions if they want to. Different girls take responsibility for introducing and thanking the guest. This activity was described positively by community members, teachers, TSF and G@C staff and certainly contributes to raising the profile of the program and G@C girls outside the program itself. Girls also sometimes mentioned this activity as providing a series of examples of people who have achieved interesting things with their lives or new perspectives on people they already knew, such as teachers. G@C records indicate consistent attendance of around 20 girls in 2008-2009 with an increase to an average of 32 in 2010 when a new girl coach was appointed.

Families and Schools Together (FAST)

The FAST program was first developed in the United States in 1988. Through a program of weekly meetings with dinner, FAST aims to connect students and their carers with each other and the school, helping both “become aware of their choices and capabilities, to use their strengths to prevent bad habits, while discovering success strategies” (http://www.familiesandschools.org/programs/middle-school-fast.php).

Parents who attend 80 per cent of the sessions ‘graduate’ from the program. Skills development activities are framed by rapport and familiarity building activities and are designed to focus on communication, counselling, mentoring, and accountability structures for improved family function. As it works in conjunction with the G@C program, G@C girls nominate the small-group discussion topics and help organise the weekly sessions and their follow through at home. In line with FAST guidelines, a small number of past student graduates of the program (presently 2) attend the FAST program as student mentors.
It is not compulsory for girls and their families to attend the FAST program; however this program was widely praised by all stakeholders and especially girls and their parents/carers. 9 girls and their families enrolled in FAST in 2008 with an average attendance of 7 girls and their families. In 2009, 15 families completed the FAST program. The program didn’t run during the first half of 2010, but 9 families took part in Semester 2 2010. The number of families who do not complete the program each year isn’t consistently documented but interviews and observation suggest that the 2008 numbers are fairly representative. Some families have attended more than once with different children.

According to a 2008 evaluation of the FAST program as it operated at ASHS, “...this program cycle achieved the primary goals of improving family relationships, social connectedness, the FAST youth’s behaviors and the parent’s involvement in school” (FAST Evaluation ASHS 2008). The TSF report to DEEWR in 2008 also contained the following participant quotes:

Girls at the Centre has helped me be more confident I really enjoy the activities and FAST. Mum and I are getting on better (Year 9 girl)

That was so good the other night. My daughter and I were like teenagers and skipped home together. All that stuff we did like that game ‘getting to know you’. I haven’t talked to people like that for ages. I’m not taking the other kids next week; it’s going to be a special time for me and my daughter. (Parent of Year 9 girl)

Core of Life (COL)

Like FAST, COL is an external program which TSF broker in for use with G@C students. In term 4 2010 all G@C girls completed the Core of Life Program. Originally developed by two Victorian midwives, COL draws on teams of presenters including a qualified midwife (the CMS nurse) and other youth/health/community service representatives, to provide realistic information on pregnancy, birth, breastfeeding and early parenting. COL presenters undertake skills training for imparting information about the parenting journey, and the CMS nurse and school counsellor have both independently undertaken this training as part of their collaboration with the G@C program.

Tuesday after school activities

Tuesday afternoon activities have been held since the beginning of Semester 2 2008 as a way of fostering interest in the G@C program. When CMS was first formed via a merger between Alice Springs High School and Anzac Hill, Tuesday after school activities helped create a unifying experience for both groups. Activities are diverse and may also be directly requested by girl participants. Activities have included: “dance, basketball, Aussie rules football, rugby, beach volleyball, jewellery making, scrap booking, swimming, ten pin bowling and rock climbing. Initial research established that there is not one specific activity that girls are interested in so a variety of activities were agreed in consultation with the girls themselves.” (DEEWR Report 2008)

Experiential mentoring

The “experiential mentoring” program is often singled out by girls as a key reason for joining G@C and as a highlight of their experience in any given year. Even adult observers have noted its impact: “It is really important to get the girls out of Alice Springs and out of their comfort zones. To hear the kids come back from somewhere like Melbourne, all abuzz, well - they have a different perspective. This is a small town with a small town perspective.” Girls see these trips as a major asset for the program and sometimes initially commit to the program because of them. The program aims to take girls on trips to locations which can provide them with new experiences, with the travel itself counted as a key new experience for many of the G@C girls. These new experiences are guided by G@C and/or TSF mentors who accompany them and by organisations and individuals selected as part of the program. Senior girls who have graduated from G@C understand these trips as educational in a broad sense – highlighting trips to the aquarium, the football, and Melbourne University, but also just living with their hosts in the city in a more everyday sense that involved taking the train to school and having dinner with host families.

In 2009 ten G@C girls travelled to Melbourne on one of these mentoring trips. The girls were chosen on the basis of school attendance, behaviour, and effort. Nine of the girls were from ASHS and one from Anzac – 7 Indigenous and 3 non-Indigenous. The girls, in pairs, were guests of Ruyton Girls School families and spent some of their time attending computer, sewing, and Physical Education classes with their Ruyton hosts. In May 2010 22 girls, two mothers, two Girl Coaches and the TSF NT Regional Programs Manager travelled to...
Melbourne to take part with Ruyton and Korowa Anglican Girls Schools in a week of activities. The girls were again billeted with families – six from Ruyton and five from Korowa.

Aspirational plans

All girls enrolled in the program are meant to complete an Aspiration Plan (also known as Action Plans), designed to assist each student develop aspirations for healthy living, success at school, and life post-school. However, as discussed below, aspiration plans are only inconsistently available and it is not clear whether they are pivotal in the development of ‘life skills’. Girls interviewed never independently singled out the Aspiration/Action Plans as important elements of the program and when prompted might recognise the intended value of the plan but still did not rate it highly: “It was pretty much goals and what we want to achieve this year or in the future…I can’t really remember.” Those closer to program suggest that the process of dedicating one-on-one time with girls for a focused conversation is the most valuable part of the process, rather than the artefact of the plan itself.

I don’t know that they’re critical. Like I think we’re getting amazing results even without them [the plans] because there is so much other opportunity for those conversations with the girls in that non-formalised way, but I do think there’s a value in them because I think it’s a good process to go through, and even if it’s not something that they stick to. I think that skill of being able to identify what it is that you want to work towards and know how to set those goals and work towards that and identify what support you need around you is a really great life skill.

Work-shadowing

The Work-Shadowing program is considered at various points throughout this report as an exemplary instance of the G@C program working with the community outside CMS and with a developmental model of training in ‘Life Goals’ and ‘Life Skills’. In this program Year 9 girls selected for their good record and for their potential to benefit from the program are placed with ‘employers’ in the broader Alice Springs community. Some of these employers are businesses and some government service and support agencies. While the girls are legally too young for paid employment (although in fact a number do have part-time work), they are offered a version of “work experience” with this program in which they are placed in the role of shadowing workers in real-life workplaces.

The girls interviewed had generally worked in administrative or customer/client service support roles – filing, answering phones, recording orders, or attending inquiry counters. With only one exception they did not find the positions themselves very interesting but they did value the experience of ‘mature’ working life. Their understanding of these positions, however, was that they less modelled future employment than provided experience of workplace expectations such as how to dress, how to address customers/clients, and how to incorporate habits of attendance and participation: “I get a lot out of it – I’m learning heaps. Even little things like presentation or like how you’re meant to dress and all that kind of stuff. It’s like important for work experience too, like learning all that kind of stuff.”
PARTNERSHIPS AND FUNDING

Promotional material for the G@C program highlights the important achievement of collating funding and support from a range of stakeholders, and indirectly highlights the importance of the otherwise backgrounded activities of the G@C management team: “TSF has brokered partnerships across Australia and attracted funding from the following sources: NT Dept Education and Training, FaHCSIA, Shirley Smith Memorial Trust, Equity Trustees, Colliers, Sally Oatley Trust” (DEEWR Report Dec 2008).

In 2010 G@C secured funding from the Aboriginal Benefits Trust (ABA) to enable the appointment of a Program Manager in Term 4. In August 2011 the program won a $50,000 Impact Award from the National Australia Bank. In such promotion TSF and G@C staff stress the ongoing support for the program from a range of organisations and individuals, including government-funded bodies and community groups.

Such networks clearly require careful ongoing maintenance. One telling example of the value and difficulty of such networks is the “community reference group” which is important to the story of the G@C program’s development. While there was clearly some strong support for the program from this group at one stage, it no longer functions as a group with a coherent program advisory or review function. Interaction with G@C from any past or new possible members of this group now appears to be ad hoc to non-existent and some interviewees singled this out for criticism. At the same time G@C as a program, the G@C coaches and the G@C girls clearly have a good reputation among some past members of this group and other community representatives, a small number of whom were interviewed during this evaluation. As discussed further below, it is a question for program consideration whether the reference group function needs to be revitalised. It is almost certainly necessary in new sites.

GROWTH OF THE G@C PROGRAM AND KEY PROGRAM CHANGES

In Semester 2 of 2008 students began being enrolled in the program, with 30 students and their families from Alice SHS agreeing to take part within the first month and 5 from Anzac Hill participating.

Since its inception in late 2008 the program has grown in size, with increasing numbers being enrolled each year. In its first semester, 35 students took part in G@C program. By the end of 2009, 43 students were signed up. In 2010 there were 49 girls enrolled, with a further 20 on a waiting list. Since 2010, with the employment of an extra Girl Coach the program has expanded. In 2011 weekly participation included up to 77 girls in Term 1 and up to 66 girls in Term 2. This reduction in numbers is an inevitable part of the school year as students adjust to new expectations, and some students are usually lost and gained across the year.

PARTICIPANT NUMBERS

The precise number of girls presently participating in the program is difficult to pin down for reasons that are integral to the state of the program in late 2011. There are three distinct ways of assessing which girls are part of G@C and each has its own validity and reveals something about the program.

By one assessment, there are currently 74 girls enrolled in the G@C program. This represents the full list of girls assigned to G@C at the beginning of a year. It is subject to minor adjustments as girls formally leave or, subsequent to vacancies from departures, are allowed to join on request. From this pool of girls the core participants of all the above activities are drawn. This number is also shaped by the program’s protocol specifying one girl coach for every 25 girls and it serves the program’s need to be inclusive of girls with varied interests and experiences, including of Indigenous and non-Indigenous girls. This assessment also allows the program to directly engage with girls of very different kinds, forging bonds between girls who otherwise might not interact and thus establishing peer-mentoring networks among them. The problem with this mode of assessing participant numbers is that it ignores differences in the program’s attentiveness to different girls in this pool, thus neglecting the targeted work undertaken by the coaches and potentially the sharpest impacts of the program.

By a second measure, there are currently 22 girls enrolled in the G@C program. This represents the list of “high priority” girls whom the girl coaches deliberately monitor for problems at home and school. This assessment of G@C girls dominates the daily, weekly, and term-by-term practices of the girl coaches, substantiating in many ways the perception in the school of the program’s success in problem solving. It is notable that this list of high priority girls does not match directly the list of girls with attendance or behavioural problems separately.
generated by the school and nor is it a list entirely of Indigenous girls. This supports the claim by a range of
interviewees that G@C picks up problems that would not otherwise be noticed and also the claim, made just as
often, that the problems G@C addresses are not solely “Indigenous” problems. The problem with this
assessment of participant numbers is that it singles out only intense engagement with girls and underestimates
the broader yet still important impact of the program on girls who may not have been ‘marked’ as in high need for
close engagement.

By a third measure there are currently a large pool of girls officially and unofficially involved in the G@C program
– significantly more than the designated 75. This number represents all the girls who use the G@C room and
who participate at some level in activities organised by the program. This also serves the need for the program
to be inclusive, but in a more expansive way than the first measure because it not only allows friendship groups
and other peer networks to be supported by the program but ensures such loyalties do not prevent girls’
participation. Further, allowing this degree of access increases the visibility of the program within CMS and
ensures that for every girl who decides to leave, there are as many girls who want to be more formally included.
The program’s reputation as an accessible place with trustworthy and responsive staff is considerably enhanced
by this unofficial “flexible access” policy, although as noted below, it represents an issue for helping coaches
manage the potential for burnout. This inclusiveness can lead to unrealistic expectations placed on girl coaches
not only by their own desire for the success of individual girls and the broader program, but indeed by the
program’s own expectations that the girl coaches will provide exceptional engagement with all its girls and their
school and home contexts.

STATE OF THE PROGRAM NOW

At the time of writing, the program has lost its longest-standing girl coach, who has assumed a different position
within CMS. The program’s original initiator, Tricia Rushton, has also left TSF. The CMS leadership team are
keen to retain the program but would need for it to continue to be externally supported for this to be viable. TSF
is considering options for future delivery, which this current evaluation will help inform.
3. LITERATURE REVIEW

A non-systematic review of the literature was undertaken to provide additional information on gender issues in education and to seek evaluation data on analogous programs. Dr Robinson used the online search engine “ Summon” to identify articles and reports related to high school retention rates in Australia, Indigenous education policy, programs for Indigenous students, and literature on girls’ attendance. A range of search terms were used, including: “absenteeism”, “school attendance”, “retention rates”, “school leaving”, “non-completion”, “Indigenous youth”. Bibliographies from relevant scholarly texts were consulted in order to uncover further material. This was followed by a literature search across two areas: 1) programs and policies that target Indigenous youth in high school, particularly looking to see what factors affect the scalability of a program; and 2) academic literature about Indigenous schooling policies, especially with regard to gender, attendance and retention rates.

A large body of work was canvassed. However, here we forgo a review of the vast literature on Indigenous education, to concentrate on those aspects most pertinent to this review. There is a notable paucity of material which looks at issues of geography, gender and indigeneity in relation to school achievement. The relevant literature cited here is thus in some cases slightly dated, an interesting issue in its own right.

GENDER, RACE AND EDUCATION

In an article published in the Journal of Population Economics, Bradley et al investigate the magnitude of Indigenous educational disadvantage by examining test score performances of students at age 10 and 12, making comparisons between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students in government schools in Queensland. Their work “provides an analysis of the correlation between geographical remoteness and Indigenous educational attainment” (2006: 548-549), and confirmed anew that there is a significant gap in educational performance between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. The more telling issue is how early this disparity appears, how it evolves between the ages of 10 and 12, its link with geographic location, and, almost uniquely, the gender differences in play:

"We find that, even at the age of 10 years, Indigenous students perform markedly worse on numeracy and literacy tests when compared to non-Indigenous students. At this stage, Indigenous students are already approximately 1 year behind on literacy and numeracy performance when compared to national benchmark standards. This disparity is even more marked for rural and remote Indigenous students, who are, on average, approximately 2 years behind the literacy and numeracy skills of English Speaking Background (ESB) children in similar geographic areas by age 12. Furthermore, these differences between ESB and Indigenous groups, in most cases, widen between the ages of 10 (Year 5) and 12 (Year 7). We also show that Indigenous students in rural areas, for whom English is a second language, perform particularly poorly, especially in the case of girls (Bradley et al 2006: 549, emphasis added)."

This claim is supported by research by Boyd Hunter and Jerry Schwab of the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research into proportional gains in post-secondary qualifications:

"For Indigenous females, the proportion with any qualification increased steadily from 18.6 per cent in 1991 to 26.0 per cent in 2001. For non-Indigenous females, the proportion with some post-secondary qualification also increased steadily by 7.7 percentage points to 39.5 per cent in 2001 – with increases of roughly equal magnitude in the two inter-censal periods. For Indigenous males the proportion with some qualification increased from 22.0 per cent in 1991 to 29.8 per cent in 2001, an increase of 7.8 percentage points spread approximately evenly across the two inter-censal periods. Within the non-Indigenous male population the proportion with some qualification increased by 5.9 percentage points to 50.1 per cent in 1996."

Hunter and Schwab note that while there have been improvements in post-secondary participation, these are more than matched by general population trends, and further, that Indigenous people tend to have fewer higher qualifications relative to their non-Indigenous counterparts than they do for the more basic vocational qualifications. Put differently, Indigenous males and females have more qualifications at the entry or basic vocational levels than anyone else. Younger Indigenous people are less likely to participate in post-secondary education than their older counterparts, although this is where income loss and childcare responsibilities make participation much harder.
Hunter and Schwab’s discussion of the conditions necessary to change this include inducements for more successful secondary retention and support for students to overcome their myriad educational disadvantages, including their disaffection with school and teachers, and their difficulties in attending (Hunter and Schwab 2003: 16). It is worth noting that these are the factors targeted by G@C.

Bradley et al (2006) also report a particularly large educational gap for female Indigenous students, particularly those in rural and remote schools:

> After controlling for observable differences, female Indigenous students in rural/remote schools have markedly inferior test score achievements compared with their urban counterparts. They are one standard deviation below the average performance level for rural/remote female students, which is the largest educational gap that we observe. Aboriginal boys in rural/remote areas have lower attainment in literacy at age 12 than their Torres Strait Islanders counterparts. (2006: 560).

Living in a remote or rural area, coupled with English as a second language, are factors in lower educational performance: “For instance, Aboriginal girls in rural/remote areas for whom an Indigenous language was their first language would be expected to achieve a literacy test score some 109 points less than an ESB student, which equates to a schooling deficit of more than 2 years” (Bradley et al 2006: 560).

Interestingly, this study separated Aboriginal students from Torres Strait Islander students, arguing that:

> Geographic location matters much more for Aboriginal student performance than it does for Torres Strait Islanders. In addition, Torres Strait Islander boys attain appreciably better test scores in literacy than their Aboriginal counterparts (Bradley et al 2006: 568).

A report from a longitudinal survey on Australian Youth used a sample of 8,691 young people, aged 15 in 2003 and tracked their experiences up to 2005 when they were 17 years old (Curtis and McMillan 2008: 5). Investigating the rates of non-completion of Year 12 in 2003, the authors unsurprisingly found that

> those most likely to have left school early between 2003 and 2005 are Indigenous young people, young people from non-nuclear families, those whose parents worked in blue-collar occupations or were other than university-educated, those who were from non-metropolitan locations, those born in Australia, those who were low academic achievers and those who were from government schools.

Further, “Indigenous young people have a much higher school non-completion rate (30%) than the cohort average” (Curtis and McMillan 2008: 8). But the report also examines the demographics of people who left school early between the 1980s and 2005, finding that the groups most likely to stay in school until the end of Year 12 are:

> …females; young people with parents in high-skill white-collar occupations; young people with university-educated parents; those who attended independent schools; those from metropolitan areas; those with parents from non-English-speaking backgrounds; and those with high levels of reading and mathematical literacy (Curtis and McMillian 2008: 45, emphasis added).

They also found a clear gender difference in occupations of non-completers who were employed: “Employed males are considerably more likely than employed females to be in skilled occupations (such as trades and related work) and are less likely to be in unskilled occupations (such as elementary clerical, sales and service work)” (Curtis and McMillan 2008: viii). So, while females were less likely to drop out than boys (ibid, p. 20), if they do they also seem to suffer greater career consequences:

> Even in the study cohort, nearly 30 per cent of recent school non-completers did not enter full-time employment, education or training in the initial post-school years. Further, female school non-completers were much more likely than male non-completers to have taken low-skill jobs. Young women were especially likely to be engaged in such activities on a part-time basis only, or to be unemployed or not in the labour force. This is consistent with international research which shows that the employment penalty to non-completion is much more severe for young women than it is for young men (Curtis and McMillan 2008: 46).
Some studies have sought to analyse this situation from the perspective of students. One example is Gray and Hackling’s piece, “Wellbeing and Retention: A Senior Secondary Student Perspective.” Building on other research suggesting that there are three key motivations behind students’ decision to leave school before Year 12 – employment opportunities, negative school experiences, and severe home and welfare issues (Gray and Hackling 2009: 122) – Gray and Hackling studied Year 11 students in two Western Australian schools. Their study develops a range of measures to gauge the impact of students’ “social connectedness and academic engagement on academic engagement and retention” (ibid: 121). They note that “Within Australia, the secondary school completion picture mirrors the OECD data, with 30% of students dropping out of school before completing 12 years of schooling (Lamb, Walstab, Teese, Vickers, & Rumberger, 2004), (Organisation for Economic Cooperation Development, 2005)” (Gray and Hackling 2009: 120). But unlike the OECD countries,

Variations in retention data across the Australian states are influenced by factors such as the proportion of Indigenous students, the remoteness of secondary schools from key metropolitan education districts, access to post compulsory education within the local school, and access to Technical And Further Education colleges and workplace learning opportunities (p.120).

Noting that cultures and structures within schools have a strong impact on whether a student feels included, and thus whether or not they decide to complete high school (p. 124), Gray and Hackling also consider the impact of gender, arguing that the literature generally suggests that there are higher rates of non-completion among boys (p.132). But, confirming Curtis and McMillan’s findings, they point out that “Despite the current surge in employment opportunities, girls in our study reported finding it harder to get traineeships, appropriate workplace learning opportunities, or employment involving on-going training aligned to their aspirations than the boys” (p.132). Gray and Hackling identify three key factors that contribute to a supportive senior school culture. These are respect, relationship, responsibility:

- **Respect**: mutual; acceptance; belonging; intellectual challenge; appropriate curriculum.
- **Relationship**: confidence; support; involvement; young adult environment; pedagogy; guidance.
- **Responsibility**: independent learning; balance; flexibility; discipline; opportunities. (p.140).

Finally, and again affirming G@C aims, design, and practice, their research found that students who had a strong sense of social connectedness at school were more likely to stay past Year 11; there was also a strong connection between their feeling socially connected and their academic engagement (p. 139). This was clearly linked with both their quality of participation and retention (p.142).

One author who has subjected the (admittedly still rare) focus on girls to critical analysis is Joanne Baker. Baker argues that in a ‘post-feminist’ environment shaped by years of programs addressing girls’ participation and achievement in education, it has become usual for analysts to decry the relatively poorer performance of boys:

...a rather mythologised commentary about young women’s success in education and employment has developed in the media and popular literature. The idea that girls and young women are particular beneficiaries of the changed conditions associated with late modernity provides support for the ‘feminisation thesis’ which asserts that society is increasingly shaped by feminine values, that women are now relatively less committed to family and are destined to become the majority of the workforce. (Baker 2010: 2)

One consequence of this mythology is that young women are “under exceptional and exacting pressure to understand their lives as separated from old inequities and in line with the new post-feminist sensibility; ensuring that the educational arena for girls and young women is characterized by high expectations and acute self-responsibility”. In other words, with societal sexism supposedly resolved, it is up to girls to make the most of opportunities to succeed. Baker notes that the unstated baseline in such understandings is a white and middle-class female. Drawing from her own interview data with 55 young women aged between 18 and 25 who were all living in a regional city in North Queensland, Australia in 2003–4, she finds that young women are in fact still circumscribed by historically and culturally defined limits to what they can imagine becoming, with the main change being that their circumscribed ambit has to be articulated within “a post-feminist framework of presumed equality and personal choice” (Baker 2010: 13):

Despite ostensible access to unprecedented choice, the findings reported here suggest that new possibilities for young women are still located within traditionally gendered and classed parameters; altruistic or people-oriented...
work is strongly preferred and ventures into masculinised domains reveal intransigent difficulties. Furthermore, young women are forming their aspirations and mediating their expectations in order to enable them to fulfil the dual desires of childrearing and employment. This reflects their current reality or future expectation that they will take primary responsibility for childcare and domestic work. (ibid)

ANALOGOUS PROGRAMS

As part of this evaluation, a search for evaluation data on analogous programs was additionally conducted. This yielded limited information as the majority of programs that have been in place long enough to warrant independent review have almost exclusively targeted boys through sports, in particular football. Of significance in this regard is the Department of Finance and Deregulation’s Performance Audit of the Sporting Chance Program, through the Office of Evaluation and Audit (OEA), and a review of the literature by Purdie and Buckley, both of which we report here at length as additional context for the G@C program and its evaluation.

Nola Purdie’s and Sarah Buckley’s issues paper, *School attendance and retention of Indigenous Australian students* was produced for the Closing the Gap Clearinghouse as Issues Paper No 1. This analysis provides an evaluation of studies and literature into school attendance for Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. It draws upon a range of national and international literature and aims to evaluate the quality of available evidence relating to policies and strategies to improve school attendance (Purdie and Buckley 2010: 2). As with our own efforts, their review of the literature “found that there were very few high-quality evaluations that had been conducted in this area. The evidence about attendance and retention strategies that work for Indigenous students is, therefore, not strong” (Purdie and Buckley 2010: 1).

Although the available data on retention rates and school attendance is limited in this way, they go on to argue “there is evidence that Year 7/8 to Year 12 school retention rates for Indigenous students have improved over the last 10 years (from 35% in 1999 to 45% in 2009)” (ibid). Yet, overall, they find still stark differences between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students: “the retention rate from Year 7/8 to Year 12 in 2009 was 45% for Indigenous students compared with 77% for non-Indigenous students” (ibid). The importance of examining the effectiveness of different approaches is thus underscored by available data.

The authors point out that it is often difficult to categorise the programs into types, because they vary according to whether they are state-run or community-based, and also according to their intended outcomes. For example, some programs targeting school retention rates are designed to improve numeracy and literacy, while:

> Community-focused components involve: increasing local community involvement in innovations that support school retention outcomes at a local level; connecting young people with their communities more effectively by facilitating youth development and youth participation; and promoting and recognising community-based learning (p.7).

This paper provides valuable outlines of a range of programs that are in place to improve attendance and retention rates of Indigenous students. These include:

* **The Catherine Freeman Foundation**

  The foundation works in partnership with community organisations, businesses, schools and other philanthropists in facilitating educational opportunities for young Indigenous girls. The current focus of activity is the remote Indigenous community of Palm Island in far north Queensland (p.8).

* **Future Footprints Program**

  This is an initiative of the Association of Independent Schools, Western Australia. It is an additional support structure for Indigenous students from regional and remote areas of WA attending residential schools in Perth. The goal of Future Footprints is to support students’ engagement in education and to enhance their transition to and from school, to further education and employment or training. (p.8)
Evaluation of The Smith Family’s Girls at the Centre Program  
Centralian Middle School, Alice Springs

Specific goals of the program are to: increase retention of Indigenous students from Year 10 to Year 12; increase the level of successful Year 12 completions; ensure Indigenous children are ready and inspired to learn in the school environment; and strengthen the capacity of parents and the community to work with schools to improve educational outcomes for Indigenous students (p.8).

Purdie and Buckley also note the preponderance of sporting programs:

*Indigenous students have been particularly targeted through programs with a strong sporting element. For instance, programs provided by the Clontarf Foundation have targeted boys through involvement in Australian Rules Football. Both boys and girls are targeted through the Academy of Sport, Health and Education in Shepparton, which is a partnership between the University of Melbourne and the Rumbalara Football and Netball Club. The Australian Football League (AFL) Kickstart program, supported by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission, was initiated in 1997 for Indigenous youth across remote communities in Northern Australia (p. 9).*

*Most of the sports programs now come under the auspices of the Sporting Chance Program, which is an Australian Government initiative originally announced in the 2006–07 Budget. In 2010, a total of 22 providers were funded to deliver 59 projects (54 school-based sports academies for approximately 5,000 students, and five education engagement projects for approximately 5,000 students). Sporting Chance has two elements: school-based sports academies that provide sports-focused learning and development opportunities to secondary school Indigenous students and education engagement strategies that provide a range of sport, recreation and education activities for primary and secondary school Indigenous students (p. 9-10).*

The Purdie and Buckley report only describes one of the Sporting Chance programs, due to their large number. This is ‘The Clontarf Foundation’, which runs a series of sports programs that use football as a means to improve the life skills, health and education of Indigenous young men (run at CMS as the Mparntwe Academy): “By the end of 2009, the foundation operated 23 academies located on 27 school campuses. Eight new academies opened in February 2010. Approximately 2,200 boys are enrolled” (p. 10). Other programs include ‘Follow the Dream: Partnerships for Success’, “a program designed to help aspirant Aboriginal secondary students achieve a successful tertiary destination. [It] operates in 24 sites across WA” (p.11), and ‘Dare to Lead’ (p.16).

Purdie and Buckley (p.17) point out some of the difficulties that come with trying to assess what works in policies and programs that aim to improve school attendance and retention rates, noting that the numbers are often too small to permit randomisation. They continue:

*In our exploration of the attendance and retention literature, one fact was overwhelmingly evident – there is very little high-quality evaluation literature. Much is claimed about what works, but supporting evidence is thin on the ground. This means it is difficult to be clear about what does work or what is merely someone’s “good idea” (p.18).*

Despite this “lack of robust evidence” Purdie and Buckley suggest there is apparent “consensus that the reasons for non-attendance and non-completion of school are complex and contextual; that there is no simple answer; and that real change occurs over time” (p. 18). In conclusion, they advise that any new strategies or programs should have built-in evaluation components that in turn “should use mixed methods and combine qualitative and quantitative approaches for assessment” (p. 21). We note that the present evaluation of the G@C program has aimed for precisely this mix, reflecting in turn the mixed methods used for in-house performance monitoring within the program.

The second relevant published evaluation is the Performance Audit of ‘The Sporting Chance’ Program. This report helps build on Purdie and Buckley’s overview. At the time of the audit, the Sporting Chance Program was providing grants to 13 providers to operate 24 ‘academies’ across Australia. The Sporting Chance Program was announced in the 2006–07 Budget, and received total funding of $19.6 million over the four years through to 2009–10 (2009: 8). In the 2009–10 Budget, the Government announced a further $10 million in funding over four years to further expand the Sporting Chance Program. This funding was to establish new academies with a focus on improving the participation and engagement of girls in schooling and funding for the Former Origin Greats to establish academies with a focus on rugby league in Queensland and New South Wales (2009: 18).
This is the basis of funding for the Girls Academy models now in place at CMS and CSC, which different policy formulators had anticipated would replace TSF’s G@C initiative. Instead, CMS hosts both programs.

The OEA was significantly unable to comment on the extent to which academies have improved students’ enrolment, attendance, retention and engagement, given the limited performance data available. They did note, however, that “there is consistent anecdotal evidence from schools that the program has a positive impact on the educational experiences of Indigenous students” (p.3):

*The main element, representing $13.5 million in program funds, has funded the establishment of 24 school-based sports academies for Indigenous secondary students who are at risk of not completing their schooling. The objective of academies is to improve educational outcomes of participants by developing and implementing educational programs in partnership with schools. When announced the program was expected to provide support for 1700 students in 20 academies by the end of 2009. By 2008, 24 academies were being funded and were reaching 1807 students. (2009: 8)*

The report additionally noted that the Clontarf “objective of ‘encouraging positive educational outcomes’ is also very broad and non-specific for a small program operated largely by organisations outside the education system” (2009: 23). Given a lack of clarity as to “how the [Sporting Chance] program intends to ‘encourage’ positive educational outcomes and the specific improvements sought by any kind of encouragement” (p.23), the report recommended that the DEEWR revise the program’s performance indicators so that the outcomes of the sporting academies can be more effectively measured (p.28):

*The Sporting Chance Program’s objective of encouraging positive educational outcomes for Indigenous students does not sufficiently address the Australian Government’s original intention for the program and is very broad for a small program like Sporting Chance. The objective does not reflect the Government’s intention to improve Indigenous students’ life prospects including health and employment outcomes and does not make clear what it means to ‘encourage’ educational outcomes. (2009: 30)*

There was anecdotal evidence that school attendance rates for Sporting Chance participants had improved but lack of baseline data made this difficult to quantify (2009: 37). Finally, the report also comments on the low level of female participation in the Sporting Chance programs:

*The level of involvement of girls in the academies has not been as successful as the program’s original target of 50 per cent of participants. In 2008, girls represented approximately 30 per cent of total academy participants (It is important to note that the eight Clontarf Foundation academies only deliver their program to Indigenous boys).*

Academies and schools indicated that it is a challenge to engage and retain girls in academy programs and some had found it necessary to change academy activities regularly to maintain their interest. This is a strategy that the G@C program has also somewhat organically developed – that is, it was not an element of the original project design but has become a core feature of the pilot program in practice. The OEA report on Clontarf noted that the issues relating to the involvement of girls in academies are likely to be complex. For example, the one girls-only academy it considers, ‘Role Models WA Clontarf Girls Academy’, indicated that the lack of purpose-built boarding accommodation for girls from remote areas attending the school has led to a high turnover of girls at the school and consequently in their program. OEA highlighted the retention of girls in the program as an issue warranting discrete investigation, together with a call for research into the needs of Indigenous female students and their motivations: “It may be that specific strategies need to be developed for females, either within the framework of the Sporting Chance Program or through alternative programs” (2009: 36).

In this context the pilot G@C program should be of particular interest to national funding bodies.
4. KEY FINDINGS

TERMS OF REFERENCE

The evaluation team was asked to:

- Measure the extent to which the Girls at the Centre program meets its objectives to improve the literacy, develop life goals and life skills of young Indigenous women at Centralian Middle School in Alice Springs, identify the significant success factors and document the success stories.

- Assess the scalability of G@C for adoption to other high need sites such as large regional centres and urban locations.

- Provide information on the effectiveness of the program’s strategies to increase retention of young Indigenous women to Year 12.

Our assessment of these issues follows, with consideration of scalability treated as a separate item from those which concern the program’s impact on its target population.

KEY OUTCOME AREAS

Mapping and making sense of the data

A range of data have been collected and compiled by TSF in partnership with the schools throughout the course of the program. These data include: attendance rates, activities undertaken by the girls, individual and collective achievements, behavioural patterns of students at the schools, lists of students taking part in the program, qualitative interviews with principals, feedback from staff and parents, as well as a collection of Progress Reports written periodically for DEEWR. As the program notes of its collections,

The most complete quantitative data sets are school attendance, participation in events and participation in program elements such as FAST, experiential mentoring, curriculum enhancement, Girls Room and Breakfast with a Mentor. The most complete qualitative data is from experiential mentoring and FAST. (G@C Data Collection June 2010.doc)

And of the interview data,

The longitudinal value of these interviews is also compromised because of the high turnover of key staff such as the Principals and the Executive Directors in the region. However this remains a strong source of qualitative data as views of mentors, parents and business and community groups are tracked. TSF relies on the school to provide the data to track literacy and they have found this challenging as mechanisms to measure progress in literacy rely currently on the biennial NAPLAN test. A proxy is the school reports which are being made available from 2010. Despite these limitations the data collected provides a rich source of information about the achievements of the program. (G@C Data Collection June 2010.doc)

This provides a valuable resource but also something of a moving target, as reports and analyses have been prepared for different purposes and data sets do not have a collective repository or warehouse. Even so, there are multiple indications of the successes of the program so far. For instance, the data suggests that the G@C program has a positive impact on attendance rates. For each semester that the program has run, the average attendance rates for G@C girls have been higher than the average for all Indigenous girls (see table 1). In the following we discuss key outcomes in turn, discussing what the data is and is not able to tell us.

Literacy

The G@C aims to meet its objective of improving literacy indirectly by targeting attendance and self-esteem; and more directly by working with teachers and other wellbeing personnel at CMS to identify and respond to issues which may be impeding literacy achievement. The balance between direct and indirect intervention focused on literacy has been difficult to strike, as G@C program staff have been reluctant to overstep their roles, sensitive to
the fact they are neither teachers nor literacy specialists. This has placed the onus of literacy improvements on attendance and engagement strategies, rather than more direct interventions (such as tutoring). There are embedded literacy elements built into a number of the program activities but these would be insufficient on their own to improve literacy as measured in national literacy assessment or NAPLAN data.

CMS and G@C staff, and G@C girl participants, represented the relationship between G@C and school curriculum in a wide range of ways. The strongest claim for its curriculum contribution was made by a senior teacher who claimed that “in our curriculum it’s the inner learner stuff” (collaboration, creativity and so on) that G@C offer, along with appropriate “health” curriculum. Girls sometimes also stressed the G@C program as fitting in with classes and often used the Core of Life program as an example of this. In general, however, administrators, staff, parents, and girls all see G@C as distinct from school classes.

A recommendation of this review is that the objective of improving literacy as an isolated goal be reassessed. Its lone appearance over other academic goals (such as improved mathematics or science participation) and the absence of targeted strategies for realising literacy improvements in a direct manner suggests a hangover from informal committee discussions at program inception, when generic goals tend to be more freely promulgated. With the benefit of program implementation hindsight, ‘literacy’ is too distant a goal. ‘Family engagement’ would be a more realistic and accurate fit for the program’s actual activities and clear effects. There was a suggestion that G@C team members might facilitate access to expert tuition or specialist assistance, given the relationships of trust they enjoy with girls and their families, and this is certainly an avenue that could be explored should literacy improvements be retained as a program aim.

While neither improved attendance nor improved family engagement are listed as discrete goals for the program (being viewed rather as strategies for achieving the headline targets of improving literacy, retention to Year 12, and developing life goals and life skills), many activities directly target these outcomes. Girl coaches follow up unexplained absences in consultation with school personnel; and provide a resource for families experiencing disruptions. The importance of regular attendance is stressed in coaching messages and the relationships of trust that are core to the program also motivate attendance. Girls who are at risk of abandoning school because of other priorities, including life crises, are encouraged to stick with school. Engagement pursuits explain the everyday working reality of G@C in-and out-of-school actions.

We therefore pay these impact areas attention here as if attendance and engagement are discrete goals and also recommend that these be made more explicit as goals for the program in the longer term – especially given their respective importance within current education policy.
TABLE 1: G@C ATTENDANCE DATA 2008-2011

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<tr>
<td>Number of G@C girls</td>
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<td>35</td>
<td>30 (ASHS)</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>26 (ASHS)</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>31 (ASHS)</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>77 #</td>
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<td></td>
<td>5 (Anzac)</td>
<td>6 (Anzac)</td>
<td>12 (Anzac)</td>
<td>20 on waiting list</td>
<td>48</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average attendance of G@C girls</td>
<td>86.10% (ASHS)</td>
<td>86.69% (ASHS)</td>
<td>90.7% (ASHS)</td>
<td>89.4% (ASHS)</td>
<td>85.8% (Anzac)</td>
<td>87.55%</td>
<td>79.38%</td>
<td>83.1% *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average attendance all Indigenous girls</td>
<td>77.41% (ASHS)</td>
<td>71.13% (ASHS)</td>
<td>77.3% (ASHS)</td>
<td>69.3% (ASHS)</td>
<td>75% (Anzac)</td>
<td>71.65%</td>
<td>61%</td>
<td>66% *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of families in FAST program</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0*</td>
<td>11 *</td>
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Attendance/retention

Activities in the Girls Room seem to have a positive effect on school attendance, with reports of girls coming to school specifically to attend a ‘breakfast with a mentor’ or to take part in an extra-curricular activity. In addition, girls interviewed for this review themselves link attendance to the G@C program, both in response to the specific urging of the girl coaches – “at the end of recess or lunch, Shelly always tells us to go to class... And you know you have to go to class” – and more indirectly because the G@C program encourages a more positive attitude to attendance: “Girls at the Centre is probably the only reason that I do come to school and like to see my friends and stuff.”

In terms of available data, there is some indication that attendance at school is higher for participants in the program than for Indigenous girls not in the program, which supports the anecdotal reports from educators and school leaders that attendance has improved for G@C participants (see table 1 above). School staff and other professionals interviewed about the program also overwhelmingly tended to credit G@C with a definite impact on school attendance. One senior school staff member stated emphatically that G@C “definitely has been beneficial” when it comes to attendance. One educator noted: “what makes it work is the relationship they have with the student. I have a girl with really challenging behaviours – now, instead of running away from the school she goes to the Girls Room and stays.” And from another,

“I don’t have the stats but it’s clear the girls have a secure place to go and there’s accountability within the program to attendance. I can see the help-seeking behaviours – you can see G@C students have a greater sense of connectedness to the school. It is quite an instrumental impact.”

Note: As data for this evaluation was collated in mid-late 2011 there was only partial data available for the 2011 year. Additional data (marked *) was subsequently provided by the G@C team. Along with this additional data a lower number (of 50) was provided for G@C girls in 2011 (marked #). For accurate reporting purposes we have retained the data gathered during fieldwork and note our discussion of contradictory assessment of program participation elsewhere in this report.
There was only one exception to this general perception among CMS staff, but even this single, very critical view of the program, didn’t directly refute claims that it improved attendance: “I know the girls enjoy it. I know they enjoy it but I don’t know if it’s enough to motivate them to come to school. I couldn’t comment.”

Our consultations gathered unequivocal testimony from parents and students that without the program, particularly the intervention of coaches, girls would have dropped out. In one case study instance, an Indigenous participant experiencing high levels of stress in her private life would have left school altogether but for the program. As her carer put it:

You know what, I’ll point this out to you now – [my daughter] had a run in with one girl here and she really wanted to leave, she wanted to go to Melbourne to be with my family…. And she said, “Mum, the only reason that I stay is because of Girls at the Centre. I stay at CMS is because of Girls at the Centre”. You know, she had a really bad time and she was like, “Oh, I hate everyone but Girls at the Centre” you know. So yeah, that was a really defining moment.

The daughter of this parent also strongly supports crediting G@C with her staying at school. Similarly, one of her year-mates asserted that she had not been attending school before she joined the G@C program. She particularly identified her non-attendance as in spite of school efforts to encourage her to come, which she did not perceive as similarly centred on her own needs and goals: “They [the school] didn’t expect too much, they just planned out our future for us, like we wasn’t going to go anywhere or do anything – like achieve anything and then Girls at the Centre like give us that confidence and like they make us believe in ourselves.” Another girl now at Centralian Senior College and intending to complete Year 12 identified herself as a girl who only stayed in school past Year 8 because of G@C support that helped her effectively negotiate a clash with teachers. The 2008 TSF End-of-Year Report to DEEWR also provided the following indicative comments from students:

“It’s fun. Getting us fit and healthy. We are getting to know different people. We are getting to learn new things and we are helping each other.” (Year 7 girl 2008)

“I love meeting new people and I love Shelly cos she is fun and she makes me feel good about myself. I like being with the Anzac girls during the activities. Some of them are my old friends and now we get to see each other. I like school better. Girls at the Centre is helping me apply for the Indigenous Leadership and Mentor program.” (Year 7 girl 2008)

Engagement

With the exception of near-universal acknowledgement of the characteristics of the coaching team as pivotal to G@C success, the single most important feature isolated for comment concerned the program’s success in engaging with families. The Families And Schools Together (FAST) program plays a clear role in this affirmation, however it seems that the G@C context for the FAST program makes it notably more successful than many other iterations of it. A parent who had been involved with FAST at another school noted that the CMS/G@C version was both more enjoyable and far more effective. And a professional associated with the umbrella FAST program also independently volunteered the opinion that the network of relationships formed between G@C staff and families made the FAST program more effective.

Somewhat surprisingly, given the available literature on the scepticism of girls towards school-based support programs, the girls interviewed were themselves uniform supporters of the FAST program as engaging parents or care-givers with them: “before FAST me and my nanna wasn’t really close. We used to argue all the time and not agree on anything and like I wasn’t allowed to do much so... She like trusts me more and like we trust each other and we can talk more now about other stuff.”

The fact that the G@C program is impacting so clearly on family-school engagement needs to be seen as an extraordinary achievement. Both the international and Australian research on parent-school engagement makes it clear that efforts usually fall short of reaching the most alienated parent groups. The Smith Family has an existing commitment to developing parental and community engagement across its work, given the importance of this for improving educational outcomes. G@C has a clear place in the range of strategies for engagement identified by Lea et al, but at the same time they also provide a mode of positive “engagement” for both parents and students that exceeds the premise that “the parents who are most engaged are the ones whose children are most noticeably in trouble” (Lea, Thompson et al. 2011: 332).
As one respondent to this review, an experienced educator and policy formulator, noted, “Of the various initiatives available to foster involvement, this G@C is the most successful.” Similarly, from a parent, “So there are other school programs – they are much of a muchness – but they just don’t have the same emphasis on families.” Another parent noted:

I wish this program had been around before [when another child was at school]. I was too rigid with my other daughter, like “I’m the mother, you listen to me” and she rebelled. After our first two times coming, [my daughter] changed. She was more open and talkative. FAST would help a lot of parents not just us Aborigines. It helps families stay together.

The FAST program is particularly singled out by respondents of all kinds, including in the case of the sole CMS critic (on which, more below), but in general the program is praised for making connections between all stakeholders:

Another thing which is something that I’m very impressed by is the degrees to which they [TSF] bring families into the school and they help the school make sense to families and families make sense to the school, so it’s a little bit of a broker between families and the school. A lot of our students come from family backgrounds that did not have a strong positive experience of schooling and may not have as assertive skills, as their parents, in terms of being able to engage and have that power in a school context. So for instance if you look at our school council, it’s nowhere near representative of our school community, and that’s not uncommon, that’s where we’re at. So something that is really important at this school in terms of what Girls at the Centre does, is it helps to break down those barriers, some perceived and real barriers that families have around knowing what’s happening at school, around supporting their children at school, around being able to raise concerns if there are concerns at school. And that’s something that is – that certainly Girls at the Centre do better than our other on-site programs and it is a really valuable contribution to the school. Evidence of that is the FAST Program that they run so I think that’s been a very important program that they built up over a number of years. It is an important program into this context but obviously the way it runs this year – every year it seems to be more successful than last and I think that’s – that’s fabulous.

And from another:

The FAST program – it is the best thing. It makes a remarkable difference. The [two] Year 9 girls would have dropped out otherwise. The girls were destroying each other with their infighting. It used to take up such a lot of time. We don’t have that now. The G@C program provides them with different preoccupations and FAST helps students and parents have different goals – keep the focus open not near [moves hands close to face].

The G@C program in general is credited with this kind of impact. One senior teacher, acknowledges that “there is a perception that the social problems do play themselves out very much in the middle years” but G@C and the other on-site programs means there is always “some supervision and support”. The one CMS staff member who criticised the G@C program focused particularly on how it added to her workload because she felt the G@C staff were not supportive of school goals and rules. In contrast, another working in a very similar role especially credited G@C with reducing fighting, bullying and other undesirable activities and thus lightening staff loads – because the G@C staff are always “quick to respond” with assistance as well as offering a “safe place” for girls.

**Developing life goals and skills**

Measurement of life skills is one of the more difficult challenges facing any behavioural transformation program and to the extent possible, TSF have robust systems in place to gather a variety of performance data on this outcome. These include attendance at school and key events; the development of Aspiration (or Action) Plans; and feedback through structured interviews with key informants – school leadership and staff, parents and representatives from businesses involved in work experience. The Aspiration Plans are discussed further under ‘Sustainability’ below.

In addition G@C works towards developing life goals through the Work-Shadowing program, and events tailored to introducing girls to the “world of work” through visits from speakers on how to choose and apply for a job (including preparation of resumes), on mentored trips, and also at CMS, through engagement with representatives of TAFE and University programs. The Breakfast-with-a-mentor program also works to this end,
featuring not only role models but a variety of future pathways for girls. Grooming and deportment lessons and presentations skills are also included:

My concept of G@C has changed. Initially I didn’t like the emphasis on grooming, on political lines you know, but now I have to acknowledge that teaching girls these skills, how to behave, not to smell, be neat, be polite – this is the reality of how people are judged in white middle class society.

There is also evidence that the program improves girls’ self-esteem and confidence. Comparing G@C to the generic encouragements of the school, as one girl put it, “[Teachers] didn’t expect too much, they just planned out our future for us, like we wasn’t going to go anywhere or do anything – like achieve anything and then Girls at the Centre like give us that confidence and like they make us believe in ourselves.” This was echoed by CMS staff and by stories from G@C staff:

One of our year 7 girls who began the year with a whisper and struggled to say “hello” now towards the end of term 2, she enters the room saying "hello, how are you?" This is a good indicator for confidence in our room!

One senior teacher especially stressed the G@C program’s success in “building those skills of sharing” generated by the expectation that girls share in supporting social events through “rituals that are built... on a weekly basis”.

Despite the uneven application of the Aspiration/Action Plans discussed below, and conflicting information about their importance to, or success with girls, there is nevertheless some evidence that the G@C program succeeds in stimulating new aspirations in girl participants. Girls interviewed in Year 9 at CMS and Year 10 at the CSC stressed that they now aspired to finish school in order to complete a trade or go on to higher education as they (and/or other siblings) had previously not done. Furthermore, available data indicates that G@C may have some direct impact on retention to Year 12.

Impact on public perception of Indigenous girls in Alice Springs

It is one of the objectives of G@C that the program makes the Alice Springs community more supportive of emerging young Indigenous women. This is a very ambitious aim and we would suggest it form part of a vision statement rather than a specific program aim, if only because the actions that can be taken within the current parameters of the program limit the means available to transform the township’s valuation of indigeneity, youth and gender.

The program has enlisted support from multiple stakeholders, including local small businesses and the Chamber of Commerce and Industry, involving these in the Breakfast-with-a-mentor and Work-Shadowing activities, and it is clear that these external groups strongly value the program. Describing obstacles for young people, one responded:

…and then [attitudes in] Alice, I mean, you’d know a lot of it: the social issues, the trying to bring in a youth curfew rather than actually looking at the issues facing these young people and growing programs like the Girls at the Centre Program. Not just fund them but grow them.

Interviewer: Grow them instead of?

There’s so much out there. When I was in politics you were always getting these, you know, program funding things and requests and I’m like ‘I’m so sick of funding all these new programs because I want to know who’s doing what well, why is it going well?’ – what you’re basically doing [with this evaluation]– and work out if it can be moved somewhere else and stop having 20-odd people doing the same kind of thing but not doing anything well.

Another noted that the program’s integrated approach would help change a generation and that this was especially needed in Alice Springs:

It is good. It is not them and us. Indigenous girls get on with non-Indigenous girls. We need this in Alice. We need to break down the underlying racism in this town. A lot of people are pretty racist. A young girl coming from such a family into this program and befriends an Aboriginal girl. It changes her mindset and maybe that of her family too. We need to stop the frictions.
G@C interactions with local businesses through the Work Shadowing program has likewise created positive impressions. “I was quite surprised by the level of confidence. Unlike other Indigenous groups, they (the girls) weren’t afraid of asking questions or saying what they did and didn’t like. They were very impressive.” And further,

From a business perspective, we need kids that want to stay at school and get ahead. The businesses need the workers and they’d prefer locals. Race doesn’t come into it. It is about behaviours and expectations, making sure workers know what the requirements are. If young people have the will, then the business community is very keen to give them the opportunity. But the work ethic has to be there. Girls at the Centre gives the girls skills to be stronger. The business community was thrilled to be involved.

The program also connects with local youth service providers, which is especially important when case managing students who are exposed to the juvenile justice system. From the perspective of service providers, G@C provides a consistent link for planning, and “getting the disengaged re-engaged”. Their work also helps youth services cope with the wider township’s negative attitudes toward young people, in a context where media portrayals are hostile and police harassment of ‘loiterers’ has become the norm.

RETENTION TO YEAR 12

Improved retention to Year 12 is a clear goal for the G@C program, and TSF has sought to track students once they depart the Middle School with verification of this goal paramount. Despite best efforts, the available data is patchy, principally because of the relative youth of the program. 2011 was the first year that any G@C girl could have reached Year 12 (those being the girls who were in Year 9 in 2008 when the program first commenced at Anzac and ASHS). And the first year that any girl who had been supported by G@C from Years 7 through 9 could reach Year 12 will be 2013. There are some inconsistencies in the available data due to different modes of collection and some problems with data maintenance. To illustrate, knowledge of how to access information on which G@C graduands have transitioned to Years 11 and 12 was in the hands of one coach and relied on memory and supplementary phone inquiries to CSC for ad hoc completion.

With only one year to sample, and a start-up year at that, there can only be very cautious statements made about retention to Year 12 at this time. Additional difficulties arise from the high level of mobility characterising not only families but also girls within extended family networks in Alice Springs and from the fact that other (private) high schools have more attractive academic reputations than the public CSC. Together these mean it is quite likely that girls leaving CMS and proceeding to Year 12 might move to other schools, which data available to us does not identify. Considering as well the expected rate of retention to Year 12 of Alice Springs public high school girls, some positive indications might be drawn from the data in Table 2:

TABLE 2: POST-G@C PROGRESSION DATA 2008-2010

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Year 9 2008</th>
<th>Year 9 2009</th>
<th>Year 9 2010</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>G@C Graduates</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other School Yr 10</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CSC Yr 11</td>
<td>11 (in 2010)</td>
<td>8 (in 2011)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other School Yr 11</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CSC Yr 12</td>
<td>7 (in 2011)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other School Yr 12</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*The contradiction in records here is indicative of problems with collection and maintenance of program data but is slight enough (at n=1 rather than as a percentage of the cohort) that it raises no additional questions about the available data.
The unevenness of this data provides one example of why, as recommended below, gathering and maintaining consistent data on retention from year to year within and following the program through the high schools into which participants are most likely to feed should be a priority.

This retention data also needs to be considered in relation to different ways of accounting for the cohort of G@C girls. This is not only because the percentage retention would vary according to the cohort of girls being assessed, but also because the retention data does not reflect the full impact of G@C on girls. Another point of caution concerning retention to Year 12 data arises from the inclusivity of the program. Given that G@C aims to include girls regardless of whether they are “at risk” of leaving school, it also sometimes includes relatively high-achieving girls in academic terms and thus every year includes a proportion of girls who would be fully expected to proceed to Year 12. While this softens the power of retention data, this very situation has the added benefit of building relationships between girls who might leave school and those who would not and likely has a stronger peer effect on the girls “at risk” of leaving school. It is also of note that the mixed nature of the G@C cohort was cited by the majority as a factor in its success, including by girl participants. A CSC respondent noted the following:

_Overall we are getting bigger batches of Indigenous kids making it to senior school than ever before. This is the product of all the mentoring programs available. We are getting more Indigenous students here in terms of the movement of people into town and with it a growing proportion of students with high needs. The parents are second and third generation unemployed. The school has to absorb a complex social problem. Every effort that works is welcome._

**FACTORS FOR SUCCESS**

The Terms of Reference for this evaluation asked that we identify critical success factors for the program. The following features were distilled from interview and other program data.

- Effective Girl Coaches
- Significant parental engagement
- Inclusive Indigenous and non-Indigenous mix
- Holistic approach to girls’ lives (does more than sport)
- Girls’ input into decision making
- Resources and Facilities
  - access to a girls room
  - spacious additional area to engage with parents
  - access to bus and other school facilities/equipment
- Decentralisation/independence from school and government
  - discrete funding and management
- Site characteristics
  - Wider school integration
  - Constituency of supporters
  - Formal partnerships and strategic alliances, networks and coalitions.

Success factors that have not been discussed more fully in prior sections are elaborated further below. At this point it is important to note that some factors for success are not as publicly visible. We would include in this the
support and strategic acumen of the TSF Darwin and Adelaide management teams who pioneered the G@C program and many of its more readily identifiable successful attributes, including the ability to broker in alternate programs, independently raise revenue, and advocate for greater service responsiveness to families in need.

**Girl coaches**

The qualities of the coaches to the success of the program cannot be overstated. Their importance was almost universally nominated across diverse stakeholder groups:

...a lot of kids do not open up to total strangers. They’ve got to build their confidence and that’s what’s happened here. A lot of the kids knew Shelley and the other coaches and their confidence got built up and they helped them with their school issues. (Parent)

So I think there’s a quality that I am very grateful to see come into the school because I think it does give a lot of credibility to the program ... I know that a lot of these programs aren’t cheap but it’s not really just about the money, it’s getting the right people, getting the right program... You need to have staff that stay, that will build the relationships with the families, so that as the girls go through the program the next lot of girls coming through, aunties, grandmothers, they get to have those [deep] connections....To me, if you were running it separately [in another school] the core elements would still go back to the staffing, their commitment... (Educator)

They do what they do very well – that’s totally to do with the calibre of the coaches. Girls have to have a rapport with them. In similar programs, you achieve poor outcomes with the wrong people in place. (Policy officer)

[You need] people with that early intervention visionary mindset, they’re the kind of qualities that you’re looking for. People that strive for excellence and I think people who have known real strong adversity and have come out the other side... [so the girls know] “Oh well, you actually get us” (Community member)

During the research people provided multiple characteristics thought essential for effective delivery teams (coaches). These included:

- Empathy, affinity with girls and their families
- Caring, social justice orientation, non-judgemental
- Some counselling experience or aptitude, able to intervene in conflicts
- Community networks – ideally at least one person is local
- Open and energetic; willing to ‘go the extra mile’
- Good organisational skills
- Tolerant of self-absorbed teenage behaviours, flexible, adaptable, calm
- Fun to be with – entertaining
- Able to get on with other staff and stakeholders, team players
- Responsible to the school as well as the program they are in
- A commitment to the town and its future
- Having a vision for young people; very respectful of the girls
- People who have known adversity themselves
While CMS staff stress a mix of support and guidance – “a non-judgemental staff who are really supportive of the girls and still have high expectations” – the girls themselves uniformly prioritise from these attributes an empathetic, positive, enthusiastic and generous attitude to girl participants:

_They’re just so like calm and like they’re so good about everything – they’re very nice. . . . kind of all like – an all-round person. They don’t really get angry with us, like they keep their cool. They have to have patience, or they do have patience._ (Year 9 student)

Conflict resolution and mediation skills were highlighted by coaches, girls, and school personnel as one of the key G@C skill sets. For coaches, breaking up conflicts, or knowing about brewing tensions before they blow up, is an ongoing responsibility; and diffusing “a punch on” is the most consistent disruption to program implementation that coaches face in any given week. This aspect is also valued highly by school personnel:

_The transformation is amazing. [G@C] stopped the bitchiness, inappropriate behaviours, the bullying, and inability to talk about issues properly. Dealing with these can be a waste of teacher time. It can be so disruptive to the class and it can go on for years._

And by policy administrators:

_More girl fights happen at the school than boy fights. And mostly they happen during lunch and recess, where teachers are not really across things. Fights just escalate like bushfires. The girls in the program have engagement doing something they like at lunch and recess and they take fights to Shelly and Cara [coaches] before they get out of hand._

_Look, these kids come from environments where the idea of going on a holiday is a foreign idea. They don’t live in their own houses; they don’t have the dream of owning homes. And there are extraordinary levels of violence and aggression in how they talk to each other. So no expectations are set at home – and then they meet school expectations. The coaches work through these decision making processes – bringing the families along._

For girls, the coaches are the adults to turn to for help with all sorts of stressors:

_Girls at the Centre, the coaches, they just put it in a – I don’t know, just in a better way and they don’t really – if you do something wrong, they don’t really tell you off, they’re like – they stay calm and like work it out and stuff like that whereas like the other teachers will like yell at you and threaten to ring your parents and stuff._

While for staff,

_If there is a problem, either in terms of the child’s welfare or a student’s engagement in school or barriers at school around these children accessing everything that they can, most of the time Girls at the Centre will know about it prior to anyone at the school and I would suspect that a lot of those things wouldn’t come to the school’s attention if Girls at the Centre staff didn’t know about it. I suspect a lot of those things would fester and it would blow up over something which would seem quite minor down the track, but which actually has all these things underlying it…. it’s also about the welfare of young people, so if a family is travelling rough at that point of time, again Girls at the Centre know about it before the school and then they can work with the school to allocate resources that the school has, or indeed the Girls at the Centre Program has, to supporting those children. If there are barriers to participation around uniform or footwear or transport or food, those sorts of things [get sorted]._

**Managing the work**

The coaches are expected to operate with a case load of 1:25. That is, each coach should be responsible for no more than 25 program participants at a time, setting a cap for the current G@C program at 50 participants. We were advised the limit is designed to guard against coach fatigue and be a realistic measure of the number of girls who can usefully receive individualised attention. As noted, there is considerable ambiguity concerning variation within what counts as program participation and the number of actual participants fluctuates below and above this ratio. Such slippage is a strength and challenge for the program. It seems likely that the high levels of trust enjoyed by coaches is engendered, at least in part, by the team’s willingness to ‘go out of their way’ to meet all a girl’s needs, including where necessary, the needs of her family, through on-referral and networking. The team put in many voluntary (unpaid) hours after school and on weekends, chaperoning the girls or turning up at
significant community events as champions in the girls’ lives. In an exchange over the most important qualities for girl coaches a group of Year 10 girls agreed on commitment to the girls and the program:

Someone who is willing to listen to like a lot of girls whine and complain and stuff.

Yeah, someone that you could like talk to and everything, not just there for the job but to actually –that isn’t just doing it just to get paid but actually genuinely like - they want to do it.

Coaches are exhorted to stick to the ratio, as part of managing their workloads, but are simultaneously expected to forge links, be responsive and go beyond strictly interpreted duty statements in their care for the girls and their families. Put differently, the program is unlikely to be as successful in building relationships between home and school, or in being a life-skills resource for participating girls, without the coaches’ willing embrace of the extraordinary claims that are routinely made upon them. As one external observer noted, “Any position involving young people – you have to have your heart and soul in it or else you wouldn’t employ them. You get dedicated people who develop intimate knowledge of the girls and their families. This is critical.”

The CMS website description of G@C coaches describes the expected role succinctly:

The work of the Girl Coach is the core element driving the outcomes of the program. The role of the Girl Coaches, working with the students, is to “hassle and help” the girls to fulfill their potential. In this role the Girl Coach challenges the girls to raise their aspirations and work hard. They also help the girls and their families to overcome the barriers that they may face. Their work includes negotiating a signed commitment from parents and each girl to fully participate in the program and working with each family to ensure consistent participation. Sometimes this means providing the girls with broader experiences through arranging and leading sport, arts and work observation, or arranging a range of brokered programs that meet specific needs. Breaking down barriers for the girls can also mean helping Mum arrange childcare for the little ones or develop her budgeting skills through financial literacy programs. The Girl Coach also works with each girl to develop an Individual Aspiration Plan and to understand the steps they need to take now toward that goal.

(http://cms.nt.edu.au/Careers/Girls--the-Centre/)

The rigidity of a coach who habitually refuses assistance on the basis that this would go ‘over quota’ would be problematic for the program. Conversely, those who respond warmly to over-quota requests for help have the attributes necessary to be most effective as coaches. Thus, working within the breach of the stated ratio and the coaches’ extraordinary efforts are depended upon. As one external respondent stressed:

I know that the Girl Coaches are absolutely swamped. I know that they go over on other things; they do access and service a lot more girls than they’re funded to work with. So I think either the funding needs to reflect that or the policies need to be a lot more specific around what they are there to do, and I know that’s incredibly difficult for Jody and the girls and they need to say ‘Okay, we can’t have any more than a set number’ ... they really need to work with a core group that they can focus on and get them to really high outcomes as far as what the girls and the parents work with them to define what those outcomes are, rather than just try and get as many across a basic line. And I think that’s the one area that I would like to see different...

That such efforts take a toll is evidenced in recent loss of staff, and TSF support managers are right to have concerns about the types of workloads that can be managed over the longer term. At the same time, it is clear that this contradiction is not resolved by managerial insistence on a ratio that cannot be honoured in practice. The school based supervisor/program coordinator role is theoretically meant to ensure that such issues are regularly reflected upon and managed, but this role is also besieged by demands and there is no framework which suggests how fluctuating levels of need should otherwise be managed, other than stricter insistence on the image of the ratio.

We do not have a resolution to hand, other than a recommendation that such contradictions be comprehensively thought through by the team, as it strikes at the heart of program sustainability. The 1:25 ratio is a symbolic solution to a problem that probably needs other tactics. One option is to be certain about the justification for this ratio, clarifying what evidence it is based upon, and why it matters. If it is a validated criterion, this needs to be
stated clearly and discussed meaningfully in terms of dose and impacts, so that coaches understand the principles and the impact on the girls of any dilution effects. Another option would be to reassess the human resource equation, as it might be that the workload is too high and more coaches are needed to handle the demand. This is certainly the verdict of a number of observers, who express concern that the coaches risk burning out and that a more ideal scenario would see a coach per year level and another to facilitate girls’ transition to senior school. In the words of one:

> I think that Girls at the Centre needs to have more money and more staff...25 is way too many for one person. They need to bring down that ratio. The program is good; it works. A more generous ratio like 1: 15 or 16 would be way better...TSF should focus on this program and making it work well rather than taking on new burdens in new sites. Don’t spread it too thin.

Or, less effectively, the ratio could be stated for what it currently is, which is a symbolic empiric guideline only.

**Inclusive Indigenous/non-Indigenous program**

A number of commentators noted that the inclusive, or non-exclusive, nature of the G@C cohort – that is, the fact that it welcomes a mix of Indigenous and non-Indigenous girls – is key to its success:

> It’s open to any females in the school to participate. Whilst it’s funded around the Indigenous cohort, it’s not exclusive, and I think that’s really important.

> The mix of girls is important. It is not race based and they blend high achieving girls with other girls: they all benefit.

> This is really important. It is part of overcoming black-white tensions. You know, it was the Indigenous women [in early consultations] who said this in the initial time.

Girls and their parents are also uniform in agreeing that the inclusivity of the program is a positive factor in the program’s success with individual girls and even a positive step towards better relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous girls. One teacher claimed that CMS is in effect a “bicultural school” and that the divide between Indigenous and non-Indigenous prevents cross-over friendships which G@C has particularly helped with – “the environment supports that... the fact that they’re sharing” responsibilities and expectations. The program’s inclusivity she “very strongly” thinks is “a good thing”. “I do see friendships coming out of there that I wouldn't have expected”. One of the girl participants also noted, however, that G@C helped Indigenous girls better understand relations between Indigenous girls: “We all have different backgrounds and it’s good to get to know each other, like we all have different lives, even like us Aboriginal girls have different lives to each other.”

**Holistic approach to girls’ lives**

The G@C program in practice aims to have a holistic approach to girls’ lives. While this attribute was particularly stressed in interviews with professionals, parents and girls by a comparison to the Girls Academy program, the frequency of this comparison was also partly a product of the semi-structured interview format in which a comparison of the two programs was explicitly asked for. Professionals more familiar with the Girls Academy did not see the difference between G@C and Girls Academy as one between a holistic approach to supporting girls’ lives and sport-centred coaching, but instead saw the groups as differentiated by accessing different networks of girls. At the same time, girls, parents and also CMS staff identified Girls Academy as sport-centred whilst seeing G@C as more generally concerned with girls’ lives and connecting with families. The widespread position can be summarized by one comment: “not everyone is sporty”.

What this holistic approach means in practice for girls is more variety of activities, on the one hand, and attention and support invested in all areas of their lives equally – which might include sport (the girls particularly mentioned basketball and football) but did not have to. It would certainly not be possible to fulfil the criteria of full participation in G@C that enables access to the highly desired program elements like trips away, by sport alone. In fact, while some descriptions of the G@C program seem to imply that girls must participate in all elements of the program including all planned group activities that are open to all girls, this was also subject to some discretion. The fact that the Girl Coaches freely interpret this principle to mean girls should be active members in a general sense, and allowed the girls to be highly selective about which group activities they participate in, is also part of the program’s success. It allows the program to be more inclusive by not penalising girls who are
disinterested in basketball, cooking, scrapbooking, or painting, and it facilitates the image of the program as holistic by not prioritising any of those tastes or lifestyle choices in hierarchical terms. A girl's whole life and all her interests are potential inspirations for program components.

Girls' input into decision making

The holistic approach to supporting girls' engagement and achievement also contributes to the program’s aim of “engendering female resilience”, which might be better phrased as girls’ resilience, given that what stimulates perceptions of self-reliance and self-direction for girls and overcomes images of girls’ vulnerability is quite different for adult women (see Driscoll 2002). Given the degree to which girls’ choices are ordinarily determined for them or heavily limited or shaped by parental and institutional expectations, allowing them direct input into decision-making about activities for them encourages an authentic perception that they are both deemed responsible and valued for their own expertise within the G@C program.

Many elements of the program are “brokered-in” or otherwise selected by G@C and/or TSF support managers and girls’ significant input into decision-making is not one of the program’s formal aims. Indeed one of our recommendations is an increased degree of reflection on how program elements are chosen and with reference to what understanding of girls' needs is being made (even if the ambition is simply to “pull in the numbers”) and a greater articulation of sequenced achievements, goals and skills.

However it should be remembered that a clear contributing success factor is this validation of girls and of their membership in the program by allowing them substantial choice (e.g. about after-school activities or the discussion topics within the FAST program). Girls very frequently represented a sense of ownership of and authority within the program through statements about being consulted over activities and being deemed capable of choosing appropriate activities for G@C participants: “they asked us what we wanted to do, so then everyone had a say in what to do”. Parents participating in the FAST program also highlighted this aspect, noting that having the girls nominate the discussion topics meant they would be canvassing priority issues for girls, making it a learning experience for all involved: “The girls pick the subjects for FAST and so we get an insight into the pressures they're under. It helps us as parents. It helps a lot.”

Facilities and resources

The most central facility for the G@C program is the Girls Room to which the program has exclusive access. The room is never seconded to other activities except for collaboration in which G@C takes a leading role. This room is not only a resource that enables program activities but functions as a daily resource for girls, offering them a communal space, access to support staff and food, hygiene requirements and other resources, and, importantly a safe girls-only space for themselves and their belongings. For CMS staff this safe space element of the Girls Room was particularly important:

You know helping to ensure in those less supervised times that students have a safe place to go and there’s less likely in that lower structured environment of a break for students to make inappropriate choices. . . . It is obviously also a good opportunity for them to check in and touch base with the staff down there, so that’s one thing which is an amazing contribution to the school.

The Girls Room also functions as a spacious area in which to engage with parents and/or other family members. This broad commitment of resources at the disposal of the G@C program is a clear advantage and as noted, reflects some of the important establishment and advocacy work pioneered by TSF’s program leaders behind the scenes. At the same time, it is also clear that the G@C program both relies on resources provided by CMS more generally, and related support staff, and that this dependence is occasionally an obstacle. As some CMS staff members put it to us:

Getting the girls to come to school more often is a big thing. They (the G@C team) do a lot of running around in their own vehicles. They don’t get first priority for the school bus – a teacher will get first dibs. They really need their own transport. I sure hope they get a petrol allowance because they have to use their own cars a lot.

Access to a school bus and other school facilities/equipment is an important factor for some activities, including such engagement with girls and their families as assisting girls with transport to G@C events and providing catering and other services and would be a considerable local enhancement.
Decentralisation/independence

We have noted the importance of the TSF program managers in otherwise hidden establishment, leadership and support capacities. One of the few ways in which this fact is obliquely referenced is in the identification of TSF’s independence from the school and from government as critical to G@C success. Administrators openly admit it would be difficult for a school to quarantine staff with the valuable attributes of Girl Coaches for just the one program, given the multitude of extraneous demands made on schools for extracurricular and pastoral activities. High turnover in both school leadership and policy influencers was also cited as a risk factor for a program that was government-run, as was likely competition for program funds. The independence of TSF, its wider national reputation and its ability to independently leverage funds would be difficult to match by state-administered programs. As one respondent put it,

There have been multiple changes in the Executive Director position in Central Australia [a senior administrative position within NTDET]. Each comes with their own priorities and agendas. Some of these have indicated they would like more reporting on bizarre things. TSF resisted whimsical changes. They don’t bend to idiosyncratic whims. They have consistent values and aims.

A business leader commented that the key to G@C success is that it is small and nimble:

But if it got any larger, like a more government style thing, it would be over-regulated and there would be reports and paperwork and logistical hassles that make it harder for businesses to deal with. It wouldn’t work at that scale, not like that.

Most importantly from the perspective of participating girls, the coaches are their advocates. They do not take ‘sides’ with the adults as a fait accompli. At the very least, coaches have to be differentiated from teachers. And for TSF independence in financial and strategic terms to be maintained, a strong managerial support structure is also required.

Site characteristics

Under ‘Scalability’ below we note the importance of exquisitely understanding the site attributes that are conducive to successful program implementation. From our analysis, the CMS site offers a number of important features in addition to facilities, including integration of the G@C program into a wider school approach to family outreach and student wellbeing. G@C sits on the school’s wellbeing team, which according to participants, is the forum for “finding out who is working with who, who is following up on what.” Information and concerns are shared and integrated case management is planned for. The G@C staff interact especially closely with the school counselor, school nurse, the Home Liaison Officers (HLOs) and the Aboriginal and Islander Education Worker (AIEW). They are thus part of the ‘extra-curricular’ pastoral care team who do things the teachers can’t do. G@C staff even do what HLOS and AIEWs can’t do. As their roles were described to us, the HLO and AIEW roles are very specific and they must take direction from the Principal. They link to families but their loyalty has to be to the institution. One respondent put it this way:

Home Liaison Officers and Aboriginal and Islander Education Workers are part of the school still. Sort of associated with “strapping” boys and girls, you know. These [G@C] are independent advocates. The AIEWs/HLO roles are now much more statutory and administrative and their reports are picked up by truancy officers as part of that whole welfare crackdown. And their ratio is 1:300, not 1:25. (Administrator)

While another noted:

Interviewer: So in schools, there’s always mechanisms or roles that are meant to be trying to provide that community intel, isn’t there? Like, there’s always AIEWs or HLOs, so what’s the difference?

Respondent: So we have two HLOs and one AIEW, so we’re better staffed in terms of those roles than we should be. We should have one HLO and one AIEW [using the formula]. What’s the difference? There is a strong overlap then between those roles, not with those and Girls at the Centre. I would more say that we have three staff filling a similar role within the school. They have a massive workload. Looking at our school demographic and looking at where our kids are coming from, obviously any assistance or any added attention that can come through as on-top programs and Girls at the Centre in particular, it’s really – it’s stuff that wouldn’t happen
otherwise. So we have this [pre-existing] staffing, sure, [but] it’s not sufficient, based on the kids that we’ve got here.

Constituency of supporters

TSF’s formal partnerships and strategic alliances, networks and coalitions as brokered by the TSF management are also clear factors in the success of the program. We received positive reports from business representatives and community leaders. This includes people who value TSF’s overall independence:

Yeah, you need to have a very clear understanding of who the program is [for], who it’s run by, the vision and the belief and the commitment to people rather than the commitment to policies and legislation and getting voted back in. And I think, yeah, that’s the defining difference – that people need to have a confidence in who’s running it and why they’re running it and not just for a vote winning piece.

In the early days of the program, when TSF was establishing the program’s presence, the TSF program managers were able to call upon strategic links at the ministerial level to ensure agreements went ahead. It appears this intervention was needed to head off some local (small ‘p’) political resistance from some education bureaucrats who saw the G@C program as competing with the emergent Girls Academy model through the Australian Government’s Sporting Chance program. But as we note in ‘Other Issues’ below, such tactics can be double-edged. Bringing in a minister over the heads of local bureaucrats might win a battle but bureaucrats can also be thin-skinned over any perceived sidelining and some residual push back was gleaned in interviews.

SUCCESS CASE STUDIES

From the girls interviewed in this review we identified three kinds of support that G@C visibly offered. These are: 1) support in increasing girls’ aspirational life goals, 2) support in dealing with personal difficulties and obstacles that impeded successful school participation, and 3) support for families in the community more generally as the necessary context for any girl’s participation. We have chosen three success stories here that generally represent these modes of support although each crosses more than one.

The names of the girls have been changed and we have otherwise endeavoured to ensure the description disallows ready identification of the girls concerned, although evidently it is impossible to ensure staff familiar with the girl’s particular circumstances will be unable to determine which girls are concerned.

- A girl who is academically ambitious

“Melanchta” belongs to a mid-sized Indigenous family with parents working in Indigenous liaison and service roles. While she has material social advantages over some girls at CMS she had never identified herself as a girl who would do particularly well at school or go on to Year 12 until she became involved in G@C. Her parents both work more than one job and while employment was certainly an expectation, she had no particular sense Year 12 would be required for this and no expectation either of leaving Alice Springs. Her older siblings have never needed to go on to Year 12 and have experienced successes of their own in non-academic areas. As Melanchta puts it, many girls "would be at school, like, I don’t know, [grades] 7 ‘til 9 or whatever but then when we get here, like, some of them start dropping out". Leaving school is a normal expectation. She nevertheless does not make claims for any academic curriculum in G@C. For her, the G@C staff do not operate like extended family but, rather, "when you’re in Girls at the Centre like, people don’t ignore you kind of thing, like they talk to you". Instead, Melanchta identifies the program as a source of encouragement and inspiration, in particular of evident and sustained interest in her personally and with introducing her to alternative life paths.

She is now committed to finishing Year 12 to “Get a better job. Because if they know you’ve been to school and graduated and stuff, I guess it makes it look better for yourself”. Melanchta’s way of putting things here is telling. Education is for her not only about employment but about a broader sort of mobility. She fully intends to leave Alice Springs in order to further her education but also, at this stage, to return home afterwards. In improving Melanchta’s own image of herself and her future, this education is a life goal firmly grounded in a new sort of self-esteem and of a new confidence that she, her mother, and CMS staff all link to G@C. She is now at CSC and has won an academic merit scholarship to continue her education in a metropolitan city (on a scholarship) in 2012.
A girl who faced home and health difficulties

“Renee” is a middle child in a large family parented by a single mother. Her family has struggled with disabilities, health problems, adolescent pregnancy, and the burdens of a larger family on a small income. But while Renee’s mother agrees that G@C has had a profound impact on the family as a whole, especially in improving relationships between mother and daughter, Renee’s own perception of what the program has done for her is more personal. Suffering from a non-congenital disability, Renee’s health problems and relations with social environments in which her disability singled her out as visibly different was compounded by her low self-esteem. Everyone interviewed who referred to Renee’s case agrees she was shy or even withdrawn to the point that it constituted another disability. It’s into this situation that G@C intervened directly, by accessing material resources to assist with her disability but also with personal support and encouragement: “I just didn’t want, like, to see anyone. But with Shelly and stuff, they just talk to you.” Staff at CMS and G@C agree with Renee’s self assessment of changes in her relation to the world: “I’m heaps confident now. My whole family, we have all these disabilities and that. But I’m not, like, all shy anymore.”

As a fair-skinned Indigenous girl Renee also particularly stressed the significance of the inclusive nature of the program, indirectly suggesting that her disability was exacerbated by difficult questions about cultural belonging. She drew clearer lines between Indigenous and non-Indigenous girls in the program than most girls and also identified differences in the realistic expectations of Indigenous girls. She now also aims to finish Year 12 in order to access trades training at the Senior College and local university. “You have to get an apprenticeship and stuff,” she notes. “Have to show you’re responsible.”

A marginalized (non-Indigenous) family assisted by the program

“Tabitha” is not a girl we interviewed but one who was repeatedly used as an example of the sometimes very special nature of G@C support by professionals, TSF managers, G@C staff and community supporters. There were numerous citations of Tabitha’s family as a special case, strongly indicating the effectiveness of the tier of “high priority” girls produced by G@C staff, who identified her family crisis and helped them access housing and other resources. As one professional noted, this “probably would have may have slipped the radar in the classroom because the girls feel a lot more comfortable and safe… and tend to open up and develop more (with G@C)”.

Essentially the girl’s family had shifted from a regional town more remote than Alice Springs to Central Australia in search of work. Instead of employment, they faced a harsh winter, life in a tent, and a rodent plague which ate into their food supplies. Hospitalisation followed for a number of family members. G@C called upon the experience of TSF, and in particular the resources of the managers in Darwin and Adelaide, in brokering essential support services for the family, including housing access.

While this girl’s entire family was supported in this way, the fact that they accessed support through G@C rather than any other possible avenue (presuming they appeared, eventually, on some other institutional radar), also had particular personal effects for Tabitha, who was described as a girl whose confidence had transformed:

*The Girls at the Centre actually worked quite a long time with the family because they were living in a tent, and they got them into a house because the girl had very bad asthma, it was actually quite a big family and they were living in a couple of tents out on the highway, and coming into school every day…. And so they organised for her to have showers and what have you. Because she was cared for and stayed here and kept coming to school, this girl’s now receiving a Chief Minister’s award.*
5. SCALABILITY

The Terms of Reference for this evaluation required an assessment of the scalability of G@C for adoption to other high need sites such as large regional centres and urban locations. We assessed scalability in terms of the maturity of the program. A different form of market research would be required to measure demand for the program and assess the pricing models for different service options.

By ‘maturity of the program’, we are referring to the program’s levels of codification and its growth status. ‘Codification’ refers to articulated program designs and logics, or what we might call the program’s theory of practice: what are the expected impact pathways between an action and an effect and are these pathways explicitly stated? ‘Growth status’ refers to the ability of the program to handle growth, both within the original local environment and in new contexts, without reducing its current impacts. A challenge for the G@C program is that many of its activities were started from first principles. The energy required for getting the program off the ground inevitably meant less attention has been paid to stepping out how the program’s actions are supposed to achieve the outcomes it intends; and why some actions should take precedence over other available actions. Such an articulation would be required if new parties without the inception history and knowledge are to take the program forward.

This is not to fossilize the program or reduce its flexibility but to take it beyond a reliance on the excitement and fervour which people involved in getting something off the ground naturally bring to new projects. For sustained effect in different contexts and with different people, deep thought about the components of program implementation (its core or its essence) for fidelity in new contexts is a necessary pre-condition. It is a testament to the acumen and vision of the program’s initiators, particularly Tricia Rushton, the former National Manager, Indigenous Policy and TSF’s NT Regional Programs Manager Catherine Phillips, that the program is in the enviable position of being able to consider its future directions. It is now prudent to seek to manage maintenance and expansion efforts by having key knowledge made available in other media – guidelines, training courses and the like – ensuring managers are able to continue to focus on direction setting and program leadership and not be caught in time-consuming repetitions of procedural information, whys and wherefores.

It is our assessment that the G@C program could be implemented in other areas, including urban, large regional, and non-Indigenous settings, but that time is required for The Smith Family to ensure the rationale and recommended procedures behind key aspects of the program are made clear for third and fourth party implementers. A useful guide to assist this preparation activity is available at http://www.msiworldwide.com/files/scalingup-framework.pdf.

This preparatory analytical work will ensure G@C program logics and processes are well-documented and third parties can be trained and supported to adopt and implement the program in new sites. Discussions need to focus on:

1. the scale up target and purpose
2. institutionalisation processes such as recruitment, training, support, program measurement and data systems
3. the leadership processes and organisational capacity for achieving and sustaining buy-in from stakeholders and knowledge of site characteristics necessary for successful implementation.

These points are briefly discussed in turn.

SCALE-UP TARGET AND PURPOSE

Commonly, ‘scaling up’ is conflated with implementing programs on a much larger scale, but the focus goes beyond putting a pilot program into place in one or more new locations. ‘Scaling up’ may also be about increasing the depth of an existing program by offering new and different services and/or increasing the number of recipients of a program. Without going into the definitional debates, a useful typology is provided by Cooley and Kohl (2005) who suggest three broad steps for moving ‘from vision to large scale change’. These include the need to:

- develop a scaling-up plan, including creating a vision and filling in information gaps;
- establish the pre-conditions for scaling up, including legitimising change, building a constituency, as well as realigning and mobilising resources; and
- implement the scaling-up process, including modifying organisational structures, coordinating action, and maintaining momentum.

A key first task in developing the ‘scaling up plan’ is to create a concrete vision of what scaling up would look like for key people if the venture were successful, well in advance (Cooley & Kohl 2005: 6). That is, being clear on what is being aimed for within scaling up efforts is an essential definitional undertaking.

During our interviews, many different ideas about the end goal for scaling up were offered. For some, scaling the program would see G@C offered at the CSC or in the feeder primary schools linking to CMS in Alice Springs. Some argued that the program should be replicated for boys at CMS, especially those for whom sports were not a passion. One educator suggested that the “hole in the net” is the “non-footy whitefellas.” While CMS staff are the strongest supporters of this idea, it was also raised by more than one girl, although when the idea was put to other staff and girls there was division on whether (1) a boys program is needed and (2) boys would willingly participate. Some insisted the program was needed “for girls everywhere” in every kind of school context, all over Australia. For others, expansion was imagined in more structural terms, as something that could be spin-off activity by The Smith Family, with replication to be achieved through a franchising model where TSF brokers train and support school-based teams but do not assume responsibility for driving site implementation.

Similarly, while we were able to distil a number of factors contributing to the successes of the CMS initiative, it is also the case that a number of key characteristics need to be more systematically codified (documented and tested) to clarify exactly what constitutive elements are to be transferred. Again, there is great variability in what people think are essential ingredients, with the only common element being the universally endorsed quality of the coaches and the success of the coaches in engaging with parents, through such activities as the FAST program. Otherwise ‘what’ is being scaled up remains ambiguous beyond structural attributes (such as having a discrete space to operate from).

Clarifying what scalability means for key TSF implementers and constituents is thus an essential primary step. Because the G@C program has only been in place for three years, and has only had its current staff complement for less than 12 months, some of its processes still remain ‘know how’ and are not yet at a point where key steps have been documented for use by potential third parties. A draft manual is in the process of development, and will be useful for new adoptees, but cannot be expected to provide a sufficient resource to enable newcomers to implement the program and expect equivalent or similar gains if dormant key assumptions remain either unsurfaced or untested. Manuals are necessary but not sufficient. An illustrative example is the matter of ‘Aspiration Plans’.

According to the management guidelines, each G@C participant is expected to have an Aspiration Plan developed which sets out her goals and how these might be achieved. The understanding is that the process of articulating one’s ambitions and mapping steps for achieving these underpins achievement, making girls active agents rather than passive bystanders in their own futures. These plans are ideally meant to be developed through one-on-one conversations between a coach-mentor and a girl at the beginning of her participation in the program.

Yet, important as the Aspiration Plans potentially are as a vehicle for agency, they are not reliably developed for each girl. The beginning of any new year is filled with manifold demands to get the program up and running with fun activities so that girls and families can immediately see the point of participating; so on and so forth. Only a handful of girl participants have plans and no girls mentioned them as pivotal to their development within the program, despite explicit prompting during interviews. Even the G@C field personnel concede that the girls’ dreams become known through multiple other mechanisms and are realised through multiple other techniques that could never be fully aggregated into such a structured plan. In the interim, the absence of plans is listed by G@C staff as one of the many things that needs to be attended to, at some hard-to-name future point when there will be more time, as a ‘should and ought’ that is dutifully considered necessary despite indications that the girls’ needs may be being met anyway.

The point is not to critique or judge the necessity of the presence or absence of plans. Rather, it is to highlight the work that still needs to be done to truly isolate the ingredients which need to be faithfully replicated if different school populations (and staff, parents and communities) are to uphold the essential characteristics for quality and effect to be sustained over time.
INSTITUTIONAL PROCESSES

There is no question that the quality of TSF-appointed staff implementing and guiding the program has been pivotal to achievements to date. At the same time, it was recognised that leaving the program dependent on ‘good staff’ to make it work, without systems to nurture implementation fidelity, would impede success in new sites:

...organisations need to have good structures in place to grow effectively [or else] it’s like the tree that shoots up and doesn’t put the roots down, doesn’t have strong foundations. That is where the processes and the induction system and management oversight need to occur. It works because they’ve got a really good tight team of motivated staff, but I can tell you, you know, it’s really, really difficult to attract highly motivated, well qualified staff to the Northern Territory...If you are only going to tap into locally available talent and that talent is poor, that might be where it fails, unless you’ve got those good systems in place. (Educator)

These supports that underpin the ability of programs to be replicated with success are typically not well developed in young initiatives and the pursuit of such work is a recommendation of this review.

At the same time, we are aware of a fear that specification of the program’s core action pathways and protocols (i.e. its ‘codification’) may reduce G@C’s local attunement, when agility, adaptability and responsiveness have been hallmarks of the program and its successes to date. This is an understandable but unwarranted fear. While the review team have been able to identify success factors, the necessity or otherwise of a number of program elements are necessarily hypothetical. Program activities are based on professional wisdom, girl preferences, understanding of behaviour change literature, and extensive knowledge of the community, youth and girl development fields. These professionally and client-informed working hypotheses need to be more tightly specified within a theory of practice which articulates what kinds of behaviours and knowledge a graduand of the program ought to have – perhaps specified per year level given that both girls and schools understand potential G@C participants to be grouped that way – and the sorts of tested approaches that might yield these attributes. This is not to apply the heavy hand of bureaucratic documentation or clinical protocols to an agile prevention program but simply to say that new implementers need to be guided in what they do and why they are doing it. Inevitably and desirably, local discretion will be needed to make these recommended protocols effective in individual and everyday circumstances.

Say, for instance, that codification of G@C program design and elements enshrines continuation of the current recommendation that each family be asked to sign an agreement specifying their roles and responsibilities as program participants, but the family that the coach encounters is in crisis and unable to prioritise such an agreement. Signing agreements should take a back seat while more immediate concerns are attended to, but because the notion of a shared understanding that needs to be discussed and agreed to still remains as a program requirement, it will be reliably returned to in time. Similarly, the ‘codification’ of G@C protocols and core assumptions might state clearly that site-based staff should have the discretion to broker in programs that accord with G@C goals (presuming that these have been more crisply defined). Flexibility and expert nous will remain vital, within a framework which provides guidelines for best practice implementation. We can also assume that a leadership structure will need to be maintained to attend to troubleshooting support, professional development, achieving and maintaining buy-in from stakeholders, fund raising and management of ‘politics’ that are also necessary for successful implementation.

For scalability, the program needs greater clarity about what to do, when and why. Although the success factors outlined above make it clear why G@C and TSF staff would hesitate to think about such clarity as a G@C-specific ‘curriculum’, both ensuring G@C’s success in the face of staff changes and taking such a program to scale will be aided by considering how and why certain activities precede or draw on others. The program’s effective scalability depends in part on being able to explain how to deliver the program beyond its structural ingredients (coaches, discrete space etc). It also depends on understanding what levels of exposure to different activities yield desired impacts on girls most effectively. This is what is meant by program logics.

Maintaining responsiveness to the school environment, to parents and community, and especially to girls’ cultural context, tendencies and desires is a crucial component of the G@C program, but this is not necessarily opposed to thinking more closely about how that responsiveness is organised and most effectively delivered. An external policy-maker’s perspective on the program at the moment (however incorrectly), is that “it’s an instinct driven program, which is good, but you can’t scale up an instinct driven program, because you can only spread those staff so thin.” Or, in the words of another, “many programs in the NT are personality driven. They [TSF] need to clarify their criteria for key program aspects – at the moment it is a paper-less zone.” This last contributor
included a suggestion that, for government to support scaling, the data and research associated with program implementation and decision making needs to be published in the peer-reviewed literature as part of a continuous improvement regime, otherwise the program risked remaining “a bolt-on, ‘special’ and one-off.” We would make note that government readily supports a plethora of approaches that are neither peer-reviewed nor evidence-based. But to the extent that such perceptions about G@C impair the fundability and hence the scalability of the program, they should be noted.

The reflection on and designation of program principles that we are recommending in fact draws on the success of the program thus far. For example, clarifying whether the G@C program is a three-year program or a year-by-year program might at first glance seem at odds with the agility and responsiveness that has made the program such a local success. But this is already a question raised by the practices of the program. The G@C program is presently a full three year program in the sense that girls progressively benefit from particular regular activities – such as Work-Shadowing, which is currently available only to Year 9 students. Reflecting on the program and designating its principles can proceed by asking how such limits on an offering are decided on and what, if anything, needs to prepare girls for these particular activities. At the same time, the G@C program is presently a year-by-year program in the sense that some activities are available to all years and repeated every year on a regular basis, such as the FAST program.

Considering the kinds of experiences and behaviour changes that are desired or expected for each year and how they are best ordered and assigned to different groups of girls does not have to remove flexibility – for example, it does not remove girls’ choices concerning what topics are discussed in FAST meetings or what activities fall into the generally available after-school activities like cooking or basketball, both of which were chosen by girls at different times. On-site G@C staff have responded positively to the idea of a “handbook” which would record activities that have been used and their particular advantages and disadvantages for encouraging certain values or attributes. Closer reflection on the program would extend this to describe as well which groups of girls benefit in which ways from listed activities; and recommendations for which activities develop effectively from or towards other listed activities. And for any larger scale expansion, these choice ranges would need to evidence their logics.

Recruitment, training and retention

Given that the quality of the coaches is critical to the success of the program, processes for recruiting, training and supporting new coaches to deliver consistently well in new sites are also needed. At present, we were advised that coach training is haphazardly received and not delivered to a clear outline of the key competencies required for successful implementation. When consulted, the coaching team were able to identify a long wish list of critical areas for which they sought training and technical assistance. Without any prioritisation or culling, these include:

- Counselling, conflict resolution and mediation training
- Dealing with cyber-bullying, suicide and depression
- Team work
- Cultural awareness
- Time management and project planning
- Communication and facilitation skills for working with diverse client and stakeholder groups (girls, families, schools, community)
- Transport qualifications (bus and four wheel drive certification)
- First aid, occupational health and safety
- Health and wellbeing
  - Nutrition
Life skills
- Personal development.

The training needs to be directly relevant to the professional requirements of the position and ideally, a clear schedule of workplace training should be in place, enabled by careful rostering of release time for attending staff, and planning around known community and G@C events. If the program were to expand, attention to orientation and induction processes will also be necessitated – especially if TSF are operating as start up and implementation consultants rather than directly program managing each site. As the program matures, structured opportunities for allowing implementation staff to reshape induction, orientation, training support and program guidelines based on their experiences will also need to be created as forms of program reflection and renewal.

Program management

For good and valid reasons, implementation of the pilot version of the G@C program was not tightly controlled from a strict evaluation point of view. However, available data has been captured with greater attentiveness than is usually the case, using a mix of qualitative and quantitative measures, accurately reflecting the many moving parts of the G@C program. Future activities would benefit from further streamlining of these collection methods and reporting mechanisms.

Ideally, in taking the G@C program to scale, a second stage pilot should be designed which takes the program to a select (controlled) number of new sites and then measures the real world impact and challenges. Planning for such expansion activities is also a research conversation with people who specialise in what is now called ‘implementation science’. Taking the time to replicate and see if interventions are effective across contexts is a critical foundation for wider expansion and would move the program beyond over-reliance on the advocacy and passion of program supporters. In the world of competing programs, robust outcome data helps sustain programs beyond promising pilot efforts and the wit and energy of innovators. Large scale deviations should be harnessed as part of a program of testing program assumptions about effect and impact. So saying, we recognise the efforts required to develop and fund such disciplined expansion efforts under tested conditions, given the potential arbitrariness of the goals and timeframes set for fund-dependent projects, and the under-resourcing of research-intensive implementation efforts.

More pragmatically, attention to what real time information is needed for fluid monitoring of program achievement against benchmarks is warranted. As the program develops, there will be greater need for efficient forms of data collection and reporting which encourage timely updating because of their usefulness to staff on the ground, as much as to folk demanding reports from a distance. This requires that TSF invest in a G@C information system that most easily allows site-based staff to monitor and report on the performance of the program, in forms that can be aggregated for national program monitoring and refinement and which can harness existing system data. For continued local success as well as for expansion, well-calibrated and more efficient data collection systems are vital.

This said, it bears re-emphasising that for a program the size and age of G@C, the data collection systems in place have been highly suitable. It is telling that the audit of Sporting Chance programs, a much bigger nationwide effort of far longer standing and with more extensive national resourcing compared with G@C, also made the following observation:

While it is likely that the Sporting Chance Program is improving the educational experiences of Indigenous students, OEA was unable to comment on the extent to which the program objective has been met owing to the lack of an effective performance measurement framework to facilitate measurement of program outcomes. The audit had to rely largely on anecdotal evidence from academies and schools as to the program’s impact on students (Finance and Deregulation, 2009: 44).

That this is not the case with the current program is a testimony to the efforts and vision of its instigators and implementers.
LEADERSHIP AND ORGANISATIONAL LANDSCAPE

The ‘behind-the-scenes’ discernment that informed the recruitment of the highly effective team at CMS also needs to be made explicit, as it too signals key program dependencies. Like girl coach attributes, these leadership qualities should be clearly identified. These include direct program leadership and that of the wider TSF organisation. Notably, whilst the G@C program was developed locally it also sat within TSF’s national framework for program delivery, which enshrines the key principles of data driven prevention efforts, together with the emphasis on education as a key to remediating social disadvantage. At the local level, the G@C pilot has been driven by individuals who are clear in setting priorities and creating a passionate vision. The next stage will require these and additional skills in rallying stakeholder support for the program, ongoing coordination with other services, creating a positive work environment, facilitating consensus and consultative decision-making, and developing training and technical support systems to build strong teams who can deliver the program reliably and well. In other words, attention needs to be paid to the organizational environment that needs to be in place for new replication to successfully occur. This may also help to minimize some of the stakeholder backlash that garnering political support for the G@C program in its vulnerable start up phase appears to have engendered.

Our proposal is that TSF reflect further upon the organizational influences that shaped G@C pilot successes. Clearly the vision and supervision of Rushton and others was critical. Their essential contributions in attracting the funding, establishing the frameworks and inspiring the successes to date in turn indicates the importance of an organisational structure that provides such ‘backstage’ functions. As it is not efficient (nor possible) to document everything that the original developers learnt in establishing the program in its formative stages, reflection on the qualities of leadership and change management supports required to manage stakeholders, drive progress and guide implementation through inevitable travails is critical. This is as important as the task of articulating essential G@C model elements for successful replication or expansion.

It would also seem likely that a new model of devolved decision making needs consideration to enable a greater number of site-based staff to operate with pared down ‘head office’ attention. Even in its current forms, there were minute signs of a gap between the two environments, signalling that renewed attention to collaborative decision making mechanisms at this time of profound internal change would be welcome, regardless of the model of scale-up that is finally determined. Among other issues, there is little available time for team planning, and this is difficult to undertake in the open-door environment of the Girls Room. Regular off-site team meetings and supervision sessions would need to be structured into the program.

At the same time that attention to TSF’s own organisational environment is required we recommend attention be paid to the characteristics needed in possible new sites in order for the G@C model to be successfully implemented. Some of these have been identified in the ‘Success Factors’ section above. Here we refer to the need to isolate what each site choosing to implement the G@C model needs to be able to offer, beyond guaranteed provision of space and a willingness to integrate the program into broader school operations. We suspect these capacities include having the school, its related administrative hierarchies and wider community, being fully knowledgeable about and supportive of the program. We have indicated that, for scale, having well trained and well-supported staff will matter greatly to successful uptake of even a well-articulated program model; and that TSF will need to continue to fund and organise its ‘back-office’ to support these local capacities and greater political and social ‘fit’ with the community’s needs and agendas alongside alignment with the school’s needs and agendas. We also believe that governance structures need to be attended to, for local input and ownership. Specification of what different parties need to commit should be outlined in formal understandings.
6. OTHER ISSUES AND CRITICISMS OF THE PROGRAM

This section canvasses issues and criticisms which emerged spontaneously in patterns dominant enough to indicate areas that TSF might pay heed to.

CRISIS MANAGEMENT VERSUS PREVENTION

The program continues to face some external accusation/suspicion among professionals in sometimes very significant roles that program gains are those that would have happened anyway, on the (unprovable) presumption that the students involved are those who are destined to succeed. Conversely, one person, a supporter of the program, expressed the wish that G@C could be more open to girls whose families don’t support their daughters so forthrightly; especially those who “can’t be bothered” doing things like signing forms guaranteeing they or their daughters will participate. Yet when asked ‘does the program ‘cream’ the best students?’, both school and policy personnel insisted this was not the case. We were provided with cross-CMS data which verifies that the mix of girls includes those that would be considered ‘at risk’. Further, as one commentator put it, notions of risk are entirely relative: “Even the most advantaged girls in Girls at the Centre would be the most disadvantaged elsewhere. But these kids are the ones with whom you can make a real difference.” Another pointed out that the program does not “pick” the girls – the girls self-select, gravitating to either G@C or the Centralian Girls Academy based on peer and kin networks:

I know some really tough kids in there, with tough histories and profound social and emotional problems. All of them have difficulties, including suicidal thoughts or exposure to trauma. One girl whose brother killed himself would come the school shrouded in a hoody and talking stubbornly. She went on a trip to Sydney with the program – it was such a big leg up. She is now more confident and a really talented artist.

Another teacher especially praised their work with what she called the “not quite critical girls”. Yet another respondent reminded us that the inclusive nature of the program is a success factor – “sure, some are high achieving students from employed families, but that’s part of the peer influence” – and that at any rate, the coaches “do not spend an inordinate amount of time on them but on the less enfranchised ones. The bulk of their time is not spent on the high achievers.”

Nevertheless, the imprecision about the target group is a potential vulnerability for the program, not least because its very real achievements risk being minimised. We recommend clarifying that the program is more a prevention than a crisis management program, including defining this clearly in the program literature. This change would also help redress some remnant hostilities left over from the early establishment of the program, when the Northern Territory Department of Education and Training Education’s negotiators were pushing for a program that targeted the ‘hardball’ group, and TSF pushed for a different approach. This and other hints of legacy issues resulting from disagreements with key bureaucrats also suggests the ongoing need for expert and tactful management of institutional dynamics in any future expansion efforts.

TIMETABLING AND CURRICULUM

A further criticism of G@C, this time appearing within CMS rather than within the bureaucratic framework, is that it removes students from their classrooms. This criticism was most strongly made by the single CMS staff member opposed to the program, and who we quote more than once because she does provide a critical perspective.2 At one level the criticism that G@C takes girls away from important academic work (“science and maths” were particularly named) seems opposed to the desire expressed by G@C staff to do more in-class work with girls. This raises two related issues for the program: communication with the school as a whole concerning its aims and activities, and clarity for CMS teaching staff concerning the program’s rationale and its relation to school curricula.

The strongest criticism of the program from within CMS came from the single staff member who felt the program offered no content that compensated for time taken away from academic classes:

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2 While this person’s views were not reflected in those of our other interviewees, she very strongly expressed the opinion that other CMS staff felt similarly to her and it bears reminding that we did not speak to all teachers.
We’re frustrated because we sacrifice, because we value what we’re doing, our teaching time and now initially I negotiated three sessions – why is it that they need to have this time in class time where – from what we see, they’re just hanging out, not doing too much? – and what happens at recess and lunch time or after school? I guess the timing. What’s the expectation of the program? Is it meant to take up class time?

Girl participants insisted that G@C did not take them away from other classes, even in some cases expressing a desire for more class-time involvement with G@C programs. And this strongly asserted criticism was not repeated by other staff, indeed some contradicted it. But a number of staff indicated uncertainty about the content of G@C programs which gives substance to the sentiment that G@C, along with the other support programs like Girls Academy and Clontarf, could be more clearly explained to teaching staff.

G@C staff are not obliged to attend school staff meetings, and this exacerbates a division between those teaching staff who are not directly involved in G@C activities and those who have intimate knowledge of what the program does. Some teaching staff mentioned their desire to know more about G@C on a more direct basis, rather than through newsletters and the like. One CMS staff member who was more familiar with the G@C program pointed out that teachers do not have the time or skills to provide G@C’s wrap-around services to families in need; but while the welfare group at the school may know of such G@C work, other teachers do not: “That’s why some of them feel disengaged.”

While it is clear that G@C has been relatively diligent about communicating its activities, and other CMS staff highly commended the G@C staff both for encouraging school involvement with the program and for G@C volunteer involvement in school events, it seems that better information sharing with regular teachers, most particularly at the weekly staff meetings, is desired. While these are short, at least in 2011 they also clashed with Breakfast-with-a-mentor sessions on Wednesday mornings, a timetabling issue that is presumably resolvable through discussion.

G@C “REWARDS BAD BEHAVIOUR”

CMS staff expressed conflicting opinions on whether or not G@C rewarded girls who behaved badly, or at least enabled girls with behavioural issues to avoid repercussions of that behaviour. While the (one) strong critic stressed that “children who are not necessarily good at school and certainly don’t meet behavioural expectations, still go on the trips away”, and one supportive teacher expressed some concern that the criteria for which girls were chosen for trips away was unclear to the G@C girls as a whole, others saw the trips as having galvanised girls’ commitment to not only the program but to school and life goals. Some teaching staff mentioned their desire to know more about G@C on a more direct basis, rather than through newsletters and the like. One CMS staff member who was more familiar with the G@C program pointed out that teachers do not have the time or skills to provide G@C’s wrap-around services to families in need; but while the welfare group at the school may know of such G@C work, other teachers do not: “That’s why some of them feel disengaged.”

While it is clear that G@C has been relatively diligent about communicating its activities, and other CMS staff highly commended the G@C staff both for encouraging school involvement with the program and for G@C volunteer involvement in school events, it seems that better information sharing with regular teachers, most particularly at the weekly staff meetings, is desired. While these are short, at least in 2011 they also clashed with Breakfast-with-a-mentor sessions on Wednesday mornings, a timetabling issue that is presumably resolvable through discussion.

This problem would also be addressed somewhat by greater clarity about the program among teaching staff. The strong CMS staff critic of the program also raised this criticism, and in explaining it attributed to G@C a problem “case” that actually involved the Girls Academy student rather than G@C. This is not only a matter of misinformation. It is related to separate criticisms that the girl-centred supportive environment that G@C pursues sometimes involves suspending minor school rules in the Girls Room – such as the rule against music players and phones – and that G@C girls turn to the girl coaches for redress and mediation on their behalf when in conflict with teachers.

Yeah, there’s an ‘us and them’. Well definitely it’s an ‘us and them’. It’s quite adversarial, especially when I’ve gone and spoken to [G@C] and said “Can you make sure, please, we need your help, can you encourage the girls to wear proper shoes, to not wear thongs? Can you please – no mobile phones” - those kinds of things and it’s like, “yeah, whatever.”

While this might be an exaggeration for rhetorical effect, G@C staff necessarily do not have identical priorities to all teaching staff. The program’s success is partly premised on girls’ perception that the G@C staff are “fair”, which involves being expressly interested in the girls’ perspective in any disagreement and not excluding girls from all program activities even when they are being punished within the wider school (although good behaviour is a criteria sometimes considered in allocating more scarce privileges to girls). This may be an irresolvable
contradiction but better communication about G@C program principles and how they are applied would at least potentially help this situation.

**FUNDING**

While comment on funding arrangements was not within the Terms of Reference for this review, it is related to questions of sustainability and also to the model of scale-up that is decided upon. If the program is unable to secure long term, renewed funding, and perfors relies on a patchwork of funding sources, there are likely to be a number of ramifications. The pursuit of funding and the political footwork required to attract and retain short term funds are effort consuming, and will detract from the program’s ability to refine and test its protocols, invest in orientation, induction, training and support mechanisms, and most importantly, remunerate management and site staff and create attractive working conditions sufficient to develop deep and enduring pools of expertise.

**GOVERNANCE**

A number of respondents drew attention to the frictions that were experienced when the program was being initiated. We have briefly discussed those that arose between TSF and NTDET. But it was also pointed out by several respondents that the role of the Community Reference Group has also been underplayed.

For one respondent, the Community Reference Group was meant to ensure that, from the outset, the program was:

> embedded in the local community in terms of governance, directed by local people with a local structure, not just a projection of some sort of head office program or whatever….That would hold it to account in some way that - in the same model basically that Polly Farmer used where they have a local committee and they direct the show [so the Polly Farmer] program, while it has some sort of structures and consistency across the nation, the actuality of how it’s delivered and how it engages with the community is driven by this committee.

> So of course The Smith Family says, ‘Yeah, yeah, no worries, no worries, we’ll do that,’ and the long and the short of it is that they did it very poorly in my view. [They didn’t get] This concept of a local community governance structure where there was any level of accountability actually.

This harsh view was suggested in gentler terms by others, indicating something of a shared perception:

> I think there is room for more community engagement in a more structured way, instead of one-off events. The work shadowing program has helped. That said, I can see the G@C staff do not have the capacity to take on much more.

And from yet another:

> I’d like to see the reference group be a lot more active rather than a cup of tea session every now and then. ... I’d like to see the reference group become more of a board of governors in that sense of actually being more active in the way it is...[ At the moment there are] sort of generalised discussions about who feeds into the program and who supports it through their different organizations, but I think there needs to be more active support, like developing programs, developing the structures. ...There’s too much of an expectation [on the G@C staff] and I think there needs to be a leadership support for them to take the program to the level it needs to get the outcomes that are going to validate the funding.... if people want to be on a reference group or a board then they need to pull a finger and do something more...The Smith Family have proved themselves to do really high quality work ... they have got a long-term reputation for doing good work. But I think as far as this program goes we do need to have some more expertise from a reference committee actually driving it and supporting it further. Because it should be a community-owned program as well.

**PROGRAM PROMOTION TACTICS**

Some respondents highlighted concerns about the marketing of G@C and where it draws its models from. Several noted in particular that TSF could learn from the successes of the Clontarf model:
As an outsider, it seems Clontarf has a very good reputation for demonstrating its value – it has been able to get over the point where government is convinced. The Smith Family is not in the same spot. And I am not sure why. Clontarf certainly has the inside running – they get a lot of government buy-in when the outcomes are in fact very similar. So why is [the Department of] Education convinced about one and not the other? There is an antagonism [to TSF] that is uncanny. Yet there is more than reasonable community buy in with Girls at the Centre. Dozens of employers are involved through Work Shadowing alone. ... If I was TSF, I would be sitting down with Clontarf and saying ‘what can we learn from you and how can we collaborate?’

Certainly, when compared with more established programs like Clontarf, G@C has a relatively low profile beyond the CMS community. Yet in terms of reportable outcomes, the two programs are very similar.

The Clontarf Foundation reports success in its approach in the areas of attendance, retention and behaviour at school, as well as employment outcomes. In 2004, their academies had between 80 and 100 Indigenous students participating in each academy, with average school attendance rates of 78 per cent, average retention rates at school of 82 per cent and 83 per cent of graduates from the program achieving full time work. (Office of Evaluation and Audit (Indigenous Programs) 2009: 17).

Furthermore, while the Clontarf performance data is not necessarily any more robust than G@C data, respondents felt they were more “switched on politically. TSF can operate at this level too. If you want to scale the program need to manage the politics. It is not just about the data”.

We agree that there are lessons to be drawn from Clontarf’s success in managing its scale-up processes, and from its messaging and stakeholder management processes. The types of scaling-up used by Clontarf appear to be a mixture of expansion achieved by growth through franchising; replication being achieved through policy adoption and diffusion through networks and mass media; which in turn draws on strategic alliances between philanthropic, industry, government and community partners. G@C and Clontarf share many aims and the suggestion above that it would be strategic for some of the key groups to share ideas could be explored, perhaps in the form of a TSF facilitated workshop between philanthropic and industry contributors.

On a related matter, one professional associated with Girls Academy pointed out that there could be clear benefits from more communication between Girls Academy and G@C even though she believed they served different cohorts of girls:

we haven’t actually done even a workshop together, which would be a nice thing to do, where we could talk about what our needs are, what we think our needs are for our girls and then what they think theirs are. That would be really good to have something like that to look at.

The ‘competition’ with the Girls Academy model also bears critical reflection. In some respects, the Academy model is a variant on G@C ‘going live’ although we would argue that the wrap-around services of G@C are distinct. But as one observer put it to us in frank terms:

TSF need to rethink how it is marketing their program. ... For instance, they should work with the [Girl’s] Academy model, not against it. And be strategic with the economic case. Public servants get hit up all the time by passionate advocates but it is a not a magic pudding. It is a fixed pie.

These are significant issues both for the current program and a potentially expanded one. For instance, should TSF wish to explore the many suggestions that G@C is needed at Centralian Senior School, it would encounter the prior existence of the Girls Academy and all the confusions about overlap that accompany this. It would also come up against the investments of both senior college and Girls Academy staff which have inevitably arisen from the arduous processes of lobbying for and establishing the Academy program there. Whilst TSF’s business model is beyond the brief of this consultancy, we note a point made by one contributor, that “The Smith Family can reduce their overheads by running multiple programs under the one organisational structure which means that the per-unit cost to their girls’ program is reduced – which means they can actually spend more money where it matters.” TSF could fruitfully consider what a merged model might be like, armed with the deeper knowledge about its core success factors and documentation about key operating principles that we have recommended above, even if to clarify why such a merger is not feasible. This might also be a context to consider the suggestions that a “B@C” (Boys at the Centre) program is needed along similar lines to help meet the neglected needs of alienated young men who are not inspired by sports.
7. RECOMMENDATIONS

RECALLING THE TERMS OF REFERENCE

The background to this study was elaborated in the introduction. As part of its assessment of future options, The Smith Family (TSF) sought an experienced evaluation team to undertake an assessment of its Girls at the Centre program, specifically to:

- Measure the extent to which the Girls at the Centre program meets its objectives to improve the literacy, develop life goals and life skills of young Indigenous women at Centralian Middle School in Alice Springs, identify the significant success factors and document the success stories.
- Assess the scalability of G@C for adaptation to other high need sites such as large regional centres and urban locations.
- Provide information on the effectiveness of the program’s strategies to increase retention of young Indigenous women to Year 12.

Our evaluation involved the following:

- A focused literature review.
- Formulation of an evaluation framework and its application, including an agreed set of key evaluation questions and analysis of data held by G@C and CMS.
- Consultations with key stakeholders, including those responsible for implementing G@C at Central Middle School, school based personnel, education policy formulators, community and business representatives, parents and carers, and most importantly, girl participants, past and present.
- Field work observations and case study development.
- Analysis, feedback and write up.

Our conclusions and recommendations, including suggestions for where program changes or key decision points may be contemplated, are embedded within the report and summarised here under the follow headings:

1. Achievement of program objectives
2. Potential for improvements and relationship to other programs
3. Issues for scalability.

1. ACHIEVEMENT OF PROGRAM OBJECTIVES

As they are currently articulated, the aims of the G@C program are to:

- help improve literacy
- develop life goals
- develop life skills
- make the Alice Springs community more supportive of emerging young Indigenous women.

In terms of these original program aims, we found that:
The program’s direct impact on literacy is equivocal

- The program has modest academic emphases in terms of literacy, which is targeted as a by-product of more direct attention to attendance and engagement

- Literacy tasks are embedded within program activities along with planning, team-work and other competencies but the program does not offer an explicit literacy-centric suite of activities

- There is some suggestion that coaches could make strategic use of their relationship with girls and their families to broker expert literacy tuition

- This idea has some merit and could be considered further, but if in fact G@C determines to pursue explicitly curriculum-centred learning support, the program should also articulate why this competency is singled out over other academic subject areas, such as science and mathematics.

The program directly impacts on the development of life goals and life skills in demonstrable ways

- While not all G@C girl participants would be singled out as lacking expected life skills or goals, a combination of peer, Girl Coach, and brokered-in mentoring clearly does develop new skills and goals in some girls

- Girl participants also credit specific G@C activities, such as trips away and opportunities for community building, as inspiring new personal goals

- G@C activities which do not have utilitarian aims are clearly nevertheless associated by CMS staff, parents, and girls themselves, with increased confidence and other social skills in some girls.

The more diffuse goal of making the Alice Springs community more supportive of emerging young Indigenous women is difficult to measure, but in this regard we found that the program is highly valued by representative business-owners and community members, school staff, girl participants and their families

- In addition to engaging with parents, the program clearly impacts on community engagement with the school, although this is not listed as a specific objective

- Noting that various interviewees claimed the community image of Centralian Middle School was poor in comparison with that of other schools, and that public discourse on Indigenous people in Alice Springs is so often negative, the positive image of G@C girls among business-owners and other community members is clearly of additional significance, as is the prominence of Indigenous girls in community knowledge of G@C.

We further found that the program significantly impacts on attendance and family engagement, although these are not listed as specific objectives

- CMS data, supported by the opinions of most CMS staff, suggests that G@C girls, including G@C Indigenous girls, have a somewhat higher attendance rate than the broader cohorts to which they belong. Girl participants often claim that they come to school more often because of either the encouragement or the attraction of G@C

- The program has a demonstrable impact on some girls’ relationships with their families. While the brokered-in FAST program is a notable success in this respect that success itself seems dependent on G@C’s existing relationships with families and girls

- The location of G@C within CMS thus in turn impacts on some families engagement with the school itself as it does on some girls’ understanding of the importance of school and education more generally.

The evaluation team was also asked to assess the program in terms of its significant success factors and to provide information on the effectiveness of the program’s strategies to increase retention of young Indigenous women to Year 12. In terms of these criteria, we found that:
The key success factors for the program are:

- Effective Girl Coaches
- Significant parental engagement
- Inclusive Indigenous and non-Indigenous program
- Holistic approach to girls’ lives
- Girls’ input into decision making in G@C programming
- On-site access to resources and facilities
  - Access to a girls room at CMS
  - Spacious area to engage with parents accessed through CMS
  - Access to bus and other CMS facilities/equipment
- Decentralisation/independence from school and government
  - Discrete funding and management through TSF enables consistent delivery
  - High quality ‘back stage’ program management
- Site characteristics
  - Wider school integration
  - Constituency of supporters
  - Formal partnerships and strategic alliances, networks and coalitions.

The program appears to successfully impact on Year 12 retention

- This information is partial, as the collection period is abridged and longitudinal data is not possible
- The available data suggests retention to Year 12 is made more viable for program graduates through the mechanisms of improving attendance and inspiring new life goals.

In summary, in terms of achieving program objectives, presuming current funding levels can be maintained, the program’s overall impact certainly justifies its continuance. Further, presuming sufficient funding can be generated, the program has clear potential to be expanded to other sites and/or extended to other cohorts in the local area (CSC, primary schools, and a boys program were all suggested).

1. ACHIEVEMENT OF PROGRAM OBJECTIVES

Recommendation 1

That the success of the G@C program, in terms of achieving its more realistic primary objectives and additionally achieving the unlisted yet important outcomes of improved attendance and family engagement, be acknowledged and endorsed as a successful means of supporting girls in the middle years of schooling.
Recommendation 2
That TSF reconsider the isolation of ‘literacy’ as a headline goal for the program. Given the program’s clear targeting of and notable gains in the highly strategic areas of attendance and engagement, we recommend that ‘family engagement’ and ‘improved attendance and participation’ would be more realistic and accurate fits for the program’s activities and measurable effects.

2. POTENTIAL FOR IMPROVEMENTS AND RELATIONSHIP TO OTHER PROGRAMS

It is important to acknowledge that, notwithstanding suggestions for more tightly articulating program elements and addressing contradictions within the program, G@C was acclaimed by the majority of stakeholders consulted, including participating and graduate girls and their families. Most were enthusiastic for the program to continue and to be expanded, although there were reservations about the duplicability of the on-site G@C coaching team at CMS, singled out as key to the program’s local success.

Nevertheless, some areas have been identified where improvements might be made, whether the program is to be taken to other places or not. This includes the need to coordinate G@C with the growing range of other prevention programs targeting Indigenous youth, girls, or young people’s wellbeing and self-esteem in general. G@C staff responded positively to the idea of a “handbook” which would record activities that have been used and their particular advantages and disadvantages. Closer reflection on the program would extend this desired resource to additionally describe which groups of girls benefit in which ways from listed activities, and recommendations for which activities develop effectively from or towards other listed activities. For any larger scale expansion, these choice ranges would need to evidence their logics.

Recommendation 3
That, given the essentiality of high quality coaches and effective support team to the program, that processes for recruiting, training and supporting new coaches to deliver consistently well in new sites are developed. Such training would include enhanced knowledge of child and youth development; advanced skills in anticipatory guidance, negotiating, role modeling, holistic case management, and working in mixed school teams; and focus on the skills and attitudes needed for working “with” and not against girls. Such assessment of required competencies and associated training and support are needed for delivery of quality G@C services. As part of this, TSF should critically examine the case management ratio (1:25), in terms of the human resource implications of current workloads, articulate its rationale, and provide useable frameworks for guiding the necessary and inevitable deviations from this standard.

Recommendation 4
That the G@C program is supported to gather and maintain consistent data on retention from year to year within and following the program through the high schools into which G@C graduates are most likely to feed. This requires TSF designing rigorous procedures for data collection and maintenance, and systematising these so there is less duplication and more consistency. This is ideally an iterative task set up in consultation with coaches and support staff as primary input points.

Recommendation 5
That TSF support the development of operational protocols, in close consultation with G@C field staff, so that any new implementers are guided in what they do. Inevitably and desirably, local discretion will be needed to adjust these recommended protocols to suit individual and everyday circumstances. But making these adjustments also depends on understanding what levels of exposure to different activities yield desired impacts on girls most effectively, thus ensuring that local variations are operating within a clearly articulated theory of practice.

Recommendation 6
That G@C communicate its logics and approach to CMS staff on a regular face to face basis and participate more fulsomely in CMS planning. This includes addressing confusion about the different “on site” support programs made available for girls and/or Indigenous students, clarifying their points of distinction, and communicating clearly and regularly to all CMS staff the aims and the content of the G@C program.
Recommendation 7
That TSF consider the successes of other scaled models (such as Clontarf) and additionally explore grounds for program improvement and coordination within and between such programs.

3. ISSUES FOR SCALABILITY
The evaluation team was asked to assess the scalability of G@C for adaption to other high need sites such as large regional centres and urban locations. It is our assessment that the G@C program could readily be implemented in other areas, including urban, large regional, and non-Indigenous settings. To facilitate this, time is required for TSF to ensure the rationale and recommended procedures behind all key aspects of the program are made clear for third and fourth party implementers. The work of preparing for scaling up would also help make the current implementation model more robust. As such, many of the suggested activities could equally be considered under ‘program improvements’ above and may appear duplicative. That is, some of the tasks associated with scale-up are also important for the existing program’s sustainability. TSF needs to isolate the capacities that each site choosing to implement the G@C model needs to be able to offer (beyond guaranteed provision of space and a willingness to integrate the program into broader school operations); and address internal management support mechanisms to assist devolved decision making under helpful supervision structures.

Recommendation 8
That a preparatory program of analytical work for scaling up is embarked upon which focuses on the scale-up target and purpose; institutionalisation processes such as recruitment, training, support, program measurement and data systems; and the leadership processes and organisational capacity for achieving and sustaining buy-in from stakeholders and knowledge of site characteristics necessary for successful implementation.

Recommendation 9
That TSF clarify the core elements of the G@C program through attention to the following tasks:

- Articulate the theories behind activities and approach for third parties
- Outline steps for new site development and protocols for implementation
- Specify roles and responsibilities of different stakeholders (TSF program managers; coaches; schools; parents; girls)
- Tighten goals and targets (without losing emphasis on fun for girls)
- Clarify governance structure and strengthen mechanisms for community input into program
- Outline necessary marketing and constituency buy-in processes.
8. REFERENCES


