



Australian Government

**Department of Employment and
Workplace Relations**

**Halls Creek *Engaging Families* Trial
February–July 2006**

Evaluation Report

September 2006

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Executive summary

The Halls Creek *Engaging Families* trial had two aims: first, to increase participation in job-oriented activities among Parenting Payment recipients with children at Halls Creek School and second, to encourage those parents to try to make their children attend school regularly.

The trial sought to achieve this social behavioural change in parents and children by using a purely voluntary approach. Parents were encouraged to join the trial and participate in activities while also agreeing to send their children to school, with no threat of sanction if these things did not occur. In other words, no parent could have their income support suspended for any trial related reason.

The trial ran from February to July 2006 and commenced with 30 Parenting Payment recipients. The term 'parent' describes the adult participant in the trial on Parenting Payment (Single or Partnered) with responsibility for the children in their care as recorded by Centrelink. In reality, the adult participant could be the child's biological parent, grandmother, aunty, older sibling or foster parent. In this report, the adult participant is described as the 'parent'. The parents in the trial had 101 children between them in their care and 66 of these children were of school age.

Halls Creek School is the only state government school in the area and takes children from preschool through to Year 12. The school has 328 enrolled children and had an annual average attendance rate of 58.4% in 2005 (WA Department of Education and Training, 2006). When compared with other schools in Indigenous communities, "attendance rates at Halls Creek School fall substantially below all other benchmarks" (Taylor, 2004, p.52).

Much of the school attendance problem at Halls Creek School manifests through children not turning up to school in the morning. Parents can play a key role in ensuring children get to school in the morning, particularly where younger children require supervision to ensure they get to school safely. Parents were thus seen to be a key mechanism by which school attendance of children in Halls Creek could be made more regular.

The importance of parents in addressing school attendance problems was recognised in a 2005 agreement between the Principal of the Halls Creek School and the Manager of the Remote Area Service Centre (RASC). Under that arrangement, approximately 16 Parenting Payment recipients whose children had school attendance problems were asked to attend an interview at Centrelink. Those who didn't turn up for the interview were at risk of having their income support suspended and suspension did occur for some. Legal concerns were raised, because payment suspension for failing to turn up for a Centrelink interview should only occur where the interview is about eligibility for payment or

participation related issues. While the 2005 agreement was stopped, there was considerable community support for continuing attempts to combat school attendance problems. In December 2005, the Minister for Employment and Workplace Relations announced that a slightly different trial would commence in the new year. The trial was named '*Engaging Families*' to reflect its focus on both parents and children.

The voluntary nature of the trial is in contrast to many other Centrelink/Job Network arrangements. While most income support recipients can volunteer to engage in Job Network services, the majority of activities they undertake are carried out because they are part of their participation requirements. If participation requirements are not met, penalties are applied via a compliance system and loss of income support payment can eventually result. The welfare payment is thus conditional on certain work related behaviours being carried out once recipients have participation requirements. From September 2002, under the *Australians Working Together* initiative, parents on Parenting Payment with children between the ages of 12 and 15 were required to attend an annual interview with Centrelink to discuss work related options. Then, starting in July 2003, all Parenting Payment recipients with a youngest child aged between six and 15 years were required to attend an annual Centrelink interview. Once their youngest child reached between 13 and 15 years old, they were then required to undertake 150 hours of job related activities over a six-month period each year to prepare for a return to work. Now, under *Welfare to Work*, which commenced on 1 July 2006, parents have participation requirements to seek and obtain part time employment once their youngest child turns six years of age.

At the time of the trial, activity tested income support recipients living in Halls Creek had Remote Area Exemptions which meant that they did not have to actively seek work or take part in work related activities in return for their payment. For parents, this meant they were only required to attend annual interviews with Centrelink once their children were at least six years old, but they did not have to participate in participation obligation activities once their children were between 13 and 15 years old. The welfare culture in Halls Creek at the time of the trial was relatively passive (apart from CDEP participation) due to these Remote Area Exemptions.

Given the voluntary nature of the trial, it was decided to 'boost' the resources available to trial participants to encourage them to stay involved in the trial. The additional support by Centrelink and the local Job Network member, Job Futures, included personally picking parents up from their homes so they would turn up for agreed activities, and doing many follow-ups where parents could not be easily contacted during the trial. School children, however, were intentionally not picked up and taken to school by Centrelink staff because the trial focussed on engaging the parent and encouraging them to ensure their children got to school.

All parents started the trial by signing a voluntary participation plan with the Centrelink participation advisor. In this plan, they agreed to participate in trial activities and to encourage their children to attend school each day. All parents were referred to the local Job Network member, Job Futures, who registered them as job seekers and negotiated suitable activities with the participant. Parents were offered a range of activities to engage in, including a Working Life course run by Job Futures, meetings with a Centrelink social worker and participation in an Employment and Training Expo. They were also interviewed about their thoughts on the school and about their family life. All parents were offered assistance in finding employment, training, volunteer work at the school, CDEP, or any other activity they chose, providing it could be monitored by Job Futures.

Twenty-eight of the 30 parents participated in at least two activities and 22 remained in the trial to its completion. The school attendance of their children did not improve over the course of the trial. An attempt by the trial organisers to encourage the school to hold parent-teacher interviews for trial participants failed. Two parents were taken to the school by the trial social worker and went inside the school for the first time, while one parent met successfully with a teacher.

The many socio-economic disadvantages experienced by Indigenous residents of Halls Creek act to constrain the parents' opportunities for engagement in functional community life. In particular, the lack of employment options provided little opportunity for paid work and the lack of suitable housing and concomitant overcrowding thwarted what little opportunity there was for engagement in work-related activities. Improvements in the numbers of housing stock and their quality, along with improvements in local employers' awareness of the benefits of employing local Indigenous workers would help ameliorate the situation.

It also became apparent that the parents of Indigenous children are not the only 'lever' or 'method of engagement' that can be used to get the children to attend school. The evidence pointed to the pivotal role that teachers and the school 'culture' itself plays in a community where children decide their own time use patterns from a very early age.

It was concluded that the voluntary method used in the Halls Creek *Engaging Families* trial worked some of the time when very high levels of support were provided but that this had no bearing on school attendance of the children. The overall findings and recommendations are provided at the end of this report.

1. Pathways to engaging families

Halls Creek: a disadvantaged community

Socio-demographic profile

Halls Creek, in far north-east Western Australia, has a town population of 1,800 people and a shire population in 2003 of 4,174 people, 63 per cent of whom are of working age. The Shire has the youngest average population and is the fourth fastest growing shire in Western Australia. Seventy percent of the town's population is Indigenous.

The town was originally established by goldminers in 1886 and later became a centre for cattle trading. Mining activities continue today, especially at nearby Argyle Diamond Mines. However, the overall economy within Halls Creek is depressed. Halls Creek, in fact, is the fifth most socio-economically disadvantaged Statistical Local Area in Australia (ABS, 2001).

There are 65 Aboriginal communities within the Shire of Halls Creek and approximately 28 languages spoken within the region. There are a number of outlying Aboriginal settlements that survive with the support of the State and Australian governments, although all the communities implement their own rules and regulations. Most communities have adopted a 'No Grog Allowed' policy and request that visitors obtain permission from local elders or representatives prior to arrival. In Halls Creek, alcohol is widely available from two alcohol outlets between the hours of 9 am and midnight. The Kimberley Hotel is one of the main sources of alcohol in Halls Creek and has a reported annual turnover of between \$15-\$20 million (Penells, 2006). People drifting into town from the outer dry communities to drink often use the controversial vacant land opposite the pub, called 'dinner camp'. The influx into town increases during the wet season when people from the outer communities are left stranded in town. The seasonal influx exacerbates the already overcrowded living conditions experienced by most of the Indigenous community in the town of Halls Creek.

Alcohol abuse causes major social problems in the town.

Alcohol and substance misuse is widespread and affects a large majority of adult population, even those that are employed have a heavy alcohol intake but they still manage to go to work.

(Halls Creek Alcohol Worker)

Alcohol abuse is the number one problem in Halls Creek and is the trigger for most domestic violence.

(Halls Creek Police Sergeant)

When asked about the social problems in Halls Creek, the Chief Executive Officer of the Yura Yungi Aboriginal Medical Service said the problems stem from:

...boredom and idleness which leads to the three main addictions of alcohol, drugs and gambling. These addictions lead to the dysfunction in the family which leads to the kids in the street, the sexual abuse of kids and kids as young as 10 drinking in the streets. Kids hang out in the streets because it is unsafe to be at home with the big parties as that is when they [are vulnerable] to sexual abuse. Kids are neglected because parents spend their money on grog and parents gamble to try and make ends meet.

The CEO also said that a large percentage of local people are totally illiterate which inhibits their chances of employment. In summary, Halls Creek is a town with many social problems and alcohol abuse, domestic violence and harmful parenting appear to be common.

Need for functional engagement

Many Indigenous families living in remote regions, such as Halls Creek, simply do not have enough social and economic capital to get the support they need. Alternatively, they may have high levels of social capital residing in their kin networks, but be engaged in broader dysfunctional communities where problems are unlikely to be solved despite (or even because of) a high level of community engagement (Portes, 1998). Many families in Halls Creek arguably fall into this latter category.

Families in Halls Creek may also be exposed to the effects of chronic and multiple disadvantage arising from, amongst other things, their low income, low employment and low education levels. Such families may be at risk of social exclusion from mainstream society and, importantly, the children in these families are at risk of 'inheriting' this risk, or the reality, of social exclusion and continuing it into the next generation (Slee, 2006).

Some of these families, once they reach a certain level of social exclusion, are likely to be regularly 'in crisis' as dysfunctional behaviours are left relatively unchecked. Such crises can result in the need for severe government intervention and the household is then at risk of being dismantled. For example, intervention may result in a child being taken away (via a child protection order), an adult being removed from the house (eg. by police due to domestic violence), a family being removed from its household (due to tenancy issues), and so on.

While the trial did not specifically test the extent to which Halls Creek families were 'in crisis', the town regularly is represented in the media as having major social problems such as alcohol and drug abuse and concomitant violence. The Halls Creek assault figure of 17 per cent of all reported crime is three and half times more than the Australian population figure of 4.8 per cent and nearly double the Kimberley average (ABS, 2005). These social problems, while not unique to Halls Creek, appear to be substantial. This was confirmed during discussions with many of the community workers and service providers in Halls Creek.

The crises experienced in Indigenous families in places like Halls Creek can be deflected if pathways can be provided and/or found for functional community engagement. For adults, paid employment can offer a pathway to functional community engagement, and for children, school offers similar opportunities. This engagement not only helps families build social and economic capital, it provides everyday chances for engaging with communities that adhere to a set of social norms sanctioned by mainstream society. This in turn provides opportunities for support, if dysfunctional behaviours are exhibited.

Opportunities for engagement

Paid work, school attendance and adequate housing are major pathways to positive community engagement and enhancement of life chances for families on income support. Opportunities to engage in paid work, to attend school and to be adequately housed need to exist if families are to be able to try to engage positively in their communities and to build social and economic capital. In Halls Creek, the three themes of paid work, school attendance and adequate housing commonly produce a story of lack of engagement.

Paid work: limited opportunities to engage

The DEWR project team conducted a survey of the employment market in Halls Creek. Thirty-one of the forty-one employers in Halls Creek were interviewed for this survey. The data show that employment opportunities vary depending on whether someone is Indigenous or non-Indigenous. Only 29 per cent of the 315 paid positions identified in the survey were held by local Indigenous people and yet, population-wise, there are more than enough locals to fill all the paid positions in Halls Creek.

Even though there are enough locals to fill all vacant paid positions, the overwhelming majority of employers in Halls Creek believe that the local residents are not a good source for employment. The main reason given by employers for recruiting outside the district were that specialised skills were needed and many of

the local applicants had insufficient training/qualifications or generally lacked the relevant experience. Recruiting outside Halls Creek may be applicable for work requiring specialised training such as nursing; however, it is unlikely that this can be justified in low skilled service based jobs. In talking with employers, it became apparent that there were particular views about using local Indigenous people. For example, employers considered local residents to be unreliable and often with poor presentation skills. Of the 31 employers interviewed, ten employers did not employ any Indigenous staff. In all, these data would suggest that the opportunities for paid work for Indigenous residents are limited.

To put the number of employment opportunities in context, at the time of the survey there were 455 people in Halls Creek claiming unemployment benefit from Centrelink. The local Job Network member, East Kimberley Job Futures/Ngoonjuwah Council Aboriginal Corporation (Job Futures), had 680 registered jobseekers; about one third of these were on the Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) programme. Of the 31 employers interviewed, there were 30 current vacancies. Eighty-eight positions had been available in the past 12 months and some 38 vacancies were expected in the next 12 months. These data further show that there are very few employment opportunities for Indigenous people in Halls Creek.

CDEP is the only real form of work-related activity in Halls Creek available to most local Indigenous people. The survey identified 366 Indigenous people engaged in CDEP activity, with 344 of those providing municipal services to the surrounding Halls Creek communities. The remaining 22 people were employed in other Indigenous community organisations and at the Halls Creek School. Most CDEP participants in Halls Creek had been on CDEP for over two years, with some as long as 30 years.

The fact that so many municipal services are provided by people on CDEP in communities such as Halls Creek highlights the cross-subsidisation by CDEP of many local services. The CEO of the Ngoonjuwah Council Aboriginal Corporation said that:

CDEP provides the backbone support of the community and without CDEP the community and local services would fall apart.

Generally, employment in CDEP is in unskilled, low paid work areas and provides little opportunity to move to paid employment or to undertake further training. This was borne out by the survey. Nonetheless, CDEP still provides an opportunity to participate in a paid work pathway and for functional community engagement for some of the residents of Halls Creek. Other opportunities for engagement in work-related activities include participating in Job Futures and TAFE courses and working outside of Halls Creeks (eg. at Argyle Mines).

Schooling: plenty of opportunity but poor levels of engagement

It is well documented that Indigenous children have poorer educational outcomes than non-Indigenous children, both in terms of attendance and performance. For example, Australia-wide data suggests that Indigenous children are absent from school at a rate around twice that of non-Indigenous children (Schwab, 1999). The poor attendance and outcome rates for Indigenous students appear to be more pronounced in the remote areas of Australia, like Halls Creek. In particular, data from the Northern Territory suggest that the Indigenous absentee problem is much higher than national averages and the retention to Year 12 rates much lower (NT Department of Education, 1999).

The NT Department of Education (1999) also recognises that there are many problems with school attendance figures and they are likely to be overestimates. But, whatever the real numbers, there is no doubt that for those who don't attend, their education does suffer and they are more likely to drop out altogether.

Halls Creek would appear to be no exception to the problems experienced with schooling Indigenous children. There are actually nine schools in Halls Creek and district with a total enrolment of over 820 children. The largest, Halls Creek School, has 328 enrolments and was the school chosen for the *Engaging Families* trial. Over 94 per cent of the students at Halls Creek School are Indigenous. The number of schools and their availability to communities in different locations indicates that there are plenty of opportunities for children to attend school in Halls Creek—at least where opportunities are measured in seats available.

On the other hand, many of the children are not taking that opportunity. In 2005, according to WA Department of Education and Training (2006), the average school attendance rate for Halls Creek School was 58.4 per cent. This is significantly lower than the WA average and even lower than other remote schools in the Kimberley region. Table 1, on the following page, compares attendance data, from WA Department of Education and Training, for Northern East Kimberley government schools in 2001. All of these schools offer primary and secondary schooling.

There are three significant points to be made from the data in Table 1. First, Halls Creek School clearly had the lowest attendance rate by far. Second, all other schools in the region compared favourably with the Indigenous state average. Third, as the data for Dawul and Oombulgurri indicate, it is possible to have Indigenous attendance rates that equal non-Indigenous rates. So, many Indigenous children can and will take the opportunity to attend certain schools, but not at Halls Creek. The low attendance figures for Halls Creek clearly warrant the community concerns that led to the *Engaging Families* trial.

Table 1. Indigenous and non-Indigenous attendance rates in Northern East Kimberley government schools, 2001 (Taylor, 2004, p. 52)

School	Indigenous	non-Indigenous	Indig. state avg.
Jungdranung RCS	78.7	N/A	77.5
Dawul RCS	94.4	N/A	77.5
Oombulgurri RCS	93.3	N/A	77.5
Kalumburu RCS	86.9	N/A	77.5
Wyndham DHS	84.0	91.7	79.5
Kununurra DHS	81.3	93.7	79.5
Halls Creek DHS	55.9	93.7	79.5

RCS=remote community school DHS=district high school

Housing: limited opportunities to live in an orderly household

A recent review of the research (Penman, 2006) suggests that housing may play some part in educational attainment and in employability of adults in Indigenous households. Indigenous Australians have the poorest quality housing and an inadequate supply of housing compared with non-Indigenous Australians. Indigenous housing is not generally suited to their 'extended family' way of life and is therefore often overcrowded (Penman, 2006).

On-the-ground observations at Halls Creek confirmed the broader picture painted in Penman's (2006) review. There is a severe housing shortage in Halls Creek, with many Indigenous people living in overcrowded, substandard conditions. There are only 800 dwellings in Halls Creek Shire to accommodate a population of over 4,174 people, making an average of 5.2 people per household. This average is noticeably higher than the average of 3.4 people living in all Indigenous households and the overall average for the Australian population of 2.6 people living in a household (DEWR, 2006).

The average figure, however, conceals the extremes of overcrowding that can be experienced. At least 11 of the 30 participants in the *Engaging Families* trial lived with eight people or more in a dwelling, some with up to 15 people. Homeswest, the state government housing authority, recommends that no more than eight people should live in a three-bedroom dwelling.

Overcrowding results in physical stresses on housing and its infrastructure and in social stresses from just too many people. These stresses, in turn, have specific and practical impact on the work-readiness of parent(s) and school-readiness of children in the household. Such impact can result in a lack of sleep and lack of

security and privacy for work related items. It can also result in a lack of washing facilities and poor health from broken facilities (Penman, 2006).

The housing situation in Halls Creek is inadequate and, in recognition of this, the WA Government recently announced it has committed \$15 million to improving housing for Halls Creek. This is expected to provide an additional 35 houses for Halls Creek. Some of these will be specifically for Government employees.

Supplying more houses will solve a large part of the housing problem, but not all. The way houses are physically treated and the way that unpaid labour such as housework and parenting is carried out within households is unlikely to change simply because of less people living in the house. Other changes may also need to occur. For example, it could be that lack of ownership of houses is contributing to the problem and, thus, ways to increase home ownership may need consideration.

Nevertheless, giving Indigenous people opportunities to live in an orderly household by improving the physical conditions in which they live would go some way to ensuring they are more able to take advantage of opportunities in paid work and school.

Methods of engagement

Outside of CDEP, the opportunities to participate in paid work within Halls Creek are limited. Moreover, the housing situation in Halls Creek and the consequent overcrowding means that there are also very limited opportunities for householders to create work-and school-ready environments within them. On the other hand, there are plenty of opportunities for children to go to school, but low levels of engagement/attendance.

In order to ensure that opportunities, whether limited or otherwise, can be engaged in, means that there must be ways of engaging that are available and effective. These means, or methods, of engagement can range from making welfare payments conditional on undertaking various activities, to providing high levels of resources and intensive support so that people have the capacity to actually follow through with that decision.

When it comes to schooling in Halls Creek, many parents wanted their children to go to school, but did not follow this through and ensure their children got to school in the mornings. Similarly, many parents said they wanted to attend activities but did not turn up unless Centrelink or staff from Job Futures collected them from their homes. The parents did not seem to have the means to encourage their children to be engaged in school. However, there are other methods possible to achieve better school engagement that do not rely directly on the parents.

An innovative method for engaging Indigenous children in school has been demonstrated by Dr Chris Sarra at Cherbourg State School. He showed how to turn a school around and achieve high attendance and performance levels with Indigenous children. His story (Sarra, 2005) is told below.

When Dr Sarra started at Cherbourg State School in August 1998, the school was in chaos, the teachers blamed the community for the students' failure and their own under performance was largely left unchallenged. Dr Sarra's strategy involved changing teacher, student and community attitudes towards the school environment and increasing their vision of what Indigenous children can achieve academically. Elements of this strategy included:

- believing that it was possible for Cherbourg State School to achieve academic outcomes comparable with other Queensland schools*
- developing a positive sense of school identity that included a motto of 'Strong and smart' and a school song that the kids could relate to*
- improving the quality of the teachers and giving teachers who didn't believe it was possible to improve academic outcomes for the students the opportunity to transfer out of the school (half the teachers left)*
- requiring the teachers who remained and the new teachers to go into the community and understand the social and cultural context of their students*
- bringing in community people to work with the new teachers, so that they could co-educate each other*
- challenging the students that if they wanted to be 'strong and smart' then they couldn't be missing school and playing up for the teachers*
- rewarding student attendance*
- employing local tradesmen to do the maintenance on the school grounds, so that students could see their Uncle, Cousin or someone from their community helping to improve their environment*
- developing and implementing a local Aboriginal Studies programme that included local sites, family connections, important Aboriginal identities as well as addressing the hard issues of domestic violence, alcoholism and child abuse.*

continued over

By term four of 2005, student school attendance was 93 per cent. Within two years the Year 2 diagnostics tests for reading improved from having all the children well below expected reading levels to less than half below. Year 7 student performance improved dramatically. In 1999, all Year 7 children were significantly below the state average band for literacy. In 2004, 17 of 21 students were within the state average band for literacy. The strategy implemented by the Principal and the team from the Cherbourg State School and the community, 'transformed the school into an institution in which children were hungry to learn and take pride in themselves and their school' (Sarraf, 2005).

It is important to note here that while Dr Sarraf's story is dramatic, it is not unique. Other programmes at other schools have also had a significant impact. The key to improvement is to create an education environment in which students want to remain (Australian Council of Educational Research, 1998). In other words, the students need to be engaged. The main means for doing this is with high quality teachers and a strong leadership culture within the school.

The means for engaging Indigenous people in paid work needs to take into account the limited opportunities for such work and the attitudes of the employers to creating such opportunities. The employer survey conducted in Halls Creek during the *Engaging Families* trial found that most employers would not employ Indigenous people, giving reasons such as unreliability and poor presentational skills. Unreliability and poor presentational skills are understandable outcomes when considering the effect of the stressed living conditions of most Indigenous households and the cultural importance of spending a lot of time on kinship maintenance activities. Nevertheless, this does not mean methods of engagement are not possible.

Argyle Mines provides an innovative example of a method of engaging employees in paid work. The mines are located some three hours drive north of Halls Creek and the employer reports satisfaction with their Indigenous employees' reliability. They ensure this reliability by personally collecting employees and taking them to work, where they then live for up to two weeks at a time.

The experience of Argyle Mines suggests that if the employers in Halls Creek changed their practices they too could have reliable employees. This might require employers physically collecting people from their homes and taking them to work. This increases the likelihood that employees will be reliable. If the employer were to also offer showers and food (as are available at Argyle Mines) upon arrival at work, and perhaps a set of work clothes, presentational skills as well as the employee's commitment to attend each day could be enhanced.

While such changes to practice may initially appear to be costly, particularly for small businesses, this may not be the case in the long-term; especially when such practices are compared with the effort employers go to now in order to attract outsiders (eg. by providing expensive accommodation to move temporarily to Halls Creek to fill vacancies, even unskilled ones). If employers were to provide such services, it would be an example of an employer-provided method of engagement. The employer would be providing a method by which people could engage in any paid work opportunities that exist within Halls Creek.

Methods of engagement such as those used at Cherbourg School and Argyle Mines can work where resources are available (eg in the form of school leadership or workplace facilities) and intensive levels of support can be provided. In the *Engaging Families* trial, the main method of engagement focussed on providing high levels of resources and intensive support to encourage the parents to engage in job-related activities and to ask them to ensure they got their children to school regularly during the trial. Financial sanctions or incentives were not used to encourage involvement. Instead, a supportive and voluntary approach was trialled. The aim of the trial was to determine how such supportive methods, delivered in a voluntary context, could be implemented on the ground, what the implications were, and what affect they had.

At this point, however, it should be noted that the Australian Government's change to the administration of Indigenous affairs provides other new methods for engagement via sharing responsibility for outcomes between governments and Indigenous people. Regional Partnership Agreements (RPA), and associated Shared Responsibility Agreements (SRA), spell out what communities, governments and others will contribute to achieve change in Indigenous communities. SRAs and RPAs are partnerships that recognise that governments and Indigenous people have rights and obligations and all must share responsibility, because governments alone cannot fix Indigenous problems. RPAs address government investment across a whole region, to promote coordination and meet regional needs and priorities. An RPA about employment is currently under negotiation in the East Kimberley Region, and will include actions in Halls Creek. This RPA will enable a range of complementary measures to be implemented involving multiple agencies, private sector organisations and companies, as well as local Indigenous communities. A "no school-no pool" SRA is also under development in Halls Creek.

2. How the trial was conducted

The *Engaging Families* trial employed a practical research approach, characterised by making a direct intervention and observing the consequences. In this instance, the practical intervention was engaging parents on Parenting Payment in a voluntary participation plan aimed at improving their employability and the attendance of their children at school. The trial was also an iterative one. The initial design was updated as the trial progressed. Changes were prompted by field visits by the project officers in February and May with a final visit in June/July to collect trial-related information. The changes were designed to enhance the quality of the practical intervention and to better accommodate local needs and circumstances.

Given the qualitative and iterative nature of this small trial, it would be wrong to make substantive policy recommendations on trial outcomes. Rather, recommendations from the trial should be locally directed and framed within existing policy frameworks. Lessons from the trial, of course, can be used to help provide examples in wider policy debates.

Governance

There were four key groups who oversaw and ran the *Engaging Families* trial. The groups included representatives from Commonwealth and State governments and the private sector.

The Employees on the Ground

This group ran the trial in Halls Creek. It was responsible for ensuring that the agreed activities were available and implemented for the parents and children. It included the Centrelink participation adviser, Centrelink social worker, the Halls Creek Job Network member, Job Futures, and the Halls Creek School youth worker.

The aim of the group was to ensure that there was a co-ordinated response to the family when any of the family members were having a problem. For example, if a parent did not attend agreed work/training activities, then it was expected that Job Futures would follow up with the individual to determine if there was a problem. If this did not prove successful, then Job Futures would notify Centrelink and, once again, the Centrelink social worker would follow up with the parent to determine if there was a problem and/or to provide encouragement to stay on track with the trial.

The Local Steering Group

This was also based in Halls Creek and was established to provide guidance to the employees on the ground. Members included representatives from the Office of Indigenous Policy Co-ordination based in the Indigenous Coordination Centre (ICC) Kununurra, DEWR Solution Broker ICC Kununurra, Centrelink Halls Creek manager, Halls Creek School principal and the WA Department of Education and Training Retention and Participation Officer from Broome. A representative from the Halls Creek Aboriginal Elders Reference Group and board member of the Ngoonjuwah Aboriginal Council Corporation attended the first meeting and a representative from the Department of Community Development attended the fifth meeting. Parents from the trial were invited to attend however; no one chose to take up this offer.

The Local Steering Group met on a monthly basis to discuss the progress of, and issues with, the trial and to discuss other community issues that may be affecting the Halls Creek community. This group reported monthly using minutes and reports to the Inter-Agency Group via the Halls Creek Evaluation Team.

The Halls Creek Evaluation Team

The team included a DEWR project officer and a Centrelink project officer, both based in Canberra. Their role was to oversee the Local Steering Group and Employees on the Ground and to report to the Inter-Agency Group on the progress of the trial.

The Evaluation Team was responsible for designing and implementing the trial through the local Halls Creek project team in consultation with the Inter-Agency Group. The project officers visited Halls Creek in December 2005 to consult with the community about the design of the *Engaging Families* trial. In February 2006, the DEWR project officer returned to Halls Creek to oversee the initial set-up arrangements and to launch the trial at the local level in Halls Creek. Both the project officers returned in May to undertake the mid-trial review and again in July to interview participants and key stakeholders for the final assessment of the trial.

The Inter-Agency Group

This group was co-chaired by DEWR and Centrelink and included representatives from the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, Department of Treasury, Department of Human Services, Department of Education, Science and Training, Department of Family, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, and Office of Indigenous Policy Co-ordination. The role of the Inter-Agency Group was to monitor the progress of the trial and to ensure that the trial was meeting the aims

and objectives as agreed in December 2005. The group met on a monthly basis through the trial.

Parents and their job-related activities

Characteristics

Of the 30 participating parents, 29 were female and one was male, 29 were Indigenous and one was not. The parents ranged in age from their late teens to early fifties, with 22 of them having three or less children and the remaining eight having four or more.

The education levels of the group were not high, with 10 parents having left school before completing Year 10, 11 parents completed Year 10, four parents completed Year 11 and five of the parents finished Year 12. They had very little post school training, with only three of the participants having completed any training, although one parent did undertake two years university study in Perth.

Twenty-one of the participants had been engaged in CDEP activities prior to the trial and 10 of the participants had had some work experience. Most of this was over a short period, usually unskilled and predominately service based. The one exception was the participant who had completed nine years employment in a language skills centre. Only two of the parents had never worked or been engaged in CDEP.

The reasons for joining the trial varied. These quotes indicate the range of reasons:

Join to get help to get kids to school

Wanted to go on CDEP

Good idea...get a job...want to work

Because Centrelink asked

Can't remember

The project officers reported that, in the end, most parents joined the trial because they liked and trusted the local Centrelink participation adviser.

Activities

THE CENTRELINK INTERVIEW

The first stage in the trial involved participants signing a voluntary participation plan with the Centrelink participation adviser. In this plan, the parents agreed to

participate in the trial activities and to encourage their children to attend school. The participation plan, in line with the goals of the trial, focussed on parents' participation with Job Futures and on getting their children to attend school regularly.

When the parent agreed to participate in the trial and to the release of the school attendance data to Centrelink (via a consent form), they were referred to Job Futures. The social worker then scheduled an interview of between 45 minutes to an hour. This interview gathered information the parent's family history; their education, information and schooling details; work history and any hopes or ideas for future work or training related activities; parent family information (including information about their child's school attendance); and any issues identified by the parent to be followed up by the social worker.

Of the 30 parents in the trial, the Centrelink social worker met with 29 of the participants. The only parent the Centrelink social worker was unable to interview moved away from Halls Creek soon after the trial began.

THE INTERVIEW WITH JOB FUTURES

All of the participants in the trial were referred to Job Futures to develop a job search plan that included their work and training goals. Job Futures interviewed all 30 participants and developed a job search plan for 29 of the 30 participants. The only person they did not develop a job search plan for was a grandmother whose close family member had died and she was going through a period of 'sorry time'. Job Futures decided that it was not appropriate to set a job search plan with her, due to her circumstances.

As well as meeting individually with Job Futures, the participants were offered a range of activities that included both individual and group-learning environments such as the Working Life course, Employment and Training Expo, and a morning tea to meet with staff from DEWR and Job Futures to talk about employment and work life balance.

THE WORKING LIFE COURSE

The Working Life course was a two-week, work preparatory course developed for Indigenous participants and delivered by the previous Job Futures manager who was well known and liked in the community. The Working Life course was popular, with 14 out of the 18 people enrolled completing the course. Comments on the Working Life course from parents included:

Liked Working Life course...liked Susanna...good teacher

Liked Working Life and Susanna...helped to get to know how to find a job

Group activities also proved to be a popular form of training for this group. The group provided a supportive environment to participate, especially in activities that involved reading aloud:

Liked group reading sessions

Reading was good...meeting with mothers

At the end of the Working Life course, all participants were offered the opportunity to undertake:

- study at the local TAFE
- employment
- participation in the CDEP programme
- voluntary activity at the Halls Creek School
- another job/training related activity of their choosing, providing it could be monitored by Job Futures.

EMPLOYMENT AND TRAINING EXPO

Job Futures and DEWR held a one-day Employment and Training Expo in Halls Creek to enable parents in the trial to meet local employers who were looking for staff. The aim was to improve the communication between employers and local people, by introducing parents in the trial to local employers and to inform employers in the town that there are local people looking for employment.

Approximately 90 people attended and seven of these were parents from the trial. Eight employers attended. On the day, two of the parents in the trial secured CDEP participation at the local radio station. Unfortunately neither parent stayed at the radio station: one of the parents moved away temporarily from Halls Creek and the other parent was not able to find any outside school hours child care for her three children including the youngest of four years.

Job Futures liked the Employment and Training Expo and thought it would be a worthwhile local initiative to have again in Halls Creek. This could be used as a regular activity to help improve the communication and understanding between local employers and local job seekers.

The parents and the school

At the start of the trial, the 30 parents had 101 children in their care: 66 were school age and 35 were below school age. By the end of the trial, this number had reduced to 85 children (62 of school age and 23 below school age). This reduction can be accounted for by some parents leaving the trial and by children moving in

and out of a particular parent's care and by children moving away from Halls Creek.

Participants in the *Engaging Family* trial signed a consent form with Centrelink for the Halls Creek School requesting that the school forward their children's school attendance information to Centrelink on a weekly basis. It was initially intended that the Centrelink social worker would talk about attendance problems with the parents whose children were not attending regularly and chart with them the attendance rates of their children.

Unfortunately, the school attendance data was not made available until the end of the trial. Despite initial assurances that data would be forthcoming during the trial, it took a relatively long time to secure the final agreement of WA Department of Education and Training to release the specific attendance data and gaining consent from the parents to use the data was also time consuming. In the absence of specific attendance data the social worker talked to a selection of parents about school attendance issues.

In April, the Centrelink participation advisor and the school youth worker contacted 10 parents to discuss their children's attendance at school and to remind parents to keep sending their children to school regularly. The most common complaints about non-attendance related to the issues of bullying and teasing by other students and some teachers. The Centrelink participation adviser and social worker spoke to the school principal and deputy principal about the issues and the school said that they would address the complaints. It is unclear whether this had any impact on the children because when the DEWR project officer later spoke to the parents about what could be done better at the school they still mentioned teasing and bullying as the biggest problem with the school.

In May, DEWR asked the school to initiate parent-teacher interviews for the parents in the trial. The school principal agreed to the request and Job Futures agreed to pick up the parents and take them to the school for their interview. But for various reasons this did not happen.

As an alternative, the school principal organised for the school youth worker to bring in the parents for their interview. Unfortunately, none of the parents were willing or available to come in for an interview. The school was unable to provide the level of resources required to achieve parent/teacher interviews.

In the end, the Centrelink social worker was able to take one parent to the school for two parent-teacher meetings. This had a good outcome for the younger and older child of the parent as their attendance and confidence at school improved. The social worker also counselled one of the teenage children of a parent in the trial (at the parent's behest) and took her to a pre-arranged meeting with her

teacher. The teacher did not show up for the meeting, apparently because of a miscommunication at the school.

This process shows that getting parents and teachers to talk to each other during the trial was problematic.

3. Evaluation of the *Engaging Families* trial

The trial process

On the ground

The trial process was both practical and iterative. In remote communities, there is frequent turnover of staff, with unfilled positions remaining unfilled for lengthy periods or simply not filled at all, issues in recruiting skilled people and a shortage of available staff housing. This means if someone is away due to illness, or even a holiday, it can seriously affect the service delivery to a community.

Problems of staff turnover and shortages in Halls Creek are a normal reality for Centrelink and other service providers such as Job Futures, the local school and the local and state government agencies. Centrelink demonstrated their commitment to the trial by providing additional resources to back-fill the positions of the social worker (from Kununurra) and the participation advisor (from Halls Creek) with other staff from Warwick (in Queensland) and Alice Springs. Given the lack of available skilled staff that could be released for the six-month period of the trial in the Kimberley area, back-filling was the best option. At the beginning of the trial, the social worker visited Halls Creek for a week to ten days every couple of weeks but, within the first three months, this had changed to visiting on a weekly basis.

The remoteness of the Halls Creek community also created problems for smooth governance and for certain aspects of data collection. The governance structure for the trial became 'geographically split' between Halls Creek, Kununurra and Canberra, with sub-sites in Broome and Perth. In the end, the structure was heavily dependent on field visits from Canberra project officers to provide guidance, motivation and support to the organisations delivering the trial at the local level.

The role of the social worker

The interventions of the Centrelink social worker had a wider impact than originally anticipated. The social worker undertook the following referrals for parents in the trial.

- two referrals to TAFE for literacy and numeracy training (one parent hasn't followed up yet)
- requested assistance from Supported Housing Assistance Programme

- visited Halls Creek School to discuss the complaints made by ten of the parents about bullying, teasing and peer pressure at the school
- referred a parent for alcohol and drug counselling (there were about four other parents who refused the offer of help in this area)
- referred a parent to Centrelink debt services
- organised Centrepay to pay for the lunches at the school canteen
- assisted one parent with a maintenance exemption in order to receive the correct amount of Centrelink payment
- booked two parents into parenting skills course (neither parent attended)
- advertised and promoted a parenting skills course to over twelve parents but none of them attended, despite ten saying they would attend
- at the request of the parent, the social worker counselled one of the teenage girls in the trial not going to school, social worker also took the girl to the school at a pre-arranged time to meet with the girl's teacher (the teacher didn't show)
- initially counselled then referred an extended family member, not in the trial, for phone counselling based in Perth
- offered several parents assistance with their gambling addiction but they all declined the offer of assistance
- liaised with the WA housing commissioner representative and wrote a letter of support for one parent wanting to move to Perth as her son needs on-going medical assistance. This had a successful outcome and the participant will be moving to Perth
- went with one of the parents in the trial who had never been to the school to meet with both children's teachers. This took six home visits and four appointments before being successful. This had a good outcome for the younger child because her attendance and confidence at school improved. The older girl was already attending school on a regular basis
- the social worker sent applications for a child to attend school in Perth and spoke to Aboriginal Student Accommodation on behalf of the participant
- offered to take the only father in the trial to visit the school but he declined
- liaised with the School Principal about a parent who wanted to work at the school. Initially the parent worked as a volunteer for two weeks before gaining employment at the school
- assisted two parents to sort out court fines. One was assisted to pay these off through Centrepay. This will mean these participants can get their driver's licences back once they have paid off these fines, which will improve their job opportunities

- referred a partner of a participant to a training organization to finish off his apprenticeship as he had only completed two years of a three year course
- referred a participant to the police counsellor for the Kimberley, part of the Salvation Army WA Mobile Ministry Team
- liaised with Homeswest regarding parents gaining work as this officially puts their Homeswest housing in jeopardy with the Kimberley Inter-Agency Group
- assisted three parents who raised the issue of 'humbug' with a range of options including: having essential services such as electricity deducted through Centrepay, going to the supermarket early before relatives come to humbug them, changing their payday (as this was the day relatives come to demand money) and having training on self confidence, budgeting and self-esteem. One of the participants felt that the self-esteem section of the Working Life course helped her with this and indicated that she would like the opportunity to learn more on this topic to make her stronger when she gets 'humbugged'. This resulted in discussions with two local service providers who provide a visiting service to Halls Creek about the possibility of doing more in this direction.

According to Centrelink humbug for the purposes for this report describes the practice where Indigenous customers (usually female), in receipt of Centrelink payments have their money appropriated by other family members generally without their consent. The money is then used to purchase alcohol, cigarettes or other non-essential items instead of being used to provide for the family. For example, in the first weeks of the trial, a young parent was humbugged by an uncle who demanded and was given \$200 in cash from the young parent's fortnightly payment (after threatening them with physical harm if they didn't hand over the money to them). The relative then used this money for alcohol.

During the trial the social worker had a caseload of twenty-nine. This is double what a senior social worker would normally carry. However, the nature of services she was able to provide demonstrates a high level of need within the Halls Creek community for a social worker. This is especially so because so many of the parents have very poor literacy and numeracy skills and they often need support in trying to get or maintain a manageable life. While there is no Centrelink social worker based in Halls Creek, social worker services are available by telephone in line with arrangements operating in Indigenous Call Centres successfully over many years. The Centrelink social worker will continue to visit the Halls Creek community every six weeks. A mental health team also provide visiting services to Halls Creek.

Intensive support needed

Recruiting the participants for the trial was a time consuming and very resource intensive process for Centrelink, particularly as participation was entirely voluntary. It involved the Centrelink participation adviser and sometimes the social worker visiting parents in the community to explain the trial and to discuss their possible involvement. The participation advisor contacted 34 parents to obtain 30 parents willing to participate in the trial. Four parents declined to participate for reasons ranging from social issues, younger children in their care or not being interested in the trial. Recruitment of the 30 parents extended from the commencement of the trial in early February to mid April.

The voluntary nature of the trial exacerbated the problems in soliciting participants. Centrelink staff made multiple attempts to engage many of the parents (on average 3 or 4 contacts but up to 6 or 7 contacts for some) before they would attend the Halls Creek Remote Area Service Centre site. Although having to make multiple contact attempts was frustrating on occasion, it was rewarding for Centrelink staff when these contact attempts resulted in an outcome for the parent, such as a parent gaining employment at the school and another who got to meet their children's teacher for the first time.

Once parents had committed to a voluntary plan, they were willing to meet with the social worker to discuss their family situation and to meet with Job Futures to discuss their employment and/or training goals. In fact, meeting with the social worker was mentioned as one of the most popular aspects of the trial for participants. Feedback from parents included:

I liked talking to the social worker... it was 'good to talk'

Easy to talk to, really showed an interest in me

Friendly and good to talk to

Good to be able to talk to someone about my family issues

Very approachable and willing to listen

However, it was one thing to discuss work and training goals and quite a different thing to follow through. Significant time and energy were expended by Job Futures staff in letter dropping to participants about trial activities, enrolling and paying for people to attend courses, then picking people up to attend the courses, giving them and sometimes also their young children, breakfast, morning tea and sometimes lunch and then dropping them home often with their children.

Even with all this support, there were problems. When it actually came time to take action, many parents did not turn up to agreed appointments and/or did not take up the offer of assistance. This was quite frustrating for the service providers in the trial—e.g. the Centrelink social worker and Job Futures—as they spent a lot of time

following up parents for missed appointments, rescheduling appointments, driving around looking for parents and/or spending money on training/activities that the participant agreed they wanted to participate in, but then failed to attend.

On the other hand, making agreements and then failing to carry them out cannot necessarily be seen as reflecting either a lack of motivation or willingness on the part of the participants. As Penman (2006) noted in her review of Indigenous household life, the poor housing and concomitant overcrowding combined with the demands of Indigenous social life can, in the end, make for a very chaotic life indeed.

Job Futures provided the following feedback on the trial, including:

It was very time-consuming i.e. getting parents together

The trial was very relationship based and, in the manager's opinion, it would be difficult to run with non-Indigenous staff

The results were good considering 50 per cent of the participants were new to employment services and had parenting responsibilities

The manager felt some of the key people in the trial lost interest and or focus during the trial due to staff turnover

Job Futures felt they received very good support from the DEWR staff.

Outcomes for the parents

Table 2 summarises the different activities available to parents in the *Engaging Families* trial and shows how many parents were invited to participate in each activity and how many actually did so. Of the 30 parents who started the trial, twenty-eight parents completed at least two activities (for example, the interview with the social worker and the interview with Job Futures). As of 7 July 2006, eight parents had left Halls Creek either temporarily or permanently, reflecting the normal patterns of mobility in Indigenous communities. Of the 22 remaining in Halls Creek (and therefore still in the trial) at the end, 15 completed the final questionnaire. Only four parents in the trial undertook no activity in the trial, beyond the interview with the social worker and Job Futures, without providing a reason. As this was a voluntary trial, there was no mechanism available to compel parents to participate in trial-related activities. The only recourse was to continue to follow-up on participants. Centrelink followed up on eight (attempts were made to contact 10) parents who had not been attending Job Futures services.

Feedback from parents about their reasons for non-attendance included illness, deaths in family or general lack of interest. In Halls Creek, illness and death are not

unusual events, they are very much part of every day life. Deaths are also mourned (in 'sorry time') by a great many kin over varying lengths of time. When the frequency and extent of 'sorry time' are combined, deaths can mean many people are absent for significant periods of time.

Table 2: Trial activities and completion figures

Activity	Number parents asked	Number completed task
Asked by Centrelink to join the <i>Engaging Families</i> trial	34	30
Voluntary participation plan with Centrelink	30	30
In-depth Interview with Centrelink social worker	30	29
Centrelink social worker follow up with parents re non attendance at Job Futures/activities	10	8
Centrelink personal advisor/school youth worker follow up with parents re school attendance of children	13	10
Interview with Job Futures	30	29
'Working Life' 2 week JNM training course	22	14
Jobs/Training Expo organised by JNM	25	7
JNM group discussion with visiting DEWR staff	22	4
Updated Action Plan with JNM	Ongoing	7
Parent/Teacher Interview (did not happen)	0	0
Employment	29	3
CDEP	29	7
TAFE	29	1
Completed final trial questionnaire	22	15
Centrelink trial exit discussion and BBQ with participants	22	6

Of the 14 parents who finished the Working Life course, one commenced paid work and four went on to participate in the Community Development Employment Projects programme.

Some of the parents in the trial who finished the Working Life course, but did not go on to CDEP, employment or training, participated in other trial related activities that accommodated their children including the Employment and Training Expo and the information session to discuss work/life balance.

Table 3 summarises the job-related experiences and activities of participants in the trial. Twenty-one of the parents in the trial had CDEP experience prior to joining the trial and four of the parents were engaged in CDEP activities at the start of the trial. Only two of the parents had never been in paid work or on CDEP. During the trial, there was some turnover by parents in CDEP activities; for example, seven of the parents joined CDEP during the trial while three of the seven parents also ended their CDEP involvement during the trial. One of the CDEP participants was unable to continue due to serious health issues.

Table 3. Job-oriented experiences

Activity	Experience prior to the trial	At the start of the trial	Participation during the trial	Outcome by the end of the trial
CDEP	22	4	10	7
Employment	10	0	3	3
TAFE	1	0	1	1
Working Life Course	0	0	14	N/A
Jobs Expo	N/A	N/A	7	N/A
Information session	N/A	N/A	4	N/A

Outcomes for the children

Attendance

As stated earlier in the report, it was intended that the school attendance data for the school aged children in the trial would be provided by the school and monitored by Centrelink on a weekly basis. Because this did not happen until the last week of the trial, it was not possible for the Centrelink social worker to identify which children were not attending school and therefore which parents might benefit from a reminder to get the children to school.

At the conclusion of the trial we were able to get daily school attendance data supplied by the Halls Creek School for the period of the trial i.e. Term 1 and Term 2 of the 2006 school year. This data was collected via an attendance roll call taken by teachers in the morning and after lunch. The data is entered by the teacher electronically into the computer system. The specific attendance data for the children of participants in the trial are in Table 4 below. The percentage frequencies are expressed as a percentage of the number of primary, high school

and total number of children, respectively. Note that while there were 66 school age children at the start of the trial, there were only data for 62.

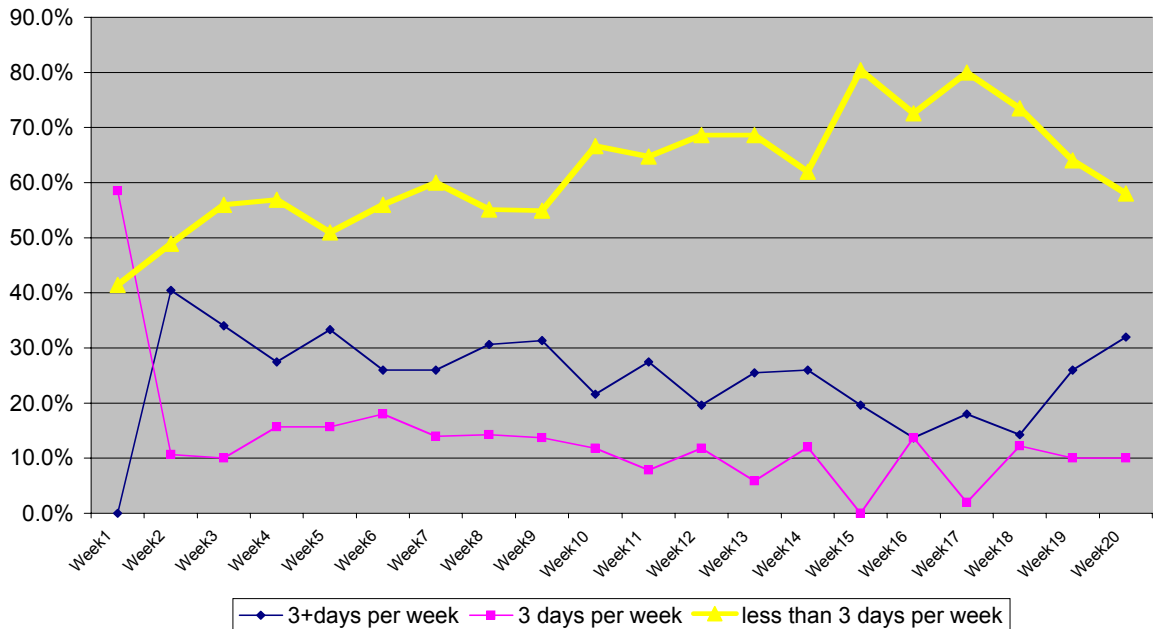
Table 4. Percentage frequency attendance levels by percentage frequency of children

% of attendance level	Primary school (1–6) %f	High school (7+) %f	%f of school age children
No record	8.3	26.9	16.1
0–25%	13.9	30.8	21.0
26–35%	5.6	3.8	4.8
36–45%	8.3	15.4	11.3
46–55%	16.7	3.8	11.3
56–65%	19.4	7.7	14.5
66–75%	8.3	7.7	8.1
76+%	19.4	3.8	12.0
Total n	36	26	62

There are a number of things to note about the data in Table 4. First, there is a substantial number of school age children for whom no record could be found. Second, just over half of the children of parents in the trial attended school for less than 46% of the time. Third, there are still some who attend regularly despite all the difficulties. Fourth, it is also of some interest to record that poor or good attendance does not necessarily run in families. According to the school attendance data, in one family with five school age children the attendance levels ranged from 14 to 88%. Only eight out of the 62 children in the trial attend school 76% or more—i.e. 4 days or more a week. Finally there appears to be lower rates of attendance by high school children compared with primary school.

While attendance data tell part of the story, it is also important to know the regularity with which students attend school. The Northern Territory Department of Education (1999) believes that this regularity of attendance—ie number of days in a row—is as important, if not more than, the frequency. The school attendance data for each child with a parent in the trial was compiled into three categories: number of times attended for more than three days in a row, for three days and for less than three days in a row. The data are in Figure 1 over the page.

Figure 1. Children's attendance data



There are two points to note about Figure 1. First, the majority of students do not attend school regularly. Second, there appears to be a trend of more children attending school less regularly as the weeks progressed.

Why is school attendance low at Halls Creek School?

The low school attendance rate at Halls Creek School was not lifted consistently during the trial period. In the current circumstances, and with the current school practices, it would seem clear that engaging parents in work-related activities and encouraging them to get their children to go to school is not sufficient to increase school participation. The trial revealed at least three contributing factors to low school attendance at the Halls Creek School.

LACK OF PARENTAL INSISTENCE THAT CHILDREN GET TO SCHOOL IN THE MORNING

All parents that the evaluation team spoke to said they wanted their children to go to school. When the school principal was interviewed by DEWR and Centrelink project staff in May, during the mid term review, he indicated that about eight parents in the trial had made an extra effort to get their children to school. However, this seemed to taper off as the trial went on.

When the DEWR project officer spoke to the parents many felt quite powerless and hopeless about getting their children to school, especially those with children aged 12 years and upwards. They had resigned themselves to the fact that they could

not get their children to school, and most had simply given up. A worker in the Department of Community Development suggested that:

There is a need for additional parenting services in Halls Creek to help families learn how to appropriately discipline and set boundaries

While many parents in mainstream society spend a lot of their parenting time directing the time use of their children, this is not necessarily the case in Indigenous households where children from an early age are encouraged to be autonomous and to make their own decisions (Penman, 2004). Going to school, or not, is just one of the many autonomous decisions they are expected to make. In other words, Indigenous children control their own time use patterns from a very young age and parents are relatively passive when it comes to overseeing decisions the children make about their time. In the case of Halls Creek, the lack of parental direction regarding the time use of children could be due to a mix of traditional cultural patterns and a product of the lifestyle issues in the Halls Creek community. This lack of parental insistence in getting children to school is reflected in an observation made by the DEWR project officer.

I was talking with one of the parents from the trial in her front yard. When I'd arrived, the parent had been raking the front yard and the children were playing football. As we were completing a trial questionnaire, we started discussing the type of help she needed to get her children to school on a regular basis. She said school was important and she wanted her children to go regularly but they wouldn't listen to her. She thought a teacher from the school would be the best person to help get her children to school on a regular basis.

As we were talking about this, the school mini bus drove slowly by with a teacher from the school in it. The children quickly ran inside and shut the door. The bus waited until a pre-school child came to the front door and yelled "I'm not going to school today". The driver rolled his eyes, shrugged his shoulders and drove on.

TEACHER QUALITY

With a school attendance rate of 58.4 per cent in 2005, Halls Creek School has low levels of attendance when compared with other similar communities (see Table 1 earlier). According to the Halls Creek School principal, differences within the school between class attendance rates were at least partly due to variations in teacher quality. He explained that where a teacher worked to encourage children to come to school by providing high teacher quality, relatively high attendance rates could be achieved.

The majority of teachers at the school are recent graduates with a four-year degree who have agreed to complete a three-year teaching period in the Kimberley for a sizeable financial bonus of approximately \$570 per fortnight more than their urban counterpart. In other words, many of the teachers at Halls Creek School are new teachers with little teaching experience and, perhaps, are likely to have been attracted to the school for financial reasons.

Given the cultural imperative to encourage autonomy in Indigenous children, the need for the school to be 'attractive' to the students takes on greater import. Where parents are not ensuring their children get to school on a daily basis, the children have to make up their minds every day that going to school is a good idea. For this to be the case, the school must be an attractive option for them, and they must want to be in the classroom with their teacher.

BULLYING AND TEASING

Halls Creek School has a teasing and bullying strategy that includes helping teachers to become more consistent in their response to teasing, conflict resolution, behaviour modification and general school attitude. However, it has not eradicated at least the perception of bullying as the issue was one of the most commonly reported by parents during their interview with the DEWR project officer. The Centrelink participation advisor and school youth worker visited 10 families in the trial (attempts were made to contact 13 families) to discuss their children's school attendance. The most common feedback about non-attendance heard by the youth worker and participation adviser related to the issues of bullying and teasing by other students and some teachers.

Feedback from parents about the school included:

Not very good...lots of bullying. School tries but the way they do it the kids doesn't seem to be disciplined, should have bullying thing at school... like should be in school lesson...kids need teachers need to speak to kids and tell them what it does the kids...spend more time with kids

Oldest kid doesn't like going to school because teacher teased him, he's in grade 7

School alright...only problem teasing kids, teachers don't do anything at school...parents sort out (problems) afterwards with other parents'

4. In conclusion

Overall findings

1. The voluntary method of engaging parents in Halls Creek in job-related activities worked at least some of the time when very high levels of support were provided.

The extent to which social behavioural change can be achieved on a widespread basis through a purely voluntary approach is a key issue that the trial sought to address. For the purposes of this trial, a social behavioural change was deemed to occur when the time use patterns of a parent changed due to their participation in this trial.

The voluntary approach used in the trial to engage parents in job related activities was accompanied by highly intensive and continuous support on the ground by Job Futures, Centrelink and DEWR staff. Yet, even with this support, progress towards behavioural change was patchy, although in some cases evident. Thirty parents commenced in the trial and 28 participated in at least two job related activities. Of the 22 who were still in Halls Creek at the end of the trial (and therefore, still deemed to be participating in the trial) 15 completed the final questionnaire. Three of the parents found employment during the trial.

Overall, the findings show that a voluntary approach to engaging Halls Creek parents in job related activities can work at least some of the time if accompanied by highly intensive and very high quality support. High quality support depended in part on the quality of the relationships both between service providers and between service providers and parents. For example, the good relationship between the Centrelink participation adviser, social worker and Job Futures staff, and the ability of these service providers to get on well with and be trusted by the parents was instrumental in the delivery of the intensive support.

In all, the type of 'method of engagement' used in the trial is very expensive and resource intensive, but can work in a voluntary context where there are no sanctions for not turning up for activities. It is too expensive to be considered for replication elsewhere and certainly could not be rolled out nationally.

2. The school attendance of children did not increase during the trial. Factors relating to school attendance include parenting behaviour, teacher quality and school culture.

The overall school attendance at Halls Creek School during the trial in 2006 was 58 per cent. Just over half of the children in the trial attended school for less than 46 per cent of the time. Only eight of the 62 children in the trial attended school for four days or more per week (an attendance rate of 76 per cent).

High levels of extra support were not provided to children during the trial. It was explained to parents that participation in the trial required the parents to try and ensure their children went to school regularly. Several methods to get parents and teachers to talk with each other during the trial were attempted by the trial organisers but failed.

Encouraging parents to make sure their children attended school regularly did not work in this trial. However, this was not because the parents did not want to get their children to school. On the contrary, the parents volunteered to be in the trial because they very much wanted their children to go to school. But, as it turned out, they did not get their children to change.

There appears to be a conflict between parenting behaviour that allows children to decide their own time use patterns from an early age and the parents desire for their children to go to school. In an environment where children make up their minds each day as to whether to go to school or not, the significance of the parent as a 'method of engagement' for the children declines and the role of the school—particularly in terms of teacher quality and school culture—increases.

Attendance rates varied between classes at Halls Creek School. According to the Principal, one teacher showed a 20 percentage point greater attendance rate than some of the other teachers. Variations in teacher quality could well be an issue affecting school attendance rates.

The school was unable to provide the level of resources required to achieve parent/teacher interviews. This was in contrast to the Centrelink and Job Futures staff members who repeatedly tried to contact parents and collect them to participate in activities. Getting parents and teachers to talk to each other during the trial was problematic.

Quite a few of the parents in the trial said that bullying and teasing were issues that needed to be addressed at the school.

3. Employers in Halls Creek often cited unreliability and poor presentation skills as reasons for not employing locals.

An employer survey was conducted with 31 of the 41 employers in Halls Creek. Only 29 per cent of the identified 315 paid positions were held by local Indigenous people and yet, population-wise, there were more than enough locals to fill all the paid positions in Halls Creek. Job Futures had 680 registered jobseekers and about one third of these were on CDEP.

Employers identified unreliability and poor presentation skills as major problems they encountered when employing local Indigenous people. On the other hand, this reliability can be improved with the use of certain methods of engagement. Centrelink and Job Futures ensured reliable attendance by picking parents up from their homes to get them to agreed activities. Where this high level of support was not provided, parents were often unreliable.

4. The housing situation in Halls Creek is unlikely to provide an environment where families can be 'work- and school-ready'.

There are only 800 dwellings in Halls Creek shire for 4,174 people. At least 11 of the 30 trial participants lived with eight or more people. Research shows that overcrowding can result in a lack of sleep, security and privacy. In addition, it can produce a lack of washing facilities and poor health from broken facilities (Penman, 2006). There is virtually no private ownership of housing in Halls Creek.

5. In the course of conducting the trial, it became apparent that small local projects could provide opportunities for families to engage in functional community activities.

Appendix 1 provides a list of projects that could be implemented in Halls Creek. It is beyond the scope of this trial to implement or further develop these projects but they are provided to indicate the types of activities that would provide greater opportunities for families to engage in functional community activities. In particular, the absence of childcare facilities means some parents do have difficulty participating in paid work.

Recommendations

1. That the Halls Creek Engaging Families trial, as it has been implemented, not be extended for another period.
2. That DEWR, Centrelink and OIPC (in conjunction with the relevant state departments and agencies) review ongoing arrangements for East Kimberley communities, including Halls Creek, in the context of the lifting of the Remote Area Exemptions and the development of Regional Partnership Agreements. This might include providing a social worker full time within Halls Creek.
3. That ways of achieving higher teacher quality in Halls Creek be investigated. This could include discussion of end of year bonuses (or some other incentive) based on class attendance rates over the whole year. It could also include a range of other performance monitoring methods. This could be done within the context of a school and community partnership, where flexibility to reward good teachers for achieving improved educational outcomes (including achieving benchmark school attendance rates) is possible.
4. That DEWR conducts employer awareness training in Halls Creek covering issues such as how to help ensure the reliability and presentational skills of local employees in order to avoid having to 'import' staff from outside the area and have lengthy delays in filling positions. Methods of engagement such as picking up employees, providing showers and food could be discussed during this training.
5. That the Welfare and Family Payments and Obligations Taskforce takes into consideration issues that arise in remote and disadvantaged communities such as Halls Creek.
6. That relevant departments (Commonwealth and State) review opportunities for engagement by, for example, helping to provide access to more jobs and to more houses and by undertaking smaller community development style projects (see Appendix 1 for list).

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Appendix 1

Local projects that could help engage families in functional activities

Activity	How would it help Halls Creek
Child Care Centre	Existing facilities are inadequate (one run down centre, only open for half a day each day and run by CDEP)
Horse Riding School within walking distance from the Halls Creek School.	Help with school attendance and develop horse-riding skills of children that could be useful for later work on stations. Provide after school activity rather than having lots of unsupervised spare time. The horse riding school could eventually be turned into a small business that could offer tourists the opportunity to ride a brumby in the outback.
Government Shop Front	It would help the whole community and the government including federal, state and local governments by providing a one-stop shop of information to the local people. Easy way for Government organisations to disseminate information to the whole community.
Targeted training programmes – STEP contract	As there is strong business in the surrounding region (Argyle Mines for example), there could be opportunities for targeted training programmes that would prepare Indigenous people in the region for existing industries. A STEP contract could be used to provide this.
Small Indigenous Business Development	With the industry presence in the region come opportunities for businesses to be developed to provide complementary services. The creation of Indigenous owned businesses would create a wealth base and empowerment of individuals, also further employment opportunities could come from this.
Jobs Shop	Similar to the Jobs Expo held during the trial the local Job Network provider should be encouraged to hold these type of events on a regular basis to increase communication between employers and local people.
Local Jobs for Local People Strategy	A strategy could be developed for the East Kimberley region including Halls Creek to create levers for local Indigenous people to fill some of the local employment opportunities that do exist. As part of this, cross subsidisation could be addressed.
Homemakers and parenting course the model for this course needs to be driven by the community and not imposed from outside.	Would help the whole community especially families.
Parenting and resource workers to work with families especially in the area of teenage and parent conflict.	It would help families and the police as it would help prevent crime and social breakdown.

<p>A community camping ground The camping ground would include a fence around the camp, showers, toilets, rules, facilities for open fire cooking, run by local Indigenous manager, people would pay and sign in.</p>	<p>It would provided somewhere for people to go when Dinner Camp is redeveloped next year. Currently in Halls Creek, there is no camping ground other than the caravan park, which is not very welcoming to local people from the surrounding communities.</p>
<p>A play group and someone employed to organise it.</p>	<p>It would help give the mums and children in Halls Creek something to do and help build a sense of community. This should be a paid position.</p>
<p>Sport for young people Halls Creek needs more organised sport especially for young people. There is only football for the older children and basketball one afternoon a week</p>	<p>There is a desperate need for <u>organised</u> sport for young children after school and during school holidays. This could be a paid position to get it organised, as it not happen on a voluntary basis.</p>
<p>Station Skills Programme for Adults to include both horse and motor bike skills and could be linked to Horse Riding School</p>	<p>Help young adults to gain employment at the surrounding stations.</p>
<p>Video Workshop for school kids</p>	<p>Video workshop by the high school kids 'going to school is cool', why go to school. Can be organised via the Australian Film Commission.</p>
<p>Video workshop for unemployed people</p>	<p>Unemployed people in Halls Creek could make a video about work readiness and the benefits of working. This could be played on the Job Futures TV while people are waiting to be interviewed. Can be organised via the Australian Film Commission.</p>
<p>Ex Cherbourg Principal, Chris Sarra to work with teaching staff from Halls Creek School</p>	<p>It would help the whole school and the community to learn how to communicate with each other and to help the school develop an attendance plan and bullying/teasing strategy that worked for the community.</p>