

ID number:

Nomination statement

Category: Excellence by a Teacher

1. SCHOOL CONTEXT

South Bunbury Kindergarten Teacher, Fiona Farren, has been responsible for developing the **Linking Education and Families** (LEAF) program. This noteworthy program, piloted in several schools in the South West Region, promises to give young children the best possible start to school.

The LEAF program has been enthusiastically embraced by young families in this district and two program evaluations have demonstrated the positive impact the program has made on participant families.

LEAF is a universal program that targets families with children aged 0-4. The program provides a mechanism by which schools can make contact with families with young children before they attend Kindergarten.

The program involves several key elements:

- training for project coordinators,
- **family visits** and
- **Play Cafes** for families of 0-4 year olds.
- ***Collaborative transition plan for Kindy children in the year prior to school***

Both Play Cafes and family visiting provide a framework for schools to actively support the transition to school, and an opportunity to get to know children and their particular learning and social needs before they commence school.

The LEAF program achieves the objective of developing respectful, friendly relationships between schools and the families in our communities. The program provides a framework for schools to work with families and children in their homes and communities to help children make a smooth transition into their school years.

LEAF assists families to connect to appropriate early intervention services if they are required. The program provides access to qualified education and health staff who are knowledgeable about early child development and are able to recognise when families with young children would benefit from assistance. The wide range of information and expertise that families with young children are exposed to through the program provides many opportunities for early identification of issues that would benefit from intervention.

The LEAF program provides an opportunity for health and education to work collaboratively to improve outcomes for the very young and their families.

The program is attended by parents from diverse backgrounds and connections for parents and children are formed at Play Cafes. Parents share information about community resources and receive a copy of the guide to local services for children. Parents attending Play Cafes are given a folder of information pamphlets and brochures from Health and Education that are relevant to their child's developmental level. The Play Cafes are a supportive and welcoming environment for families from all backgrounds.

Parents involved in the program report social benefits for both themselves and their children. Program outcomes are listed below:

- reduces anxiety about the transition to school
- promotes positive social development in children
- encourages children's independence and self-regulation prior to school
- positively influences the home learning environment
- increases use of services designed to support child and family development
- facilitates early intervention for a range of issues including speech, hearing, behavioral problems health problems and delayed development
- increases opportunities for parent support
- provides opportunities to promote the importance of the early years
- facilitates opportunities for interagency collaboration benefiting families with young children

Teachers note that the opportunities provided by Play Cafes to socialize and acclimatize to the Kindy environment means an anxiety free start to Kindy with few tears and parents and children that are confident and comfortable. Parents also recognize the social development benefits.

"It's a chance to socialize my toddler. It provides an opportunity to network and develop relationships with other mums. There are great activities for the kids. Building relationships with the Kindy teacher before they go to Kindy. It has broadened his network of friends. It has challenged him socially. He normally mixes with older kids and it's good for him to interact with children his own age. It also helps him to get comfortable around adults – other mums. It's great"(Parent).

"He is an only child and goes to Kindy next year, so it's good for him to interact with other children. He loves the activities – inside and outside and there is so much for him to do. It's been particularly good for me because I am relatively new and it has given me a chance to meet people and it's given me lots of ideas. I can see improvement in his learning, and social activities, things like sharing. He is getting familiar with Kindergarten through coming regularly. The teacher is so warm and welcoming. Play Café paved the way for him to get his hearing checked and he is now getting speech therapy" (Parent).

There is an opportunity for the LEAF program to make a difference in WA and bring about lasting change. The following quote is taken from page 92 of the Education and Health Standing Committee report to parliament (2009).

“There is promising evidence that programs such as LEAF and A Smart Start assist pre-primary children prepare for school, while allowing carers and parents to identify health concerns well before a child enters the school system. These programs provide an ideal environment for conducting a range of health screening tests before children start formal schooling. They would benefit both the child in terms of school readiness, and reduce the current burden for school health nurses who have to deal with children suffering from a variety of disorders that could have been diagnosed earlier.”

LEAF also demonstrates what can be done in the future with the development of strong community links. The government is currently seeking ways for health and education and other agencies to work in partnership and LEAF provides a framework for this to be achieved. The collaboration between all organizations involved in the LEAF program showcases exemplary practice. The interaction has been very positive and is continuing to demonstrate benefits.

2. SUMMARY OF NOMINATION

In 2005, South Bunbury Primary School released their Kindergarten teacher, Ms Fiona Farren, for one day per week for 12 months to develop strategies to connect with local families with children under four years. This resulted in the development of a program that provided a mechanism by which schools could make early contact with parents and families of pre-school children.

The Linking Education and Families (LEAF) program focuses on establishing and strengthening relationships between the family, and school and community that can support them.

The program has been evaluated twice and has been extremely well received by teachers, parents and children. The program meets current best practice recommendations for early child development and parent support programs.

Fiona Farren has demonstrated her deep commitment to the needs of families with young children through her ongoing creative and innovative practice. She has shared this practice with her colleagues and is currently developing a training resource so that the program can be replicated in other settings. LEAF would not be the exemplary program it is, if not for Fiona’s capacity to engage with partners such as the Department for Communities, Investing In Our Youth Inc, Bunbury Early Years Network, City of

Bunbury, and the Western Australian Country Health Service.

ID number:

3. STATEMENT AGAINST CRITERIA

Refer to Awards Guidelines Pages 5 & 6

Criterion 1. A high level of professional knowledge and understanding

Fiona has the vision to plan for the future, forging new directions that are in alignment with DETWA's early childhood development strategies. Fiona has been able to develop a practical framework for investing in the early years. Through the LEAF program, she has been able to improve the quality of early years learning and parent support. She has been able to bring together families, communities and teachers in support of young children. The program is unique in that it is one of the few school based programs that targets families with children aged 0-4, assisting schools to connect with the 0-4 years of children's development. The program is evidence based and built on sound research undertaken by Fiona in an extensive planning process. The program is built on the philosophy and principles of the partnership approach (Olds, 2002) – a model that proposes that resources must be offered in skilled, empowering and respectful ways in order to ensure that parents are supported in their role and not disempowered by professional intervention, and shows an understanding of strength based approaches, the nature of school readiness, and optimal conditions for early learning.

Criterion 2. Exemplary professional practice

Fiona has demonstrated strong leadership and advocacy for families, young children and early child development. She has championed a collaborative approach so that families may benefit from the combined efforts of parents, school staff, health and allied health staff, not for profit organisations, local governments and early years networks.

This fits with the National Agenda which calls for a focus on working together. The LEAF program is supported by a steering group that maximises interagency collaboration and community engagement and is informed by early year's research.

Importantly both family visits and play Cafes provide opportunities for early intervention and referral. Family visits have been instrumental in identifying issues such as speech delay, sleep problems, difficult behaviour, continence problems, sight and hearing issues and concerns with communication and language skills. Play Cafes help raise parental awareness of the importance of the early years and create opportunities for parents of young children to interact with visiting service providers. The approach is deliberately informal, with the visitor mingling with the group and being available to answer any questions that arise in conversation. This interaction often results in direct referral for issues such as meals, behaviour, and speech issues. Having the opportunity to address these issues early, paves the

way for the best possible start to school.

Criterion 3. Influential professional leadership

Fiona Farren has been responsible for mentoring six program coordinators who have directly implemented LEAF in their own schools. Fiona coordinated training in 2007 and 2008 for these coordinators but in order to meet the interest generated by other schools, she is currently developing a training package that will enable other school sites to effectively replicate the program. Fiona has also made herself available to share information on the LEAF program at conferences and education forums. Her leadership has won the appreciation of education policy officers and managers and the attention of a parliamentary committee on education and health.

ID number:

4. CITATION

Fiona Farren is admired for her vision, and commitment to the needs of families with young children. She has made a very timely and unique contribution to the development of education services for children aged 0-4. She has brokered new partnerships that will allow families with young children to benefit from interagency collaboration. She has provided a setting where parents can be supported to help their children become effective learners. She has developed a framework that can provide each child with the best possible start to school.