



Another Way

For some students, going to school is the last thing on their mind. They have more immediate concerns: finding a meal or attending court or looking after their baby.

Since 2006, Albury Wodonga Community College has been offering alternative schooling for Year 9 to Year 12 students. The Albury campus has 50 Year 9 and Year 10 students and the Wodonga campus has 85 Year 11 and Year 12 students.

In 2011, the College offered special classes to 10 students with low literacy and numeracy skills. The course was effectively an alternative Year 10 course within an alternative school.

‘The group of students were even more at risk of slipping through the education system than our usual students,’ said Albury Wodonga Community College’s Deputy Principal, Claire Cooper. ‘They had behavioural or health issues, they often came from a background of intergenerational unemployment. Some hadn’t been in a classroom for months and months.’

The 10 students were enrolled in a Certificate II of General Education for Adults, focusing on literacy and numeracy. The classes were run two days a week over the second semester of 2011. Ms Cooper and the students’ three teachers knew it would be quite an achievement for the students to attend once a week, let alone two. For such students, there sometimes needs to be a different approach, another way.

‘The specially designed Education and Wellbeing program provided the College with another mechanism to hold onto a cohort of students who can be transient at best,’ said Independent Schools Victoria SSNP Advisor Max Caruso. ‘Any hook that can keep students at school is most valuable.’

The hook for this distinctive program was that a case manager from a welfare agency, YES Youth and Family Services, attended all the classes. In mainstream schools, a school welfare officer would usually need to make an appointment to discuss a student with a case manager or youth worker, an appointment that may be days or weeks after an incident or an issue.

But if any of the 10 students were upset and, say, stormed out of class, the case manager was there to coax the student back. Or if a student had to leave for a Centrelink appointment, the case manager could later explain this to the teacher.

Albury Wodonga Community College is an adult education college which incorporates a Year 9 to Year 12 secondary school for students who have been disengaged from school over a long period of time.

Challenge: To re-engage 10 students whose schooling has been severely interrupted.

Action: A case manager attends classes with the students.

Result: All students gain a Certificate of Competency in at least one unit.

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– Ms Claire Cooper, Deputy Principal



'This created a good communication circle,' said Ms Cooper. 'All our teachers appreciate the hardships of our students. The case manager was able to add to this appreciation, to help build good relationships between the teachers and the students.'

The teachers realised that the literacy and numeracy classes had to be different. 'It needed to be fun and real, it needed to be hands-on,' said Ms Cooper. 'We asked what the students wanted to do, and worked the curriculum in that way.' The classes included gardening, indoor rock climbing and visits to local parks.

A ten-pin bowling excursion saw the students developing numeracy skills by working out not just the scores of their bowling, but the costs of the excursion. Literacy skills were needed to write letters to Ms Cooper requesting permission to go on the excursion.

The Education and Wellbeing program was proposed by Independent Schools Victoria in conjunction with the *Smarter Schools National Partnerships* program, and received funding from the National Australia Bank (NAB) Schools First Initiative.

The NAB funding helped cover the costs of the case manager, of excursions, of classroom furniture and of providing meals for students.

So, did the program work? 'All students walked away with a Certificate of Competency in at least one unit,' said Ms Cooper, 'which is quite an achievement for them. One is now a Year 10 student here at Albury Wodonga Community College, and another enrolled for a TAFE course in hospitality and bakery. We have even had students contact us nearly 12 months later to enquire about returning to study with us, which is a very positive step. It means that no matter how much time has passed, they still feel comfortable returning to us.'

In second semester 2012 Albury Wodonga Community College ran a second Education and Wellbeing program, for a group of 10 students whose literacy and numeracy skills were less than those of the 2011 class. These Certificate I students were referred to Albury Wodonga Community College by YES Youth and Family Services and were separated into gender specific classes at times so the female students could learn some Certificate II in Community Services units of competency – which is what they specifically requested.

Some of their competencies were met through building model cars (requiring literacy skills to read instructions) and creating meccano models (requiring literacy skills to write simple instructions). 'We do whatever we can think of,' said Ms Cooper, 'whatever will keep a student focused and engaged, and wanting to come back.'

'These students would be lost in a big school. There would be nowhere for them to go.'

'There is a massive need and demand for these types of programs,' said Mr Caruso. 'There could be dozens of others across Victoria.'

