



Each to Their Own

A teenage girl struggles at school. She lacks confidence. She is moody. Kath Hartwich, Good Shepherd College's Learning Support teacher, sits down with the girl, her teachers and the girl's mother and together they draw up an individual learning improvement plan. The girl talks not just about her difficulties at school but about her family life. The girl and her mother reveal their home circumstances.

Mrs Hartwich and the girl's teachers start to appreciate why the girl struggles at school. The learning plan sets out numeracy, literacy and social goals for the girl and lists strategies, both at school and at home, to support her. The parent and teachers sign the learning plan, and meet every term to review, and if need be, revise the plan.

The girl begins to blossom. 'She has gone ahead in leaps and bounds,' said Mrs Hartwich. 'Her attitude has changed dramatically. She now sees that she can do things, and she's prepared to put in the effort to achieve things.'

Good Shepherd College has been using individual learning improvement plans for its at-risk primary school students for a number of years. In Term 3, 2011, with consultation and support from Independent Schools Victoria SSNP Advisors, Good Shepherd College instituted learning plans for four of its 80 secondary students.

At the start of 2012, the College backed up the learning plans by appointing Mrs Hartwich, for many years a primary school teacher at Good Shepherd College, as Learning Support teacher. The role includes welfare and pastoral care responsibilities, and coordinating the learning plans at both the primary and secondary campuses. (Good Shepherd College's campuses are several kilometres apart: the primary campus is in Hamilton itself, the secondary campus is on a cattle and sheep farm.)

'The students are clearly benefiting from the learning plans,' said Mrs Hartwich, 'and the teachers and parents are too. Our teachers now have a better understanding of the students' circumstances and the parents are more comfortable talking about their family situations.'

Mrs Hartwich said that the parents have access to immediate assessment data and know what their child's teachers' priorities are for helping the child.

Good Shepherd College is a Prep to Year 12 coeducational Lutheran school with 120 students attending its two Hamilton campuses.

Challenge: To help at-risk secondary students.

Action: To create individual learning improvement plans for selected students.

Results: Students more engaged, parents more involved.

The parents have embraced the learning plans and the opportunity for more communication. They feel welcome and comfortable. One parent of a secondary student said to me, 'It's so nice to feel at home at school'.

– Mrs Kath Hartwich,
Learning Support Teacher



The once-a-term meetings with parents to review the learning plans have built up a rapport between the parents and the College, a rapport that often goes missing in a student's transition from primary school to secondary school.

'The parents have embraced the learning plans and the opportunity for more communication,' said Mrs Hartwich. 'They feel welcome and comfortable. One parent of a secondary student said to me, "It's so nice to feel at home at school."'

School Principal Les Seiffert pointed out that before the introduction of the individual learning improvement plans for the group of secondary students at Good Shepherd College 'teachers would only see a student's results. Now that they know a little about the student's home life they can put the results in context.'

Good Shepherd College is looking at introducing individual learning improvement plans to help extend some of the College's high achievers.

'We don't want to see students stagnating,' said Mr Seiffert, 'and we can see that individual learning improvement plans can help the high achievers as well as those who struggle. The plans can help in raising aspirations, regardless of your marks and results.'

Mr Seiffert said the Independent Schools Victoria SSNP Advisors had greatly assisted the College. 'Their regular visits kept us on task. They helped us refine our primary school individual learning improvement plans so that they could be adapted for secondary school students.'

The Independent School Victoria SSNP Advisors had direct input into the College's extensive annual action plan, of which the learning plans are just one of many elements.

Mr Seiffert noted that some parents from other Hamilton secondary schools, having heard of the individual learning improvement plans, have enrolled their children at Good Shepherd College. 'The parents can see that we can offer specialised support.'

Independent Schools Victoria SSNP Advisor Di Pekin said that the learning plans 'are not just about learning. They are about helping students emotionally and socially. It's good for students to know that teachers and parents care about them and these plans are part of that care.'

'The individual learning improvement plans are part of a jigsaw to help students become more positively engaged in secondary school. Good Shepherd College is showing that they are ahead of the game.'

A teenage boy who has grown up on a farm struggles at school. Unsettled, he battles with his emotions. Kath Hartwich sits down with the boy. He mentions his love of farming. Through the boy's individual learning improvement plan, he is able to spend time helping on the farm that is part of the secondary campus. The farm manager takes the boy under his wing, effectively becoming a mentor. The boy begins to settle. He begins to blossom.

Other Successful Schools

Individual learning improvement plans are also in action at:

- Belgrave Heights Christian School
- Berry Street School
- Henderson College
- Highview College
- Mt Hira College
- Sunshine Christian School
- Worawa Aboriginal College.

