

# MENTORS AND CASE MANAGERS

Illawarra Senior College

## INNOVATION SNAPSHOT

### • SUMMARY

- Illawarra Senior School enrolls people from the ages of 15-82, operates from Monday-Thursday, uses a case management approach to support students and has a group of volunteer mentors who, year after year, provide additional support.

### • DRIVERS

- The staff are committed to using unconventional techniques, such as not raising their voices, so that students have less chance of repeating negative experiences they experienced elsewhere.  
- Students realise this might be their last chance to turn their lives around through education.

### • FEATURES

- A culture of flexibility in curriculum delivery exists with the purpose of finding a solution for each student.  
- The four-day week has made school accessible to a range of students who would otherwise find it too difficult to attend on a regular basis.

### • SUCCESS FACTORS

- Staff have high expectations of students including their daily behaviour such as punctuality.  
- Staff are committed to the alternative approaches, for example resolving issues at the time, one-to-one.

### • BENEFITS

- For many students, the positive experiences at the college set them up for future success.  
- The community benefits from students developing attitudes and skills that will enable them to make a difference in society.

### • RELEVANCE TO NEW SCHOOL LEAVING AGE

- The college is well used to catering for students who may have become disengaged and wish to return to school.  
- The college staff are highly experienced at adjusting the curriculum and the timetable and providing case management support to meet the needs of students who require special assistance.

### Context for the innovation

For a range of reasons, Illawarra Senior College is a unique school in NSW, providing a range of educational opportunities for students aged 15 - 82 in Years 10, 11 and 12. The college operates in a mature learning environment where there is no school uniform, students and teachers operate on a first name basis, and there is a strong welfare focus across the college that is acknowledged by students, parents and staff. The college currently operates over a four day week with extended hours from Monday to Thursday, and has a flexible curriculum structure that caters for full-time, part-time and pathways students. Approximately 25% of college students are of mature age.

The college offers an alternative Year 10 certificate program (Certificate II in General and Vocational Education) for re-entry and mature aged students who have largely had poor previous educational experiences. A wide range of subjects is available to Year 11 and Year 12 students to complete their HSC, with a strong VET program involving six frameworks courses, and a large number of Content Endorsed Courses, along with traditional Higher School Certificate courses. The college sets high expectations for its students, with a strong focus on students experiencing success and completing their course of study.

The college has a very low socio-economic status profile, is supported by the Priority Schools Program and the Priority Action Schools Program and has been identified as a National Partnerships school from 2010 in the low socio-economic school community category. Together with Illawarra Institute of TAFE, the college will form the new entity called the Industry Training College-Illawarra catering for students wishing to undertake a HSC at the same time as gaining trade training through part-time apprenticeships or traineeships.

CASE

# success story

## 'Maximising' curriculum

The College supports a comprehensive curriculum to cater for the full range of students. Each line in the curriculum pattern contains options for academic, vocational or general interest courses so that students can choose a pattern of study that will suit their abilities and interests. The college will run subjects with smaller classes in some instances with no reduction in face-to-face teaching. A culture of flexibility in curriculum delivery exists with the purpose of finding a solution for each student. Each student is "case managed" where possible. An alternative Year 10 program is offered that meets the needs of re-entry students in completing Year 10 and gaining a qualification.

## Enhancing school structures

The structure of the college is innovative. It operates on a four day week and is closed on Fridays. This has made school accessible to a range of students who would otherwise find it too difficult - for example, parents with children and those supporting themselves with part-time work - and has resulted in a large reduction in whole day absences.

The timetable is arranged on an odds-and-even basis so that part-time study is fully supported. Students can complete their full commitment to a half-load of subjects in only two and a half days attendance at the college.

## Best practice

The college has instigated a number of new curriculum options to address the needs of students affected by the change to the school leaving age. It has established a culture of case management to support all students in achieving success at school. The students report a strong sense of connectedness and engagement with the school.

We have many stories of students changing their lives. One that is fresh in our memory concerns a fifteen year-old girl - a street kid, truant from school, in trouble with the police, involved with illegal substances - and a record of not much attendance since Year 8. She enrolled in Year 10 and approached me after two weeks to say the work was too easy and could she try Year 11. We assessed her on literacy and numeracy and decided to give her a one-month trial. She fully reengaged with education despite needing to be driven 70 km each way each day to school. She gained a UAI of 96 and a Dean's scholarship at University of Wollongong.

*Mark Webster, Principal*



# our innovation is the way in which we work with kids...

## **How do the extended hours work?**

We put an extra hour of curriculum time into each of Monday to Thursday, and we run from quarter to nine in the morning to quarter to four, which is about an hour longer than most other schools. We only have two half-hour breaks in the day and we also don't do the traditional Thursday afternoon school sport. We pick up four hours of curriculum time from the extra hour each day and what would normally be allocated to sport time we spend on curriculum.

## **What else is innovative about your school?**

We've got some other things happening. For example we have a very strong support network, because although we operate in an adult learning environment, we still have all the normal structures of a school, such as school counsellors and year advisers, so it's a very strong support network. Teachers take an individual interest in their students and we use wherever possible a case management approach across the college: we usually case manage individual students, for issues like attendance and work placement.

We have a very strong careers program as well, for all students from Years 10 to 12. The careers adviser will interview every student a number of times and form a connection and pretty well knows what they want to do, and what they're looking at and what options are there.

## **It sounds as though your innovation extends beyond school structures.**

I call it a culture because all these approaches form the school. If you identified one thing, you'd say it's the way we operate, but all the other parts contribute to the way we operate.

## **What are some examples of best practice professional approaches?**

We've talked about the way we operate with students, and as part of that we don't escalate any issue, we don't ever over-react to any student behaviour, we deal with it. For example, we don't have a school discipline system, we don't have levels or anything like that so there's no punitive process in the school, we don't do detentions, we don't have discipline levels, we deal with issues on a one-to-one basis. So if a student and a teacher have an issue we deal with that as it is between the two people and they resolve it and get back to class. We sometimes still have to engage in suspensions if what they do is violent or over the top, but once they've served their suspension they come back to class and there's no ongoing punishment.

That approach is tied in with the support network as well. Year-level advisers work very well with students in a positive way and everything that we do is aimed at working with the student to get them through, rather than looking for ways to get them out of the school. That's a different feature of the place.

## **It sounds as though you have high expectations of students.**

We do have expectations. We monitor attendance very closely, and our expectation is that we want every kid in every class, every day and engaging with the work. We mark the roll here six times a day while most other schools only mark it once. We record and report attendance every lesson.

Tied up with that is the support network. We have a strong early intervention program particularly with regard to attendance. When we start noticing people's attendance dropping off, we get on to that. Particularly in Year 10 this year, we've contacted parents immediately attendance drops.

Our expectations are high, we try to convey that to the students at all times. Even our expectations of behaviour are high, although that doesn't mean we yell and scream at kids and back them into corners, but we don't let anything pass that's inappropriate, we just deal with it differently.

## **Which other parties are contributing to the school's success?**

We have good connections also with a number of community agencies. We currently have one of the Job Pathway providers here in Wollongong running a service in the school once a week where they actually come in and work with a particular group of students on their caseload. They interview them each week about life choices, getting yourself to school and making correct choices.

We have really strong connections with the university here as well, and local organisations. For example, we have a number of one-off scholarships that are only presented to this school by Credit Union Australia. Those sorts of organisations encourage students to continue their education and to have strong links with the university.

We also have another unique mentoring program in Year 10. I have fifteen mainly retired adults who give up a day a week for the year, to come into the college and they volunteer to work in Year 10 classes with the teachers. So each of our Year 10 classes essentially has one teacher and two other adults present.

A lot of them are retired professionals. We have a retired sea captain, retired engineers, retired school teachers and retired primary school principals and that scheme has been outstanding in terms of settling classes down and providing immediate help to people who struggle in class. If we have twenty two students in a class, we can have three adults in there who can help them with the work.

Some of the mentors are in their fourth year of this scheme: they've given up a day a week a year, for four years. They keep coming back, which means they're getting something out of it, they're contributing to the community and they're going out to the community and saying, "I'm a mentor at Illawarra Senior College, I work with the kids there".

## **The mentoring scheme seems outstanding.**

That's why I am still here. I've never been this long in any other school and I think it's because we're doing different things all the time. Lots of primary schools have reading mums, but this is more than that, this is in-class support and I think it's an amazing commitment by these people. It amazes me every year that they give up 40 days a year of their time, then they're back up the next year and the next year and the next year.

And a number of our students have identified that too, as one of the main reasons they were successful, because not all students get on well with every teacher. In those classes if you don't get on with the teacher, there's another adult in the classroom that you might connect with.

**What management of innovation is required to ensure success?**

That's a really hard question to answer as it takes a while to learn about this school. When I came in, after three years I was still finding out things that I didn't know before. Management of the innovation requires the whole staff to be committed to it: it's a whole school management challenge.

We have very little staff turnover, and not only do the students like being here but the staff like being here, and mostly the only way we actually have people leave here is if they retire or get a promotion, but no-one transfers out of this place.

We have a very stable staff and we have a good mix of experience in younger people, so I guess the management of it is based on a mutual understanding. We try to have regular meetings, we keep people informed, involve staff in decision making, invite them to suggest ideas. I guess that's all part of it and I guess we just try to keep on top of it. It requires a bit of multi-skilling and knowing what's going on in fifteen different places at once.

**Given the raising of the school leaving age, you seem to have created positive opportunities for young people.**

There is a whole range of benefits for the community from our approach. A lot of students here are completing Year 10 who other schools wouldn't take. If we weren't here I don't think they'd be at school and a lot of them would be in some sort of trouble probably, with time on their hands and nothing to do. So there's quite a huge community benefit in students completing and re-engaging with education and getting them off the streets and getting them into something productive and gaining some skills for employment. With the increase in the leaving age that trend will continue.

We run a different Year 10 here, we don't do the School Certificate that other schools in New South Wales do. We offer the TAFE certificate, because basically it's designed for re-entry students and most of our Year 10s are re-entry, they're coming out of other schools, after being kicked out or having dropped out. We're also a trial school for the new English curriculum in Year 11. We work on the curriculum offering across each subject line, where we've got content endorsed courses, vocational education courses as well as academic courses, so there's a broad curriculum choice across the three areas, so students can usually find something to suit them.

**It sounds as though you've put systems in place to monitor and ensure benefits are sustained.**

It's part of the school culture, so that when I go in a couple of years' time, the place will continue and the practices largely will continue. There'll be differences of course: we're different this year from what we were last year and the year before, so we're constantly changing and I think that's one of the benefits as well. Because we're doing new things all the time, and looking for different things to do, it keeps people engaged and interested and the place developing.

**What are the key success factors behind your school's innovation?**

The commitment of the staff: we couldn't do it without that. It's fair to say that initially not all staff were totally on board with us being an alternative school. We're SES band one, which is the lowest band and we're supported by priority schools program and priority action schools and we'll be part of a national partnerships program next year. So, we're getting some additional funding to help us, but largely it's the commitment of the staff, because they're the ones in the classrooms dealing with the kids and they're the ones who are supporting them and getting them through and I think without that staff commitment, none of this could happen.

**What else about the new school leaving age is influencing your thinking?**

We're looking at a range of unanswered questions. We are expecting we'll get an influx of students, maybe not at the start of next year but through the year as they drop out of other schools, or find the curriculum inappropriate elsewhere. We don't know yet how we're going to manage the ones who do come back who aren't 17, who don't meet the course requirements.

I'm currently investigating putting our Year 10 course as a Certificate II level course. I'm also investigating putting a Certificate I course in below that to pick up the people who slip through the cracks and won't meet Certificate II standard. No-one else has got that. They'll still get a credential at the end of Year 10, if they meet those requirements, but it may not be a Year 10 credential. I'm fairly keen to get that going.

The other thing we're investigating is a step program for the people who are going to come back who are 16 and who don't want a HSC, and don't want to complete the year but they have to come back because they're not 17 yet. We're examining some combination of work experience and skills building program to help develop their employability skills.

They're the two pressing things for us in terms of the increased leaving age. We still don't know how it's going to pan out because the young people haven't come yet, but there's no doubt we're going to have people back in school who wouldn't have been back if it wasn't for the change in legislation.

We treat students as who they are, not what they look like or where they've been.