

IMPLEMENTING A FLEXI SCHOOL

Byron Flexi School

INNOVATION SNAPSHOT

SUMMARY

- The Byron Flexi School is a publicly supported school providing individually appropriate alternative learning pathways in the Byron Shire to meet the needs of young people not suited to current traditional comprehensive schooling.
- The teaching is provided in a number of ways, including by supporting distance education and by on-site TAFE teaching.

DRIVERS

- The School is a response by both the local community and the Department to meet the needs of these young people. The School is designed to enable students to succeed, so they will have options for further study and work.

FEATURES

- Students are expected to be on site two or three days a week so the class never exceeds six or seven students at any one time, to maximise learning outcomes.
- An individual program is developed for each student who works at their own pace.

SUCCESS FACTORS

- Success is the result of many factors including the following: collaboration between the stakeholders; local community and parent support; and a flexible approach by the School.

BENEFITS

- Students gain confidence, achieve study and training outcomes and create options for their future.
- The local community benefits from young people gaining qualifications and skills.

RELEVANCE TO NEW SCHOOL LEAVING AGE

- The Flexi School assists students to stay and progress who might normally be unwilling to continue to stay at school, or be asked to leave. This represents a full turnaround of fortunes.

Context for the innovation

The Byron Flexi School is designed to support young people in the Byron Shire who, for a number of reasons, have not flourished in a comprehensive high school setting. The School provides these students with programs and initiatives that will help them achieve success. The aim of the School is that students will complete a full secondary education or its vocational equivalent and have successful transitions from their schooling to further education, training, employment and community membership.

In addition to support from the Department of Education and Training and others, the School is also underpinned by the Byron Shire Youth Commitment which represents local organisations focused on youth education, training and community engagement.

School structures and best practice

The School is based at the Byron Youth Centre. To provide services to the students, partnerships exist with Byron Bay High School, Mullumbimby High School, Southern Cross Distance Education, TAFE NSW - North Coast Institute, Byron Shire Council, Byron Youth Service and Youth Pathways. These partnerships ensure better support is made available to these targeted students in an alternative teaching and learning environment.

That environment offers personal support, flexible learning approaches and community collaboration. In 2010 the Byron Bay High School will offer construction and hairdressing taught by TAFE teachers, and students from the Flexi School will be able to enrol.

Distance Education supplies a teacher four days a week to support the young people. Students are expected to be on site two or three days a week so the class never exceeds six or seven students at any one time, to maximise learning outcomes. An individual program is developed for each student who works at their own pace.

Achieving goals of the new school leaving age

'Aiming higher'. At the core of the Flexi School is the belief that young people who have not fitted well with traditional schooling can access alternatives to mainstream schooling, aim high and succeed.

Benefits

Students are achieving success, including through transition programs into the workplace or through accessing formal education in a less institutionalised setting.

success story

In 2009 a total of 17 students at Byron Flexi School will complete their School Certificate Examinations. These students would not have benefited from a traditional formal schooling and require a flexible community learning environment to successfully pursue their goals.



Interview with Ian Davies, Deputy Principal, Byron Bay High School

Ian, what are the origins of the school?

This is a school for students who don't really function in a mainstream school. Over the last 18 months, and in conjunction with Mullumbimby High School and Southern Cross Distance Education, we set up what we call a flexi school. It's for students who didn't cope at Byron Bay or a Mullumbimby. They go to a separate venue and the work is delivered through distance education but in a supportive environment.

What are some key drivers behind the flexi school innovation?

One of the things that we were concerned about at Byron Bay High School was the fact that there is a number, probably in every school, of students who don't function in a mainstream school environment. This may be because they have learning difficulties.

Or else I try to explain it like this: you're trying to put round students into square holes. Well what do you do with the hexagonal student who doesn't fit in anywhere? They are the students who may be talented or gifted in certain areas, but they don't function in a classroom of thirty students, they don't function in school structures in forty minute periods.

And so rather than have these students lost into the system where they end up being put into "the non-serious student expulsion" category, we tried to put something new together that will support these students in a different environment, giving them the best chance of success.

One of the issues at Byron Bay of course is that it is a tourist town with young people on the streets because it's a bit of a party town. Rather than have the students wandering the streets with nothing to do, we actually want to give them a chance of succeeding, obtaining some sort of accreditation so they can develop options for their future employment.

Is the structure of the flexi school the main innovation?

The Flexi School came out of an initiative developed through Byron Bay High School and Mullumbimby High School because we saw the needs of these students. We met with our school education director, Greg Cloak and with the representative from the Department, Peter Skaines, who is the VET coordinator for the Far North Coast. And we talked about how we can look at different school structures to support these students.

We then got TAFE involved and looked at how they could support the school. Because of the unique location of Byron Bay, the nearest TAFE colleges are at Kingscliff or Wollongbar, both at least an hour's drive each way. As there is no option to go to TAFE, we felt we had to bring the idea of the school into the community.

We met with the community over a twelve month planning period and then set up a structure to allow entry to a flexi school for students who were at risk at their school. They were interviewed and if we felt that it was appropriate because of their attendance, because of the learning difficulties, or because of the at risk nature of the students, they could be sent to an alternative venue.

Where is the school based and who funds it?

The venue is the Byron Youth Centre. It's called the YAC, Youth Activity Centre and we have a classroom structure there. It's very flexible. We initially had TAFE delivering a course two days a week and students who were over 15 would enrol through TAFE and they could access a TAFE teacher and they could do the Certificate of General and Vocational Education.

If they were under 15 they had to be referred again from their school and Distance Education supplied a teacher two days a week. The students do modules of work, working towards the School Certificate. In 2009 the funding for TAFE ran out and so at the beginning of this year Distance Education took on board the over 15 students as well and increased the support from that teacher to four days a week. They are funding him four days a week to work with all of the students progressing towards the School Certificate and eventually to the Higher School Certificate.

The distance education comes out of Southern Cross School, a kindergarten to Year 12 school based in Ballina and we have a close relationship with it.

I represent Byron Bay High School on the Management Committee and we make resources available to the Flexi School. If they want to do, say, science experiments, we supply microscopes. Sometimes they want support from a school counsellor. When they did their School Certificate this year they come to our school to use the facilities here. We try to support them in these practical ways.

What's best practice in the professional approach you're taking with the school?

The Flexi School is very supportive in putting in mentor programs, in putting welfare initiatives in place, for these at risk students. We acknowledge that there are students who in other schools who might just fall through the cracks, so to me the best practice is in engaging these students.

Last term one of our Year 10 students at Byron Bay High School had gone through a number of suspensions and normally we would have been looking at expulsion for his behaviour. We were able to meet with the family and said "Rather than go down this path, let's sign your child out of this school and apply through Distance Education to get him into the Flexi School". That same student will get his School Certificate this year. It's something we could not have guaranteed if he'd stayed at Byron Bay.

This is our second year and it's been a huge success.

How can this best practice by you or your colleagues assist in the achievement of any aspect of the three goals of the new school leaving age project?

Both the staff and the students have high expectations. We have students who now realise that in a different structured environment they are able to achieve success. They are able to meet the outcomes required for the School Certificate. And this year, we have 17 students who have gone to the Flexi School who will come to Byron Bay High School to sit for their School Certificate exams. When you look through the list of names there are students who we would have thought would not have achieved that success. So it's about working towards success for those students.

Supporting young people in identifying options and making decisions is a goal of the management committee, which has representatives from Youth Pathways, TAFE and the Department of Education and Training. We meet once a term and look at what support we can put in place for the young people. That has included the provision of mentoring programs through the local community.

Strengthening connections has resulted in the school having a really positive effect in the local community. People see it as a real positive thing. We have the full support of the local council, and the Mayor, Jen Barham, is on our side and promotes the school. Trevor Fletcher has been to see what we're doing. So we've managed to show that this is a real success story and that the students are meeting outcomes and they're gaining self-confidence. They're gaining the willingness to participate in a social environment.

What management of the innovation is required?

The biggest problem is always going to be money. Because the students are enrolled through Distance Education, they get the support of the Department of Education and Training. We're managing it quite successfully in that way.

The School also works because of the support of the Byron Shire Council, because they manage the Youth Activity Centre. They've given us the venue to be able to provide the School. So there is a lot of classic 'outside the square' thinking about how we can support people.

The deputy of distance education is David Cox and Richard Hazelwood-Ross is the deputy at Mullumbimby High School. They were successful in getting a \$50,000 grant through the National Bank to financially support the Flexi School. With that funding we will look at setting up another branch at Mullumbimby so that the students from there won't have to travel down into Byron Bay.

Our success is based on having representatives from a number of different agencies and sometimes thinking outside the square about how we can support the kids and what we can access. We initially had \$40,000 through TAFE and now we've got \$50,000 through the Schools First program.

What is a favourite highlight from the story about the Flexi School?

There's probably two. One is the fact that 17 students will get their School Certificate this year. That is a fantastic thing to be bragging about.

The other one is the student we'll call Ben. He was a student enrolled at Byron Bay High School who had a lot of anger issues. We convinced Ben and his father that Ben could be one of the first students involved in the Flexi School. Ben went on not only to get his School Certificate, or the equivalent through TAFE, but also he matured into a role model.

He now says that because he was given the opportunity to operate in a completely different environment, he was able again to realise that he could succeed at his own rate, he could achieve the outcomes, and he developed self-confidence. He then matured, he started looking at his anger management and he was a real success. And he's now gone to either Sydney or Melbourne to have a career down there. If had he stayed in a mainstream school, he would have been expelled because there was very little support we could give him. He's a number one story.

How has the Flexi School delivered benefits for the student and/or the school community?

Students are able to succeed in a less structured environment and the school community now has options for these at-risk students. We have a number of students in Year 9 who are not really coping with the school environment, so we have an opportunity to talk to their families and say "Well look, why don't we go down the Flexi School path where, by being in an environment where there might only be six or eight students working together at any one time, all of the stress of being in a rigorous school environment disappears and allows success?" So the Flexi School is giving us an opportunity to look at alternatives that could still lead to a success.

How are you ensuring the benefits are sustainable?

It's sustainable because it comes under the umbrella of the Department of Education. Distance Education can supply specialist teachers to go into do one-off lessons. We can ensure they're enrolled through the Board of Studies which guarantees them the accreditation of the School Certificate, and we're hoping some of next year's students will go through to do the Higher School Certificate.

Also, if a student goes to the Flexi School and turns around and is able to achieve success, in some cases there may be a transition program for that student back into the mainstream school. We have had several students who came back and did several subjects at the high school and other subjects down at the Flexi School. So there's that opportunity to re-integrate back into the mainstream environment.

What do you think are the main factors that have brought about the success of the Flexi School?

I think people want it to succeed; people who are willing to give a go to students who are a little bit different. People are willing to put in the extra yards, outside of normal hours. They're willing to try to bring different programs in to develop with the School.

The success is also because of the involvement of the Byron Youth Services, and the support of the Byron Shire Council and in particular the Mayor. It is because of the support from Byron Bay High School, Mullumbimby High School, Southern Cross Distance Education, the support of TAFE, the support of Youth Pathways and always the support of our SED in wanting to give us the resources as best he can, through the Department of Education, to see that it succeeds.

Are there other reasons for the success of the Byron Flexi School?

It is very low key and was implemented with small steps so that we could ensure that it would succeed. And we're showing people in the Department that this is a real success story. But we're not doing it with any fanfare. We get key people to come in and meet the kids who are sitting there with their tattoos and piercings. Then the visitors realise that they students are human beings who really should be given the opportunity to succeed.

Students are able to succeed in a less structured environment and the school community now has options for these at-risk students.