

ENTERPRISING RESPONSE TO DISADVANTAGE

Kempsey High School

INNOVATION SNAPSHOT

SUMMARY

- The Enterprise Centre is a section of Kempsey High School. It provides an alternative pathway for students to obtain further education, employability skills and access to jobs.
- The Centre's program includes the provision of a mentor, access to a school counsellor and a teacher's aide and regular contact with a transition team consisting of a careers adviser and transition adviser.

DRIVERS

- The Centre is a positive response, particularly by the school, to the classification of Kempsey Shire as one of the most disadvantaged areas of New South Wales.

FEATURES

- The Centre is on a separate campus and students have a flexible timetable.
- The learning could be described as flexible modular learning involving relevant subjects, individual learning plans and an emphasis on learning through the use of real life examples.

SUCCESS FACTORS

- The Centre is supported from within the school by the principal and staff and the Department and externally by the local community and industry.
- All stakeholders, including students, are committed to the students achieving success.

BENEFITS

- Students are more engaged in their learning and develop more skills and options.
- The community's perception of the value of the school is increased.

RELEVANCE TO THE NEW SCHOOL LEAVING AGE

- To enable them to succeed, students from the most disadvantaged areas of the State sometimes require access to flexible and modified curriculum and support systems.

Context for the innovation

Kempsey Shire is one of the most disadvantaged local government areas in NSW. The Vinson Report recognised contributing factors such as the low socio-economic conditions of the shire, entrenched welfare dependence and the multiple disadvantages of many families. Kempsey High School has approximately 25% indigenous students and is a Priority Action School.

The aim of the school's newly established Enterprise Centre is to facilitate improved levels of retention and engagement by students and to provide an alternative pathway for students to enable them to study for the Higher School Certificate and gain access to employment and further training. The Centre's overriding aim is student success.

Specifically, the Centre is designed to provide a flexible HSC study pattern that responds to student and employer needs. The needs of these students have influenced the formulation of the project and will continue to influence its evolution.

The Enterprise Centre provides worthwhile learning opportunities and teaching strategies often include the deconstruction, decoding and unpacking of assessment tasks to suit the student group. Keys to the success of the Centre are the relationships, guidance and support provided by the staff.

'Maximising' curriculum

There is a recommended but not compulsory curriculum, as individual student needs are always considered. This curriculum includes six units of Board of Studies courses, Senior Science, English (Standard), Maths (General), together with vocational courses (Primary Industries, Construction) and Work Studies. The students also have access to all subjects on the main campus of Kempsey High School, as required.

Supporting students

The target cohort is students at risk in the mainstream curriculum group. This may include students from the existing Stage 5 comprehensive model and other Year 10 students identified as at risk, using School Certificate data and anecdotal teacher observation. Students who have already commenced Stage 6 are identified in Year 11, using assessment result data and teacher observation. Other students who are welcome may be past students who wish to return or students from other schools who find the existing study pattern does not engage them.

Fundamental to this program is the need for the development of an effective teacher/student relationship. It is therefore ideal that students in the program be exposed to a minimum of teachers and their standards and expectations. The program allows for the potential for cross curriculum development to reinforce the learning that takes place. It incorporates timetable flexibility to cater for student needs better than a regular timetable with its constraints.

School structures

The Enterprise Centre involves the use of a customised school structure to differentiate the project from mainstream activities. For example, the Centre is on a separate campus and students have a flexible timetable. The learning could be described as flexible modular learning involving relevant subjects, individual learning plans and an emphasis on relevant learning through the use of real life examples.

The core teacher and the teacher's aide foster a relationship that encourages attendance and student interest while involving the monitoring of an individual's progress across all subjects. Accommodation and adjustments are made to promote student engagement and success.

Best practice

Best practice involves the provision of personalised learning and a focus by the core teacher on student success as the paramount goal. The flexibility available to the staff to do "things differently" and to do "different things" is important.

Integral to the operation of the Centre is the fostering of a supportive environment where students can relate well to staff. This is facilitated by the selection of staff who are empathetic to the student's needs, the provision of support through the teacher's aide and the making of appropriate modifications to the curriculum.

Achieving goals of the new school leaving age project

'Supporting strongly'. The Enterprise Centre and students benefit from a strong relationship with the transition team consisting of the careers adviser, transition adviser and mentor.

When students enter the program they are often disenfranchised from school and disconnected from staff. They soon realise that, with support, they can get on top of their challenges and staff are there to help students through. Commonly, students re-engage and start to consider what they might do when they successfully complete their HSC. The program provides an overall turning point in a student's life and education.

success stories

In the first intake of students, two students returned to school after lengthy breaks. One student had been away for 18 months and decided that with the supportive environment of the Enterprise Centre he would return and attempt his HSC.

The second student had left school six months previously and had obtained some casual work at a local menswear shop. The flexibility in timetabling available through the Enterprise Centre allowed him to continue to work and also attempt his HSC. The careers adviser was able to negotiate with the employer and the casual work evolved into a traineeship.



Benefits for the students and school community

The immediate benefits are that students appear to be happier and more engaged when they feel that someone is "on their side". In their schooling up to this point these same students may have built up a resistance to teacher intervention and turned off schooling.

The mid-term benefits for the student are learning more skills and being given the opportunity to complete their HSC, which in some families may be the first time someone has achieved that. They are also being better prepared for employment.

The Enterprise Centre provides another option for continuing students in the community of Kempsey and contributes to an improved public perception for Kempsey High School. Pivotal to the program is the building of partnerships between the community and industry.

Sustainable benefits

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The Centre has implemented systems for the ongoing monitoring and review of student progress. Core teaching allows for the monitoring of students at a greater level than is available in mainstream schooling. Additionally, the teacher aide liaises with mainstream teachers to ensure the completion of tasks.

The Centre has also implemented ongoing internal support systems including the coaching of individual students. Follow-up strategies are used if the student is not progressing. Students access the support systems at varying levels from requiring little more than an informal talk with a teacher through to requiring intervention by all support mechanisms available.

Interview with Kevin Sinclair, Coordinator, The Enterprise Centre, Kempsey High School

What are the drivers behind the innovation, the Enterprise Centre?

From within the school it is the leadership team. Our principal Mick Eller has a vision and he provides a resourcing structure that will make the Enterprise Centre work. The deputy of teaching and learning, Ms Nerida Mosely, has been encouraging the adjustment and modification of the curriculum to suit student needs. Mrs Denese Kennedy deals with student subject selection and other matters relating to the program.

Also from within the school, data is available about the students' academic progress. The philosophy of our school focuses heavily on social justice and fairness and equity for all students, no matter what their backgrounds.

A driver from outside the school is the Kempsey community itself. The Vinson Report recognised it as one of the bottom ten communities in New South Wales, using a range of factors that identify disadvantage. Overcoming these disadvantages is certainly a driver for what we're trying to do.

Personal experience is also a motivation. I didn't do as well at school as I would have liked. I was still fortunate enough to obtain an apprenticeship and work as a tradesperson for 25 years. I then chose to retrain as a school teacher. I now see a lot of the kids in the same situation as I was in Year 10 and Year 11, disengaging from mainstream learning.

What best describes the innovation?

The Centre starts with the need for student support. To do that we have professional learning for staff and we have to make the curriculum more accessible. Some students start off disengaged because they may not have been academically successful to this point, so there may be a combination of adjustments required. The Centre is not on the main campus of the High School. To make the project work we have a flexible timetable, flexible staffing and strong links to the community and business.

What are some examples of best practice professional approaches used by you or other staff?

Best practice is still evolving. The best practice that we have attained so far is in identifying student need. A huge amount of planning has gone into it and we are now at the implementation stage. Evaluation will commence as students move through the program.

The vision we have, the leadership team we have and the willingness to try different things to succeed are also best practice. The school also strongly supports professional development and learning.

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

We are definitely aiming higher and we have high expectations of students. Raising the school leaving age will increase the number of kids who are coming back to school because they're not allowed to leave, they haven't got a job and they haven't been able to access other training. The only thing they can do is return to school and often they'll just be putting in the time and it'll be our job to make sure they're engaged and attain a HSC and/or other worthwhile qualifications.

In terms of supporting strongly, we're assisting young people with the combination of adjustments we are making and the delivery of the lessons. After several months of TAFE training we now have a mentoring program about to commence and that should better support kids as well. We are also breaking down the experience into achievable pieces so the students can attain success. All students want to be successful.

In terms of strengthening connections, we have strong links to TAFE. If the students do a TAFE course outside our school we provide support for them back at the school. We are also building community partnerships with employers and with providers of other programs.

What management of the innovation is required to ensure success?

Change always brings about some resistance. So part of managing the Centre is about seeing the project through to the stage where people can see the benefits from it and it's accepted by each stakeholder in their own way. Stakeholders include students, parents, teaching staff, executive staff, and the leadership team. Everyone has to be on board and how you go about getting people on board is quite critical.

Professional learning needs to be ongoing. The only way it will be successful is if people keep abreast of technology and keep abreast of latest innovations in teaching

What is a favourite highlight from this story about innovation?

Seeing the kids engaged. One teacher who had a lot to do with these students right throughout this year actually commented to me that whenever she sees the students leaving the class or sees the students about the school, they all appear to be much happier. They're talking about work, they're talking about schoolwork, they're talking about assessment tasks, and they're talking about succeeding.

How has the innovation resulted in benefits for the student and or school community?

We are still in the infancy of this project but we hope that the short term benefits will be retaining students at school and those students getting their HSC. The long-term benefits for the community we hope will be to break the cycle of welfare dependency, providing an alternative but realistic pathway for students to obtain a worthwhile qualification in the HSC. Also that they are gaining work experience and hopefully employment when they leave school.

How are you or your staff ensuring the benefits for the student from the innovation are sustainable?

We've put a lot of things in place to ensure its sustainability. We identified in the planning process the elements that were going to make it work. For example, with staff we didn't put together a team that had all the same ideas. They're complementary to each other but in many ways they have differing views. You need this range of ideas and views in your team to keep the innovation energetic and hopefully sustainable. We planned how it was going to be resourced and that may be the biggest key factor in sustainability, as the Centre is expensive compared to a regular mainstream class.

What do you think are the main factors that have brought about success to date?

The main factor is each stakeholder taking responsibility for their role. The principal Mick Eller has taken on a huge responsibility to bring about a program like this. I also think you have to have a personal stake in it: I left a role in the school that I enjoyed to take on this role. So I am quite determined to ensure it is successful.

Another critical factor is identifying why students to that point haven't been successful. Okay? Is it for academic reasons? Do we need to address academic needs to help the individual succeed? Are there social reasons? Is there something happening at school? Is there something happening in their home life? Is there a social problem that we can address with mentoring or counselling?

My personal opinion is that the success of the project will be about the success of the student. It's not getting the best equipment or the best room in the school or the best window seat. It's about students succeeding, students staying at school, students completing their HSC, students gaining employment and becoming valuable citizens.

We start with slowly building the confidence of students and then we gradually work towards the students gaining independence.

We are also breaking down the experience into achievable pieces so the students can attain success. All students want to be successful.