The objectives of the Cessnock District Learning Centre Links program are to keep vulnerable young people connected with education and to re-engage disengaged students with mainstream schooling. In line with the Cessnock District Learning Centre motto of ‘Achieving Success’, its objectives are to build students’ sense of achievement, success and self-worth.

The Cessnock District Learning Centre Links program comes under the umbrella of the Cessnock District Learning Centre, an incorporated organisation established in 1995 by the Cessnock community with the specific purpose of supporting local ‘at risk’ students.

Cessnock District Learning Centre is administered by a Board of Management that includes community members and representatives from schools and youth organisations. Past chairs of the Board have been local mayors and, until recently, the Cessnock District Learning Centre patron was the Governor-General Sir Peter Cosgrove. The Board has strong partnerships with the local community and has developed professional, business and political links that enable it to successfully fund-raise, lobby for resources and access community and government grants.

The Cessnock District Learning Centre Links program is one of three programs provided by the Centre, currently located on the grounds of Cessnock TAFE. The other programs are the schools-funded Distance Education Tutorial Program, and the Department of Education and Communities (DEC) funded Return to School Centre. This close connection with local high schools and with other ‘at risk’ programs is fundamental to the success of the Links program.

TARGET GROUP: STUDENTS AT RISK

Years 7-10 students who have disengaged with learning and are at risk of leaving school early. The composition of the group tends to be girls and boys from Years 8 -10.
PROGRAM OVERVIEW

Two local secondary schools refer students to one or more of the three main strands of the Cessnock District Learning Centre Links program. These main strands are:

- Literacy and numeracy programs conducted on Mondays and Thursdays that cater for up to 12 students per day. This strand runs for forty weeks with flexible entry and exit.
- Outdoor Activity Training Schedule (OATS) which focuses on building protective factors through participation in outdoor activities such as bushwalking and rock climbing. Operating every Tuesday for twenty weeks, OATS consists of 120 hours of experiential learning for a maximum number of ten students. Two courses are conducted throughout the year.
- TAFE Outreach computer course. This semester-long course takes place on a Friday and targets sixteen Years 9-10 students who need additional career readiness support. Two courses are conducted throughout the year. Students who complete the course receive a Certificate 1 in Information Technology qualification.

Cessnock District Learning Centre Links program activities are customised to the needs of the individual learner, are conducted in a secure and structured learning environment and are delivered by educators who know and understand schools.

REFERRAL PROCESS

Each of the two secondary schools refers half of the allocated students per program strand. For example, of the 12 students catered for in the Monday group, six will come from one school and six will come from the second school. The same system is applied to the OATS and TAFE Outreach strands.

The referrals put forward by the deputy principals are made in collaboration with the school’s Learning Support team, Welfare team, year advisors, Home School Liaison Officer and the Student Support Officer.

PROGRAM AIM

- to provide academic, vocational, social and behavioural support so that students can better participate in the mainstream classroom and stay connected with their education.
The referral criteria tends to be broad taking into account a range of factors that can potentially alienate a student from school such as low levels of academic achievement, low self-esteem, victimisation, truancy, misbehaviour and social immaturity.

When the students have been identified, the deputies meet with the head teacher of the Centre to finalise the referrals and make recommendations about which students would be best placed in which strands.

The Cessnock District Learning Centre Links coordinator then meets with the parent and student to welcome them to the program, outlining program routines and expectations and developing a participation and pathways plan.

**PROGRAM FEATURES**

Cessnock District Learning Centre Links is a tightly structured and rigorous intervention program that supports the successful re-engagement with mainstream schooling of young people who are identified as possible 'early school leavers'. This aim is achieved within a supportive learning environment that:

- is familiar, safe and ordered
- sets clear and realistic academic and behavioural expectations that are continuously reinforced, and
- recognises and celebrates success.

Educational, vocational and behavioural outcomes are supported through Positive Behaviour for Learning (PBL), a program that promotes the values of ‘respect, responsibility and participation’ through a whole-of-school approach to behaviour and learning. PBL has been adopted by Cessnock District Learning Centre and the referring schools, providing a systemic framework for behaviour management. The clear articulation and consistency of application of PBL across all settings provides an effective teaching and learning environment where expectations, rewards and consequences are known and understood by all students and staff.

Goal-setting, reward incentives and celebrating successes, important features of PBL, are integrated into all strands of the Cessnock District Learning Centre Links program. Students attending the literacy/numeracy and TAFE Outreach strands receive a daily ‘target sheet’ listing ten desirable behaviours that are monitored throughout the term. Every day includes an allocated ‘reward time’ period, and on Monday a debrief session is held where daily points and the targeted behaviours are discussed.

Each term the ten students with the highest average scores are rewarded with a significant excursion such as a trip to Luna Park or a Sydney Harbour Bridge climb. More modest rewards are available to other students. However, if at any time during the term a student is suspended, their participation in any excursion is forfeited.

OATS is a developmentally-structured program that uses experiential learning in the context of an outdoor learning environment to address issues such as aggression, passivity and poor self concept. The OATS program instructor is local business owner and Cessnock District Learning Centre Links board member who volunteers his time, equipment and bus to run this strand.

As the ten students per semester strive to accomplish the challenging goals set for them, and by them, they learn leadership, teamwork and decision-making skills. They are helped to identify and replace self destructive behaviors with productive ones as they learn and practice the core values of respect and responsibility and celebrate their milestones.

The above PBL incentive-based approaches promote positive behaviour reinforcement and involve students in setting future directions and planning for achievement. The smaller class sizes and additional staffing available through Cessnock District Learning Centre Links funding also enhances student outcomes and program effectiveness as it enables individual student support to be better targeted and delivered.

Other strategies that contribute to program operations and student outcomes include:

- the provision of comprehensive documentation to students and parents
- the extensive use of Facebook to showcase student activities and successes and to communicate information about upcoming events, excursions and routine changes
- regular, and scheduled, communication between the Cessnock District Learning Centre Links and schools
- graduation ceremonies that recognise and celebrate student achievement. At the end of every semester, parents, teachers and senior executive members are invited to a morning tea where students are presented with their certificates and medals.

**BENEFITS, SUCCESSES AND OUTCOMES**

The benefits of the Cessnock District Learning Centre Links program have been many, significant and far-reaching. The program has provided a ‘safety net’ and a ‘safe haven’ for students who would most likely have left school early with few work skills and with little likelihood of gaining employment.

Staffed by education experts and highly qualified instructors who uphold clearly defined educational and behavioural expectations, the Links program has small class sizes and a student to staff ratio of no more than 8:1. This ‘buys’ time for staff to diagnose student’s learning and behaviour deficits, adapt the curriculum as necessary and focus on students’ needs, interests and abilities.

Smaller classrooms make it easier to create a ‘hands-on’ environment that caters for different learning styles, to successfully case manage students and to forge strong positive relationships. These aspects also encourage an environment where students are better supported to contribute to their own learning, make social adjustments, experience success and view themselves as capable of changing.

Promoting the values of ‘respect, responsibility and participation’ through a whole-of-school approach to behaviour and learning...
The Centre’s head teacher and the ‘Links to Learning’ coordinator and student learning support officer are attached to one of the referring school’s staffing entitlement. This arrangement has a number of advantages as it:

- encourages economies of scale in areas such as supervision, resourcing, expertise and professional development
- connects the Cessnock District Learning Centre Links team to the business of schools. Access to senior executive, year advisors and counsellors is made easier as is access to school data about student behaviour, attendance and welfare
- promotes open and flexible communication channels
- enhances the capacity of the program to monitor student progress during and after the intervention
- facilitates integrated service delivery, resource allocation and follow-up support resulting in better transitional outcomes for students participating in the CDLC Links program.

Physically locating the Cessnock District Learning Centre Links program at a site separate to the school setting is also a plus as it gives students much-needed ‘time-out’ from negative perceptions, influences and distractions. This safe, secure environment offers students a chance to ‘start again’.

There is a significant body of anecdotal and statistical information indicating that most students do ‘start again’ and re-engage with their education. Students, parents and community members readily attribute the Cessnock District Learning Centre Links program as the ‘last best chance’ that ‘saved’ many students from a life of unemployment or crime. They said that it was an appropriately-timed intervention that supported students to get ‘back on track’.

Local schools have supported the Cessnock District Learning Centre Links program for over eighteen years as the program is seen as a successful intervention strategy with schools reporting that:

- students returned to school more settled, better able to participate in classroom activities and cope with school rules and expectations
- students re-engaged with full-time schooling – and stayed at school - or else transitioned to work or further training
- previous program attendees showed considerable academic, behavioural and vocational improvements
- many past students still visit the schools expressing their gratitude for the difference the Links program has made to their lives.

Student outcomes include:

- over 80% of the fifty students in the program experienced improved educational, behavioural and social outcomes
- improvements in literacy, numeracy and vocational skills
- improvements in participation rates
- all students realised their next step plans.

The influential partnership between the Cessnock District Learning Centre Links program, the Cessnock District Learning Centre Board of Management and local schools, has given students at risk of not completing their schooling, their best chance to turn their lives around and achieve successful life outcomes.

As one principal stated, “The Cessnock District Learning Centre and the Links program are much, much more than the sum of their parts. The Cessnock District Learning Centre is an important, well-known and valued part of the Cessnock community. The Cessnock District Learning Centre Links gives students time to grow and become socially acceptable and responsible young people, rather than becoming long term economic liabilities.”

Aims of Cessnock District Learning Centre Links

- promote a positive learning for life
- create a stimulating, challenging and rewarding atmosphere in which we can work, learn and grow together
- encourage friendship and respect for the value of each person
- consider others at all times through respect and kindness
- do our best to identify and develop our special talents
- develop a sense of self-esteem and responsibility
- develop social and employability skills.
STUDENT SNAPSHOT A
Jackson, a 15 year-old student in Year 10, attended Cessnock District Learning Centre throughout 2013. Jackson, a student with mild intellectual disabilities, was beginning to truant classes and was causing arguments and fights. His lack of confidence and negative peer influences was making it difficult for him to engage with school activities and with classmates. At the start of the Outdoors Activity Training Scheme (OATS) program, Jackson was very nervous and needed a lot of encouragement to complete the activities. As the semester continued, Jackson began to grow in confidence, not just in his capacity to complete activities but also within himself. He learnt that, with the right attitude, he could confront challenging situations and achieve more than he would ever have thought possible.
Jackson is currently attending school regularly, engaged in his class work and making better choices in his home and school environments. As a result of the OATS program and the progress he has made, Jackson was awarded a local government grant to complete his Certificate II and III in Outdoors Recreation.
He is currently studying at TAFE and is gaining practical experience at Cessnock PCYC and in the Wattagans National Park.

STUDENT SNAPSHOT B
Tiana, a Year 10 student, attended the TAFE Outreach/CDLC partnership program that runs on a Friday. She was living in foster care and was very disengaged from her school, peers and community, had low self-esteem and no plans for herself post-school. Tiana’s isolation and disengagement from her natural family had infiltrated her entire life. She did not care about doing well and had no aspirations.
As Tiana experienced success in the program, she started to grow in confidence and began to build relationships with both staff and other. During individual goal setting sessions Tiana started to think about career paths, deciding upon the Hospitality industry as her first career choice.
Tiana stayed at school but started to apply for apprenticeships. Her home high school reported that she was completing her class work and Assessment Tasks, was more outgoing and had made friends. One day she arrived at the Centre so proud to be wearing her new chef uniform for a local 4 star restaurant in the vineyards. A year later, Tania decided to apply for the Australian Navy and, after attending two interviews, her application was successful.

Jackson is currently attending school regularly, engaged in his class work and making better choices in his home and school environments. As a result of the OATS program and the progress he has made...
# PROGRAM SNAPSHOT

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organisation:</th>
<th>Cessnock District Learning Community</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Program Name:</td>
<td>Cessnock District Learning Centre Links</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contact:</td>
<td>02 4991 4711</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Target group:</td>
<td>Students at Risk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Years 8-10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Program strands:</td>
<td>Literacy/numeracy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Outdoor Activity Training Schedule</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>TAFE Outreach course:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cert. I in Information Technology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Duration of program:</td>
<td>40 weeks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Days per week:</td>
<td>5 days</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Main referring points:</td>
<td>2 secondary schools</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Groups per year:</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. of students:</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>