Mr Jonathan O'Dea   MT14/1094
Chair
Public Accounts Committee
Legislative Assembly
Parliament of NSW
Macquarie Street
SYDNEY NSW 2000

Dear Mr O'Dea

I write in response to your letter of 26 June 2014, regarding the Auditor-General's Performance Audit Report No. 226: *The impact of the Raised School Leaving Age* (your reference: D14/15874).

The Department of Education and Communities has successfully addressed a number of the recommendations and is working towards the full implementation of all agreed actions by 2016.

The Department's response to the questions raised by the Public Accounts Committee is enclosed.

The Department remains committed to delivering quality service that meets the needs of students and their school communities, and to identifying and sharing new approaches by government schools to meet the needs of older students.

Yours sincerely
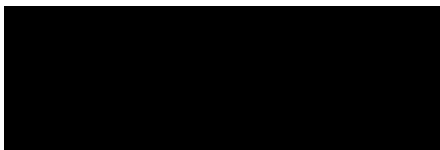
Dr Michele Bruniges AM
SECRETARY
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION AND COMMUNITIES
22 July 2014

NSW Department of Education & Communities – Office of the Secretary
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1. **The Committee noted that you have referred the Auditor-General's recommendation that the Department should collect data from school principals on student destinations after Year 10 and report annually on the alternate pathways chosen to your Project Control Group for consideration. The Committee considers that this recommendation is particularly important as it is designed to determine where students whether students (sic) who leave school before age 17 are participating in an approved activity, as required by the *Education Act 1990*. The Committee therefore requests the following information:**

    - **Has the Department formally accepted this recommendation?**

      The Department has not formally accepted this recommendation as it has no responsibility under the requirements of the *Education Act 1990* (the Act) to monitor students on all approved pathways, including those in full-time work. There is no power for a principal to monitor students who are no longer enrolled at their school.

      After completing Year 10 a student must remain at school, participate in approved education or training, or engage in full time work (or a combination of work and approved education or training). Where a student who has completed Year 10 provides evidence to the principal that they are taking up an option allowable under the *Education Act* other than school, they are free to leave school. Compliance with the requirements of the *Education Act* is then the responsibility of the student and his or her parents. It is not possible for the school to monitor this ongoing compliance.

      Where the student's circumstances change (for example by withdrawing from a TAFE course or losing employment), there is a three month period to re-establish compliance (for example by getting another job, or re-engaging with approved education or training). If this does not occur then the student would have to return to school.

      The Department has no powers or resources to determine whether people of compulsory school age in general are compliant with the Act if they are not enrolled in a school. This information is usually reported to it through other agencies or members of the community. This also applies to children who have not yet enrolled in school for the first time and for children who pursue education in the non-government sector, by home schooling or who satisfy compulsory schooling requirements other than by attending school.

      Schools keep local records of student attendance. The Department and the Board of Studies, Teaching and Educational Standards (BOSTES) keep records of school students enrolled in vocational education courses.

    - **What were the outcomes of the 2013 data collection referred to in the Department's submission?**

      The Department on behalf of the then NSW Board of Vocational Education and Training commissioned the University of Melbourne to study the expectations and destinations of NSW senior secondary students in 2013 across all sectors. The research looked at and evaluated a range of strategic drivers behind the

engagement, attainment and post school destinations of students in 250 government and non-government schools in NSW. The research involved:

- telephone interviews with 5,819 students entered in Years 10, 11 or 12 with the then Board of Studies in 2012
- telephone interviews with 2,500 of their parents
- an online survey of 3,100 teachers at the sampled schools.

The 2013 study updated and extended an earlier study undertaken in 2010.

The report on the study has been considered by the NSW Skills Board and presented at a policy forum of education, training and industry stakeholders. The report is expected to be published on the Skills Board website by the end of July.

- **Will a destinations survey be conducted in 2014?**

  Yes. The Department, through its Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation, has commissioned an independent research centre to conduct a survey in 2014 of the post-school destinations of 2013 senior secondary students.

- **Where will the results of future destinations surveys be published?**

  A report on the 2014 survey results is expected to be made available on the websites of the NSW Skills Board and the Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation.

2. **The Committee was pleased to hear that the Department implemented the Auditor-General's recommendation that it review the School Attendance Policy and related procedures. Can you forward a copy of the draft policy referred to in your submission? When will the amended policy be implemented?**

   The draft School Attendance Policy and related procedures are currently subject to consultation and changes are expected following stakeholder feedback.

   It is anticipated that the School Attendance Policy and related procedures will be made available to schools during Term 4, 2014 for implementation at the commencement of the 2015 school year. This will allow concurrent implementation with the new National Standards for Student Attendance Data Reporting, which will alter the way that student absences are reported from the beginning of 2015.

   A copy of the School Attendance Policy will be provided to the Committee after this consultation is completed and further changes, reflecting stakeholder feedback, are made.

3. **In your submission you explain that in 2013 the Department collected data relating to referrals to the Home School Liaison Program. For the benefit of the Committee, can you summarise the findings of this data collection?**

   In 2013 there were more than 5,000 cases on Home School Liaison Program caseload. Of these cases 33% were primary and 67% were secondary. A summary of 2013 referrals by both grade and age follows.
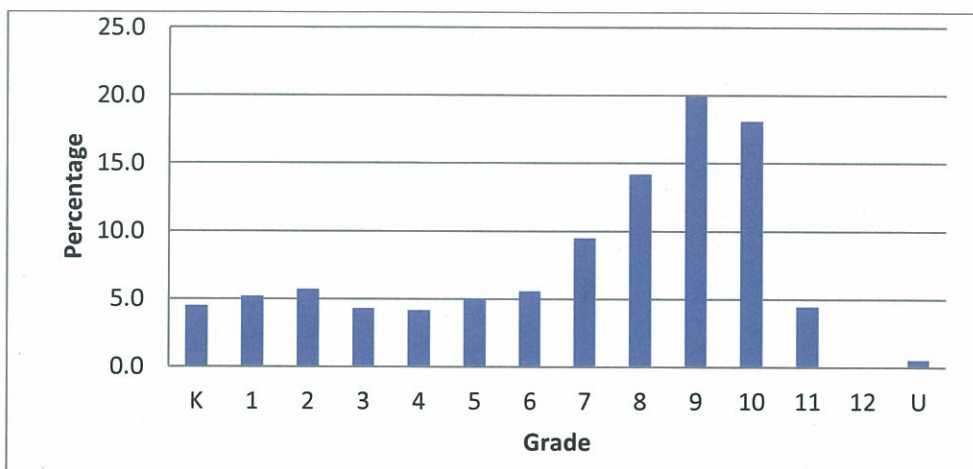
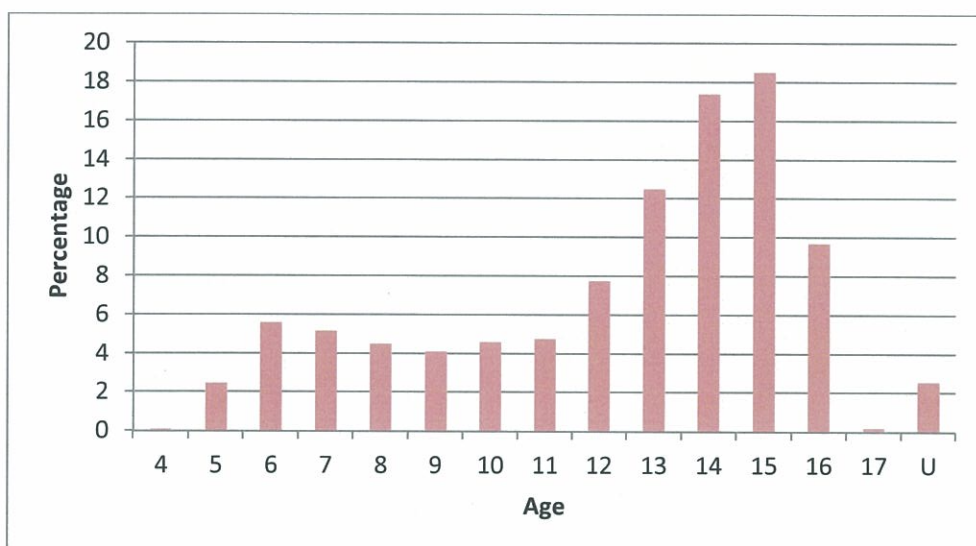Figure 1 Home School Liaison Cases 2013 by Grade – Percentage

Figure 2 Home School Liaison Cases 2013 by Age – Percentage

4. **The Committee noted that the Department's Project Control Group is coordinating the collection of best practice case studies in innovative approaches to engage students affected by the raised school leaving age. Can you provide the Committee with copies of these case studies?**

Case studies reflecting good practice have been published on the Department's internet site (at https://www.det.nsw.edu.au/vetinschools/school-leaving-age/index.html) and are being progressively updated. Some sample case studies are attached.

5. **In your submission, you explain that the Department investigated current alternative education programs and pathways and that the Project Control Group is using this data to develop alternate educational programs. Can you advise the timeline for implementation of these new programs/pathways?**

2013 – Distance education outreach programs
The Department has established distance education outreach programs to support students at risk of disengaging in learning at school through a form of field services that allow teachers to work directly and personally with students in a safe external environment such as a community building or civic centre. Where possible the programs

link with the identified local resources to build either pathways for employment or transition back to a full time educational program.

2014 – Coordinated case management of distance education students
The Department has in place coordinated case management and planning for students with significant behavioural issues who are enrolled in distance education and enhanced support to rural and remote locations through coordinated outreach partnerships.

2015 – The virtual secondary school
The virtual secondary school will allow students in rural and remote areas to remain in their local community and have access to a broad range of curriculum opportunities. The school will also offer students expanded career options through innovative programs and strengthened partnerships between schools, TAFE, universities, business and employers. The first students will enrol in 2015.

2014 and ongoing – other rural and remote initiatives
The establishment of a virtual secondary school is a key deliverable of *Rural and Remote Education – A blueprint for action.* Actions in the blueprint that expand options for secondary students and provide further support to keep them engaged with learning include:

1. **Progressively from 2015 – a state-wide network of 20 specialist centres**
   The establishment of a state-wide network of 20 specialist centres to bring together coordinated interagency health and wellbeing services to help schools better meet the needs of students.

   The first four centres will be in operation for the 2015 school year in Broken Hill, Dubbo, Tamworth and Wagga Wagga. Specialist centres have commenced consultation and planning with schools and key stakeholder groups.

2. **Progressively from 2015 – the establishment of Education Networks**
   Education Networks will link schools together to broaden curriculum options for students in rural and remote schools. The first ten education networks, to be operational by the start of the 2015 school year, have been identified and seed funding to support the development of networks has been allocated. A total of 78 rural, remote and metropolitan schools are involved.

3. **Progressively from 2015 – new programs being developed**
   New programs to be in place for the start of the 2015 school year are being developed to give students access to and engage them in science, mathematics and agriculture courses.

In addition, an increasing number of secondary schools are offering the new BOSTES courses in English Studies.

VET in schools plays a significant role in broadening the secondary curriculum, in engaging students in learning and in developing post school options. In 2013, 64,031 government school students were enrolled in a VET in schools course. This represents over 41% of all Years 11 and 12 students in NSW. VET in schools students attained a total of 20,260 VET qualifications in 2013. 2014 data is not yet available.

As at June 2014 there are 2,218 government school students enrolled in a school based traineeship and 354 government school students enrolled in a school based apprenticeship.

6. **In your submission you explain that the Links to Learning program is being reviewed in the context of Local Schools, Local Decisions. When will this review be completed?**

    The review into the Links to Learning program is due to be completed in October 2014.

7. **The Auditor-General recommended that the Department should examine student access to career advice and the quality and appropriateness of information and advice provided. In your submission, you explain that the Department is developing a survey to examine careers advice in schools. Can you explain how this survey will assess the quality and appropriateness of career information and advice provided to students?**

    The Department is developing a survey for government schools that will analyse career guidance, including its impact from the student's perspective.

    The 2013 Expectations and Destinations of NSW Senior Secondary Students survey collected information on students' access to a range of different types of career advice but not on students' perceptions of the quality, appropriateness of the career advice received, nor on whether such advice had any impact on their career planning, decision making, aspirations and expectations.

8. **The Committee noted that the Department has collected data from 270 schools which refer students to the Links to Learning Program. Can you tell the Committee what has been learned from this data?**

    The Links to Learning project is considered a valuable option for students at risk of disengaging and not completing schooling. The schools who responded indicated they could have referred more students (approximately 30% more) to their local programs, had there been the capacity to take on more students.

    The program guidelines need to be updated in the light of the raised school leaving age and other current reforms including *Rural and Remote – A blueprint for action*, *Every Student, Every School* and *Local Schools, Local Decisions*. Principals of schools in rural and remote locations identified the need for a more flexible approach in areas with few non-government groups to lead the program. Principals and deputy principals identified the need for the program to focus on students of compulsory school age and to include, where appropriate, younger students.

Examples of case studies of good practice by schools in engaging older students

These and other case studies are progressively updated and are available on the internet at https://www.det.nsw.edu.au/vetinschools/school-leaving-age/index.html.

Illawarra Senior College

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.

Kempsey High School

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.

Blakehurst High School

Blakehurst High School is a comprehensive co-educational secondary school located in the Sydney Region. It has approximately 1,100 students drawn from over ten local primary schools. 70% of students are from non-English speaking backgrounds and from over 50 different language backgrounds. The school's community is diverse, with at least 40% of students from relatively low socio-economic backgrounds.

Case study No. 1

MENTORS AND CASE MANAGERS

Illawarra Senior College

INNOVATION SNAPSHOT

• SUMMARY

- Illawarra Senior School enrols 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.

success story

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

'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 an 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.

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 we 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 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.

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.

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

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

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.

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.

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.

AN EDUCATION FOR EVERYONE

Blakehurst High School

INNOVATION SNAPSHOT

SUMMARY

- 70% per cent of students are from non-English speaking backgrounds and they flourish in a school that places priority on quality teaching and learning and positive relationships.

- No student moves into the senior school without a well mapped out pathway.

DRIVERS

- The driver is the basic philosophy of an education for everyone: the staff want to keep students at school, not drive them away.

- The local community includes a large proportion of people from a non-English speaking background who are supportive of education and the school's approach.

FEATURES

- All students benefit from a comprehensive system of student support including individual learning plans. Monitoring mechanisms effectively identify any students at risk.

- Professional learning includes the use of action learning to maintain a continual cycle of reflection on and improvement of professional practice.

SUCCESS FACTORS

- A culture of getting students ready for real life supports the continuing successful learning of 15-19 year olds.

- That culture is underpinned by teacher professional learning and leadership and parent and community engagement in the school.

BENEFITS

- Students demonstrate high levels of engagement with the school and satisfaction with learning.

- Parents convey similar levels of satisfaction with the high expectations staff have of the students.

RELEVANCE TO NEW SCHOOL LEAVING AGE

- The staff act on their belief that students will only stay at school and engage in learning when that learning is relevant, processes and relationships are supportive, and students can see a purpose for all that they do.

- The high student retention rates show that this philosophy and the approaches are achievable.

Context for the innovation

Blakehurst High School (BHS) is a comprehensive co-educational secondary school located in the Sydney Region. It has approximately 1,100 students drawn from over ten local primary schools. 70% per cent of students are from non-English speaking backgrounds and from over 50 different language backgrounds. The school's community is diverse with at least 40% of students from relatively low socio-economic backgrounds.

The school is known for its harmonious internal community and its focus on quality teaching and learning. Positive relationships between student/student, staff/student, staff/staff and school/families are the basis for all activities.

'Maximising' curriculum

The staff believe that the breadth of curriculum is important as students require enough flexibility to make choices on the basis of their interests and talents. The school attempts to ensure that courses with small candidatures are supported in order to ensure a broad curriculum. As part of that broad curriculum, school based VET and TVET meet the needs of over 50% of all senior students.

Trained senior student mentors are used to assist junior students at risk and peer support training is provided for Year 9/10 students for supporting Year 7 students.

In the BHS SLAM (Senior Learning And Management) study and learning skills program, teachers convey high expectations to students and maintain a focus on quality teaching and personal mentoring of students deemed at risk of not succeeding in Years 11 and 12.

Student support

Training is provided for all teachers in the areas of Choice Theory and Restorative Justice techniques, which emphasise that responsibility lies with students and relationships are ideally developed based on mutual respect and power with rather than power over.

Students are given leadership roles, for instance as peer mentors and mediators, and individual learning plans exist for students receiving funding support and those students in Years 10-12 deemed to be at risk of not completing Year 12 whether or not they are funded. These plans include individual goals, allocation of responsibilities and timelines for action. Selected students may be engaged in the senior years in a school transition to employment program which may include weekly work experience and school designed 'real life' learning programs as well as HSC courses.

An example of one of the many programs of support for junior students is called Learning on Track, an intensive four-week program for students whose NAPLAN results indicate the need for literacy and numeracy interventions. Another program is Chinchen, a one-on-one reading program targeted at 13-15 year olds (Year 7 and Year 8) achieving in the low bands of NAPLAN. And Reading Repairer is a one-on-one reading program targeted at 15 -17 year olds in Year 9 and Year 10 who achieve in the low bands of NAPLAN.

Professional learning

The school has formed several "Teacher Leaders" groups over the past four years which take an action learning approach including collaborative peer support. These mainly young teachers then engage in project-based studies which benefit all staff and of course ultimately student learning.

The major school evaluation for 2009 was teaching and learning with an emphasis on the importance of professional development of staff. In 2009 all teachers were members of teaching teams which analysed practice, supported change and engaged in professional dialogue.

A Professional Learning Schedule each year is designed by the professional learning team directly from staff evaluation of previous learning and the school's targets. It details the topics for staff learning workshops which take place at staff meeting time every fortnight after school.

School structures

The trialling of a changed timetable for senior students, involving an early start and early finish, and allowing better access to TAFE, employment, sport, study and other commitments, was introduced in 2005 and continues to be rated highly by students.

The school has a Homework Centre two afternoons per week and over 30% of the school attended during 2005- 2009. The centre is administered by the Business Services students as part of their learning. Students attending regularly rate the centre highly and over 90% report that their engagement with learning has improved since using the Centre.

Student Services Network documentation in 2009 indicates that the learning support team is the key structure to support students at risk. The Student Services Network flowchart clearly identifies a separation between student welfare and student discipline. Discipline is the domain of the head teachers.

Roles and responsibilities are explicitly documented for year advisers, mentors, supervisors, junior and senior welfare co-ordinators. Roles are also explained in the Student Information Booklet.

Best practice

The Senior Student Support Program (SSSP) is designed to monitor and support the progress of students in the senior school. It includes a student contract for improvement, interviews, mentoring and consultation with parents and is coordinated by the deputy principal learning/curriculum.

The students not completing HSC 'do not just drop out,' but continue with training and are assisted by the school's careers and transition programs. They have a range of options in the school setting.

success story

Blakehurst High School has developed a culture which engages its students, values student success and accepts that success is a relative concept. This requires a critical mass of those staff members who 'care for kids', demonstrate their belief in their students and have the flexibility of thought to design or source courses of study which deliver on the expectations of success for individual students.

Student K's parent said of teacher Mrs X: "Mrs X is willing to give any child a go; she sees the good in the kids".

The school designs individual transition plans for all students at risk, with a focus on retaining and retraining, and partnerships are formed with TAFE and private colleges, for instance to allow students to complete pre-apprenticeship courses.

The school designed roles of junior and senior coordinators work with other members of the learning support team to monitor and support these students in transition. The roles have executive team period allowances and each coordinator is a member of the executive team although they do not have executive salary. The fact that these roles are created and supported are an indicator of the importance placed on support structures and allowing no student to 'fall through the net'.

Achieving goals of the new school leaving age project

'Aiming higher'. Planning for the future is part of any student's education and students need to set and have clear expectations of which direction they will take. The BHS Transition program involves students, family and external partnerships working together in the planning process to assist transition and prepare students for adult life.

The transition plans depends on the individual student's needs and interests. The plans help students with everything from work to further education and/or training. A student can get help to progress to university, TAFE or work. Transition plans also assist students to become successful members of the community.

'Supporting strongly'. The learning support team is a whole-school planning and support mechanism. Its purpose is to address the learning needs of students through the co-ordination, development, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of educational programs.

A prime function of the learning support team is to ensure that the needs of students in the school are being met through vocational learning and career development, as well through pastoral care and youth development. The learning support team acts as a filter to ensure each child referred receives the support they most need. Referrals are made by classroom teachers, head teachers and parents.

'Strengthening connections'. The school's website provides the Blakehurst community with up-to-date information. The school uses the Moodle learning management system to provide 24/7 access to resources and support for all its students.

Parents and community are welcomed into the school through a range of programs and this strengthens connections to the workplace and life after school.

Benefits for students

Benefits for students of the BHS approach include the following: retention rates are increased; student options are increased; students experience different settings and develop work appropriate skills; students are able to choose the best pathway, for example, to university, TAFE or work; students are given the opportunity to learn about their skills and strengths; and students feel successful and respected so they can go on to form meaningful relationships with each other and value staying at school.

The BHS transition process allows parents, teachers and external agencies to work together to make possible the above opportunities.

Sustainable benefits

To ensure such benefits are sustainable, BHS promotes a supportive culture that includes a strong emphasis on professional learning of staff committed to quality teaching and learning, a whole school commitment to student well-being, a focus on the middle school years, a strong emphasis on technology and a team-based approach by the staff.

The leadership sets the tone for the school and lays out the school's expectations of its students. Leaders model the importance of quality relationships. They also focus on quality teaching and the importance of making a difference in students' lives. And leaders ensure that leadership is devolved and self-sustaining

Interview with Judith Thompson (JT), Principal and Maria Atwell (MA), Head Teacher, Teaching and Learning

What are some key drivers of innovation within the school?

JT: Within the school the driver is our basic philosophy of an education for everyone: we want to keep students here, not drive them away. Our demographics are such that we have a large non-English speaking background component and our parents are by and large pretty supportive of education.

MA: The culture is the driving force. We have a culture here of wanting to retain the students and we're training them and getting them ready for real life. That culture is very much embedded and everyone shares that passion. It's no one person; it's teamwork.

JT: I don't think any innovation on its own can ever effect the sort of change that you want. It's not one innovation; many innovations add up to a culture of expectation.

We've gone from a culture where, in my first years here, the teachers and head teachers at executive level would say "Why is this kid at school? We ought to get rid of him." The culture was that the HSC was only for academic achievers. But people like Maria and myself and a whole core group of staff believe that kids should have six years of schooling.

MA: We work closely with external organisations. We work with TAFE of course and a private training company so if a child is interested in, say, doing panel beating Mrs Thompson allows them to go out of the school for the five or six weeks to do the course and come back. And the outcomes from that course are considered within their assessment.

JT: The parents certainly support education. And that might not always be the case in lower socio-economic areas. They have the belief that all students deserve to be at school for six years.

How do you maximise the curriculum or use school structures or professional learning to inform your innovation?

JT: The school structures maximise curriculum. But I think professional learning is the key. That is what has changed culture. We have an effective professional learning team with plans that are fully evaluated each semester.

What are some examples of best practice professional approaches used by the staff?

JT: Our transition program for kids at risk is an example of best practice.

Our emphasis has been keeping the quality teaching framework to the fore and getting teachers into other teacher's classrooms. It's an open classroom approach. For some years now a lot of our Tuesday afternoon staff workshops have been on differentiating the curriculum.

I didn't want people to get the idea that if you stick a program in like our school traineeships and employment program in the senior school for example, it works on its own. Nothing works unless you've got a culture supporting all of that. And it starts in Year 7, not Year 11 or 12.

The number one key thing that employers look for is interpersonal skills. If you can't develop those you won't succeed. It's the relationships that kids develop with each other within the school, that staff develop with each other, that develop those skills. No innovation is going to work unless you've got that trust and respect among the staff.

How do the goals of the new school leaving age project fit with your approach, for example, high expectations?

JT: High expectations are a cultural thing. I interview every Year 10 student and their parents at this time of the year, and that's as much about relationship building as it is about checking their subjects and all of that work. That comes at the end of a very long and well-structured Year 10 subject selection process.

What I found when I began here 13 years ago was that, if you want to look at worst practice, the kids were given out sheets. They ticked the boxes, the sheets came back and that was it. And I found in that first year that I was here that close to 40% of the kids had no concept of what the HSC meant, no idea why they were here, and there was no value placed on it by them or their parents. So one of the things I decided was that I would interview every Year 10 kid and their parents.

We want to keep students here, not drive them away.

But now people like Maria and the learning support team and her support staff have a really strongly structured subject selection process that begins in July and ends in November. So, there are no kids going into the senior school who don't have a well mapped out pathway. And few of them leave: we'll have about half a dozen going off to do apprenticeships next year, out of 200. And they've had that pathway designed with them and for them, with the support of our transition program and their parents and our careers people.

What management of innovation is required to ensure success?

JT: A strong executive. All the teachers but particularly the executive are encouraged to spend a lot of time reflecting and evaluating. Evaluation is critical: we don't do anything without evaluating it.

Also, encouraging a density of leadership across the school is critical for managing anything, because all of this activity involves just about every member of staff at one time or another.

What are some of the other benefits of your approach?

JT: The major benefit is that we've got kids here, particularly in Years 10-12, who are engaged and who see the relevance of their learning. And I can't think of anybody who ever leaves the school without some support for their next step. The focus in the junior years is of course getting all students to the point at which they see the relevance of their learning, feel supported and ultimately engage with their senior studies.

Are these benefits sustainable?

JT: I could walk away from here and Maria as well as a significant core group of staff, both executive and non executive, could confidently continue the work. The processes and structures as well as beliefs and values have been put in place so that teams evolve. Developing teams keeps things sustainable. And if one person does go, the team is still there functioning and continually training and bringing other people on board. That team focus makes the work sustainable.