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**PROJECT *REAL* (RE-ENGAGEMENT IN EDUCATION AND LEARNING)**

**WHY?**

It is no secret that the issue of school disengagement is becoming more pronounced and that is happening earlier. For instance, just in March 2016, the Victorian Government announced the launch of Navigator, a two-year pilot program to support young people aged 12-17 years who are not connected to schools at all or at risk of disengaging.

In our local community the evidence indicates that this issue is prevalent with an even younger cohort of kids who, in a large majority of cases, are the victims of significant abuse, neglect or trauma.

Among the many participants attending our after school programs, we can count more than twenty children under 12 who, in the last twelve months, have spent extended periods of time away from school either as a result of absenteeism, suspensions or expulsions. Obviously schools do not expel or suspend schools lightly, but many of these children are already involved in highly problematic behaviours such as violence and aggression, vandalism, extreme risk taking, small theft and, in some cases, substance abuse.

Through individual work with their families, our staff have observed several of the following factors affecting their developmental history:

- Early exposure / modelling of violence and intimidation.

- Imprisonment of family members.

- Parental alcohol and substance abuse.

- Early sexualisation.

- Inappropriate parental role modelling (unhealthy habits, racism, etc.).

- Family dislocation / breakdown.

Despite this vulnerability and their high risk of disengagement from education and community supports, many of these children attend our programs religiously. It is clear that with the current level of resources we are missing an opportunity to turn this positive engagement into tangible outcomes in relation to these children’s social, emotional and physical development.

There is an increasing body of research investigating the conditions leading people to coming into contact with the criminal justice system. For instance, a report produced in 2007 by Queensland’s Crime and Misconduct Commission found, overwhelmingly, that “respondents had experienced high rates of family trauma and turmoil including chaotic family experiences, parental alcohol and drug abuse” and domestic violence while growing up. Two thirds of all respondents had endured childhoods characterised by what the commission identified as “extreme neglect”. These offenders suffered child sexual abuse at rates much higher than average. In other words, these offenders were themselves victims of criminal behaviour – often sustained criminal behaviour – well before they began committing crimes themselves.

As is clear from the *Victorian Ombudsman’s Investigation into the rehabilitation and reintegration of prisoners in Victoria* (2015), there is a clear link between disadvantage, crime and imprisonment. Moreover, prison experience is often multigenerational: the children of prisoners are six times more likely to be imprisoned than their peers.

Our conclusion from a review of existing evidence and from our daily experience is that for the majority of offenders, the path to adult criminality meanders inexorably through various markers of disadvantage. Time and time again, we have also witnessed that for many young people, some early worrying signs along this path include school disengagement and drop-out, use of illicit drugs and small crime. The project partners believe that the system is severely lacking in preventive responses to this problem.

For many children their school is the only source of consistently positive role models and interactions. However due to a complexity of factors, schools do not seem to be well equipped to cope with high numbers of children whose family circumstances can be described by the situations listed above. Under the current state of affairs we have witnessed the following problems:

* Extended periods of absence from school: Whether they are caused by truancy or by repeated suspensions, these periods are extremely detrimental for children, increasing their detachment from the academic environment. Often these children spend long periods of time unsupervised or exposed to the kind of traumatic circumstances which caused their challenging behaviours in the first place. Suspensions can also be interpreted as a reward for unacceptable behaviours for children whose school experience is not positive.
* Expulsions: While we understand the pressure that many local schools are under, and the difficulties in balancing the individual requirements of these vulnerable students against the need to preserve the learning environment for other students, we believe that, particularly in the case of primary students, the negative consequences of expulsions almost always outweigh their advantages when we consider the community as a whole.

**WHAT?**

In order to break this cycle we propose to develop an additional tool for schools to respond to extremely challenging behaviours and persistent absenteeism, in the form of an educational setting for children aged between 9 and 12 based at BGCS. Project *REAL* will be delivered as a partnership between BGCS, the Gateway School, Outer Urban Projects, Dianella Health, the Department of Education and Training and nine local primary schools[[1]](#footnote-1), with the ultimate goal of re-engaging these students with their respective schools.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| PARTNER | ROLE | SPECIFIC CONTRIBUTIONS |
| BGCS | Lead agency | Project management  Employment of project staff  Financial contribution towards facilities  Facilitation of governance group  Principal role in fundraising |
| The Gateway School | Lead partner | Daily participation in delivery  Provision of strategic advice and co-development of educational philosophy  Financial contribution towards facilities  Sharing of teaching and learning resources  Participation in governance group |
| Outer Urban Projects | Delivery partner | Weekly Participation in delivery  Participation in governance group  Provision of strategic advice about youth engagement and arts and performance |
| Dianella Health | Delivery partner | Weekly participation in delivery (counselling and wellbeing component)  Participation in governance group  Provision of strategic advice about family engagement, health and wellbeing |
| Department of Education and Training | Non-delivery partner | Participation in governance group  Provision of strategic advice about legal aspects and implications, delivery models, best practice re-engagement programs  Consultative support in the form of professional development (e.g. trauma sensitive practice) |
| Participating schools | Delivery partners | Referral of participants  Active participation in student’s re-engagement journey  Commitment to accepting students on completion of the program  Co-development of educational philosophy, specifically around inclusive behaviour management |

Table 1: Roles and contributions of project partners

Project *REAL* will employ a multi-disciplinary team to work with these young people using a therapeutic framework to achieve the following objectives:

* Increase the child’s sense of self-esteem and agency.
* Establish corrective relational experiences.
* Apply the latest evidence to repair neurobiological damage caused by traumatic experiences.
* Maintain and improve connections with school and circle of friends.
* Help participants to develop constructive interests and hobbies.
* Build a body of knowledge that can help build our capacity to effectively work with severely disengaged youth.

Under the proposed project, schools working with a student showing clear signs of disengagement would be able to refer the student to Project REAL, which would be marketed as a “leadership program”. Depending on the severity of the student’s circumstances, an individual plan would be developed in consultation with the student, the parents and the school.

The plan would involve a combination of work at the BGCS site with weekly sessions at the school and some external activities such as excursions and adventure-based activities, always with the objective of full re-engagement after a maximum of two terms.

In order to maximise its chances of success, the project will work not only with the student but also with their social context (e.g. family environment, social connections, access to relevant services). Project REAL will deploy a multi-disciplinary team (teacher, psychologist, family worker) to support each participant on their re-engagement journey.

Recognising the circumstances of potential project participants, this multi-disciplinary team will work collaboratively with students, providing transparent boundaries and age-appropriate choices in order to provide an environment that encourages good decisions and minimises the need to get into arguments and to be punitive or coercive.

Critical to the project implementation will be a high level of participation by their enrolling school (e.g. weekly contact between BGCS and school to monitor an individual’s progress and work toward transition back into school, reward mechanisms to recognise student’s achievements, training and professional development for a selected group of teachers, etc.)

In fact, due to the relatively small size of the proposed alternative education setting (maximum capacity: 12 students), we believe that one of the largest impact points for the project will be the opportunity to build capacity among all partner schools to develop better strategies to respond to children with unique learning needs who express these through challenging behaviours. Providing advice to schools to develop individualised strategies will be an important component of the project, as will be the development of professional development opportunities for local teachers.

**PROJECT COMPONENTS**

For several months, the team in charge of designing Project REAL has been in pursuit of strategies, approaches and tools that can help us address the complex needs of students struggling in classrooms due their histories of trauma from abuse, neglect, family violence or family home destabilisation.

While additional work will have to be carried out in order to fully develop our pedagogical approach and operational model, the following three elements will underpin all work carried out as part of Project REAL.

Trauma Informed Positive Education (TIPE)

This impressive approach, developed by Tom Brunzell, Helen Stokes and Lea Waters among others, argues that effective interventions with trauma affected students must combine the following three domains of learning:

* Repairing regulatory abilities: placing focus on the stored trauma within the student’s body using strategies for regulation.
* Repairing disrupted attachment: boosting the relational core of a teacher-student relationship which then serves as a safe conduit to learning.
* Increasing psychological resources: this promotes growth in character and wellbeing.

Furthermore, the TIPE paradigm suggests that these three domains support each other via synergistic interactions which create upward spirals.

Our design team is highly appreciative of this model, which emphasises the importance of maintaining rigorous attention towards the healing of developmental deficits, while simultaneously providing pathways towards psychological growth.

Family / Parental Engagement

Often the classroom can be the most stable and consistent location in a trauma-affected student’s life. As a result of this, it is clear that it can act as an ideal milieu to meet complex intervention needs. However these interventions need to be mindful of a basic calculation: while students spend 30 hours a week at school, they have home as their basis for the remaining 138 hours.

Based on our experience working with children and families from extremely disadvantaged backgrounds, we argue that there can never be a fully effective intervention if we fail to address the family dynamics that may be at the root of the students challenging behaviours.

On many occasions working with parents, carers or other family members can be extremely difficult and challenging, but we believe that in almost all situations, steps can be taken that positively influence the students wellbeing and their interaction with school. Parental engagement will be integrated into the operations of Project REAL in the following ways:

* The intake process will involve at least two meetings with a student’s parents / carers. One visit to our educational facilities and one home visit. During this process, opportunities will be provided for the student and the family members to provide their perspective on how the student’s educational engagement can improve.
* Parents and family members will automatically be eligible for individual support through the BGCS Client Support Service.
* Parents and family members will be invited to regularly take part in certain Project REAL activities (e.g. sports, arts, excursions), as a way to increase their involvement in their children’s education.
* Parents and family members will be offered access to parenting support initiatives, such as the Tuning into Teens program offered by Dianella Health.
* Project REAL will organise regular group activities for all parents in the program (e.g. monthly parent lunches).
* Parents will be invited quarterly to a parent teacher interview mostly aimed at sharing the student’s achievements during the term.

Community development / whole of community approach

This component takes into consideration two important ideas:

* The project’s most significant achievement will be its ability to build the capacity of all participating schools to be more inclusive. In order for this to happen, Project REAL has been designed from the outset as an alliance between schools and community organisations. Supported by the Department of Education and Training, this alliance will continue to foster professional development and peer review processes that ultimately result in tangible outcomes, such as a measurable reduction in expulsions and suspensions for participating schools over time.
* Students with complex needs are often supported by several agencies that are not always effective at communicating and coordinating their work (e.g. Child Protection, Victoria Police, Community Service Organisations, etc). Project REAL will take a leading role in coordinating the work of agencies working with its students, and will also ensure that systemic issues encountered on a regular basis can be dealt with at an advocacy / strategic level.

**PROPOSED TIMETABLE**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | MONDAY | TUESDAY | WEDNESDAY | THURSDAY | FRIDAY |
| 9:15-11:15 | Group learning  (TL, TA) | Small Groups  (TL, TA, YW, 2VOL) | Group learning  (TL, TA) | Excursion (e.g. swimming, nature walk)  (TL, YW, 1VOL) | Activities based at each student’s school, including music and performance activities with opportunities for Project REAL participants to play leadership role.  (2MF, YW) |
| 11:15-11:30 | Morning Break  (TL, TA) | Morning Break  (TA, YW) | Morning Break  (TL, TA) | Morning break  (1T,YW) |
| 11:30-12:15 | Individual work / counselling session  (CP, TA, 3VOL) | Individual work / counselling session  (CP, TL, 3VOL) | Individual work / counselling session  (CP, TL, 3VOL) | Art Therapy  (AT, YW) |
| 12:15-12:45 | Lunch  (TL, 1YW) | Lunch  (TA, 1YW) | Lunch  (TL, TA) | Lunch  (TL, YW) |
| 12:45-2:15 | Sport and recreation  (TA, 1YW, 1VOL) | Group learning  (TL, TA) | Sport recreation  (1F, TA, 1VOL) | Music and performance  (2MF, TL, VOL) |
| 2:15-3:15 | Small groups  (TA, TL, YW, 2VOL) | Sport and recreation  (TL, 1YW, 1VOL) | Small groups  (TL, TA, 3 VOL) | Week reflection  (TL, 2VOL) |

Table 2: Proposed timetable for Project REAL, including staffing allocation for each activity (in brackets)

**Estimated staffing requirements (per week):**

Leading teacher (TL): 38 hours, including team meetings, parent liaison, etc.

Assisting teacher (TA): 30 hours, including team meetings, parent liaison, etc.

Youth / Family Worker (YW): 30 hours, including team meetings, parent liaison, etc.

Child psychologist (CP): 3 hours

Art Therapist (AT): 1.5 hours

Music and performance facilitators (MF): 4 hours (X2)

Client support / additional staff: 8 hours

**PROJECT BUDGET**

**ESTIMATED INCOME (YEAR 1)**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| ORGANISATION | INCOME | NOTES |
| Helen MacPherson Smith Trust | $45,000 | Confirmed funding for 2 years ($90,000) |
| The Gateway School | $32,500 | Confirmed, contribution towards educational facilities |
| Participating schools | $45,000 | Conservative estimate of enrolment fees |
| Roxburgh College | $42,500 | Confirmed, contribution towards teaching staff |
| Perpetual | $70,000 | Confirmed funding for Year 1 |
| Other philanthropic organisations | $160,000 |  |
| Federal government (Department of Employment, Department of Infrastructure and Regional Development) | $30,000 | Confirmed contribution towards educational facilities, labour for construction work |
| BGCS | $50,000 | Confirmed, contribution towards educational facilities, project management, fundraising, administration |
| Total | **$475,000** |  |

Table 3: Estimated income for Year 1 - Project REAL

**ESTIMATED EXPENDITURE (YEAR 1)**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| EXPENDITURE ITEM | COST | NOTES |
| Leading teacher wages | $87,853 | 38 hrs per week @ $39 per hour, 52 weeks (plus on-costs) |
| Assisting teacher wages | $65,800 | 30 hrs per week @ $37 per hour, 52 weeks (plus on-costs) |
| Family worker wages | $62,244 | 30 hrs per week @ $35 per hour, 52 weeks (plus on-costs) |
| Sport, recreation and music facilitators | $22,500 | 8 hrs per week @ average cost of $70 per hour, 40 weeks |
| Art therapist | $6,000 | 3 hours per week @ $50 per hour, 40 weeks |
| Materials and equipment | $80,000 | Including purchase and fitout of new portable classroom |
| Transport | $15,000 | Mini-bus, fuel, insurance, maintenance |
| Catering | $6,000 | $110 per week, 40 weeks |
| Administration | $42,500 | Approximately 9% of total costs |
| Additional staff (e.g. client support, excursions, sick leave provision) | $16,600 | 8 hours per week, 52 weeks, @35 per hour (plus on-costs) |
| Independent evaluation | $40,000 | Based on conversations with BSL |
| Venue rental | $25,000 | Loss of venue hire income resulting from dedicating facilities to Project REAL |
| Total | **$469,497** |  |

Table 4: Estimated expenditure for Year 1 - Project REAL

**ESTIMATED INCOME (YEARS 2-5)**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| ORGANISATION | YEAR 2 | YEAR 3 | YEAR 4 | YEAR 5 | NOTES |
| Helen MacPherson Smith Trust | $45,000 |  |  |  | Confirmed funding for 2 years ($90,000) |
| Other philanthropic organisations | $165,000 | $75,000 | $50,000 | $40,000 |  |
| Service fees (participating schools) | $88,000 | $126,000 | $132,300 | $138,915 | Conservative estimate of enrolment fees. After Year 3, increase intake to 15 students per semester. 5% increase in fees per year. |
| Specialist advice and consultancy services | $10,000 | $15,000 | $18,000 | $20,000 | Providing training and advice to schools in relation to inclusive behaviour management strategies |
| Victorian Government (Dept of Justice, Dept of Education and Training) |  | $130,000 | $140,000 | $150,000 |  |
| Total | **$308,000** | **$346,000** | **$340,300** | **$348,915** | Use surplus in Year 1 to cover small deficit in Year 2. Small surplus in Year 4 for Year 5 evaluation. |

Table 5: Estimated income for Years 2-5 - Project REAL

**ESTIMATED EXPENDITURE (YEARS 2-5)**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| EXPENDITURE ITEM | YEAR 2 | YEAR 3 | YEAR 4 | YEAR 5 | NOTES |
| Leading teacher wages | $89,610 | $91,402 | $93,230 | $95,094 | 2% salary increase per year |
| Assisting teacher wages | $67,116 | $68,458 | $69,827 | $71,224 | 2% salary increase per year |
| Youth worker wages | $63,489 | $64,759 | $66,054 | $67,375 | 2% salary increase per year |
| Sport, recreation and music facilitators | $23,000 | $24,000 | $25,000 | $26,000 | $1,000 increase per year |
| Art therapist | $6,000 | $6,000 | $7,000 | $7,000 |  |
| Transport | $10,000 | $10,000 | $10,000 | $10,000 |  |
| Catering | $6,000 | $6,000 | $6,000 | $6,000 |  |
| Administration | $20,000 | $20,000 | $20,000 | $20,000 | After 1st year administration costs slightly reduced |
| Independent evaluation |  | $30,000 |  | $30,000 | Every two years. Subsequent evaluations at reduced cost as framework already in place. |
| Venue rental | $25,000 | $25,000 | $25,000 | $25,000 |  |
| Total | **$310,215** | **$345,619** | **$322,111** | **$357,693** |  |

Table 6: Estimated expenditure for Years 2-5 - Project REAL

**Note**: At a meeting with local principals on the 25th of May, the Department of Education and Training made a clear commitment to contribute to the Hume Project REAL initiative by providing strategic advice and professional development opportunities for all partners and participating schools. The financial value of these contributions is considerable but due to lack of an accurate estimate, they have not been reflected in the project budget.

**FINANCIAL SUSTAINABILITY**

The project partners have estimated that in order to make the pilot fully effective, approximately $470,000 will be required in the first year. The annual costs after the first year have been estimated at around $320,000.

Partner schools have also expressed their commitment to financially contribute to the project once they are satisfied that the model is effective. With a predicted intake of approximately 22 students per year, we have modelled a guaranteed income of $88,000 per year for the first two years. In Year 3 we expect to expand our capacity to 15 students per semester, with projected student fees of over $125,000. This amount will be supplemented through the provision of training and specialist advice to schools using a fee for service model.

To continue to deliver the program, BGCS and the project partners will need to secure approximately $200,000 per year from government grants and philanthropy. Comparing the additional investment required (6,667$ per student per year) to influence the trajectory of these young people with the current costs of imprisonment in Victoria ($100,000 per year), we can see a clear business case for this investment if even moderate success can be achieved (50% successful re-engagement).

Articulating this business case with the most relevant stakeholders (Department of Education and Training, Department of Justice and Regulation) using a “justice reinvestment” lens will be a critical strategy to ensure the ongoing sustainability of the project. In order to do this successfully, the partners will require a rigorous and credible evaluative infrastructure.

**EVALUATION**

Given the ground-breaking nature of this initiative and the need to find avenues for financial sustainability, after much consideration the project partners have decided that an external evaluation will be an essential component of Project REAL.

After many conversations and negotiations with various research institutions, the Research and Policy Centre at Brotherhood of St Laurence has been chosen as the evaluation partner. As a result of this agreement BSL will assist in the establishment of an evaluative framework for the project it will carry out an independent evaluation of the initiative.

The evaluation report will investigate the efficacy of the initiative as well as its cost effectiveness, and it will also provide recommendations for future improvements, taking into consideration the potential replication of the initiative in other settings.

It will be essential that the establishment of the evaluation framework takes place very early in the project to ensure that the partners are collecting the necessary data from the outset.

**STATUS UPDATE**

For the last year BGCS has been deeply immersed in a collaborative process to continue to refine the Project REAL model. During our research phase, we have researched and visited several alternative education settings such as the Cheshire School, Pavilion School, the Berry Street Education Model or the Baltara School.

While we have incorporated many aspects of best practice models, we also recognise that Project REAL is intrinsically different to most of the alternative models currently in operation in Victoria. For instance, deep parental commitment and early intervention (i.e. starting to work with children under 7) have been identified by many of these providers as key elements of success. However, the partners have made an intentional choice to work with older children whose parents are deeply disengaged. This choice is based on our assessment of community need. Just in the last two months, BGCS has received dozens of referrals from schools experiencing difficulties to respond to extremely challenging behaviours.

The partners have already sourced a portable classroom to be able to deliver a pilot program starting in Term 4 2016. BGCS has applied for a number of philanthropic grants to source this amount, including the Perpetual Foundation, and RE Ross Trust. In late April 2016 we were informed that our applications with the Helen MacPherson Smith Trust and Perpetual had been successful.

At a recent meeting with local principals on the 25th of May, it was agreed that an Expression of Interest document would be circulated and signed by all participating schools in order to formally express their commitment to the project (attached).

The Department of Education and Training also made a commitment to develop a letter of support to provide certainty to the philanthropic organisations interested in funding the initiative by confirming its enthusiastic support of the project (attached).

**RISK MANAGEMENT**

It is important not to underestimate the level of risk involved in an initiative targeting young people with challenging behaviours who may have experienced a significant amount of trauma. It is expected that many participants will come from families with extremely complex needs. The following table outlines the main sources of risk together with measures that will be put in place in order to manage them.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Risk | Likelihood of Occurrence | | | Consequences | | | Risk Control/Treatment |
| **Low** | **Medium** | **High** | **Low** | **Medium** | **High** |  |
| Threats to the physical safety and wellbeing of staff and other students in the program (from participating students and / or family members) |  | X |  |  |  | X | BGCS has a rigorous set of organisational policies and procedures. New protocols will have to be developed for project REAL, as well as a set of rules (developed collaboratively) for participants and their family members. BGCS has a comprehensive range of insurance policies provided by the Victorian Managed Insurance Authority. Engagement of parents in the initiative at an early stage will also be critical. |
| Lack of commitment to student re-engagement from participating schools (e.g. using Project REAL as a dumping ground) |  | X |  |  |  | X | The establishment phase of this project has demonstrated a high level of good will and a joint commitment to deal with this issue as a whole community. Students will only be accepted into the program once expectations about the role of participating schools are absolutely clear. The expression of interest document (attached) has also been created specifically for this purpose. |
| Lack of willingness from participants to go back to their original school after 6 months |  | X |  |  | X |  | Ensuring that students maintain and improve their connection with peers and teachers from their original school from the outsets will be a priority for the project. Providing students with opportunities to lead activities at their schools (e.g. dance workshops) and regular participation from their teachers at Project REAL activities are of the proposed strategies. |
| Lack of financial sustainability |  | X |  |  |  | X | Using a rigorous independent evaluation to develop a compelling business case to secure long-term government funding will be crucial, as will be the establishment of sustainable fees and the provision of specialist consultancy services. |

Table 7: main risks associated to Project REAL

1. Broadmeadows Valley PS, Coolaroo South PS, Hume Valley School, Bethal PS, Wilmott Park PS, Craigieburn PS, Coolaroo South PS, Roxburgh Park, Meadow Heights PS [↑](#footnote-ref-1)