



C O N S U L T I N G

An Evaluation of the

Community Service Program Pilot

Merredin Senior High School

Established in 1957, Merredin Senior High School provides students with a curriculum and environment that enables the development of academic, sporting and social skills, together with an appreciation of social justice, citizenship and an awareness of the value of further education. Merredin is a regional centre located 260 km east of Perth. It is the centre of the eastern wheat belt and the economy of the district is derived from farming. The school offers an extensive range of educational programs and caters for the special needs of students whether they are tertiary bound, headed for TAFE or the immediate workforce. The school runs a highly regarded vocational program in Years 11 and 12, based on units of competency, as well as Tertiary Entrance Examination and Wholly School Assessed subjects. There is also a very successful year 11/12 Bridging Course for students who need support to complete their schooling.

(<http://www2.eddept.wa.edu.au/schoolprofile>)

Demographic Profile

- Student population: 305 FTE
- Aboriginal student population: 23
- Administrative Staff: 6 FTE
- Teaching Staff: 25.2 FTE
- School Support Staff: 10 FTE

Additional information:

- There is a residential college with approximately 35 student residents
- A small percentage of students go on to tertiary study
- The VET program links to local TAFE and businesses

- There is a small Education Support Unit within the school that presently caters for 5 students
- There is a Learning Support Unit running very successful programs in literacy and numeracy

Approach to the Pilot

The Merredin Senior High School approach to the pilot program involved tapping into some existing activities which clearly fit within the definition of appropriate activities for the Community Service Program. These activities were complemented with the development of some new opportunities – with all 70 Year 10 students at the school participating in the pilot. It was initially envisioned that community service should be something undertaken by the students in their own time as an extra commitment to the community. However, that perspective shifted to the inclusion of a number of curriculum-based activities.

Planning and Implementation

The planning and implementation of the Merredin approach was undertaken as follows:

- In late 2005 the program was introduced to students through a brief presentation
- Students were also surveyed to identify activities they were already involved with
- Program was formally launched in Term 1 2006 with a PowerPoint presentation providing specific examples of community service
- Students completed second survey
- Representatives from Y-Volunteer and the Department of Education and Training came to the school to assist with the process and speak with the students
- Aimed to embed program in curriculum as much as possible
- Also sought to develop partnership with Shire and other local groups
- Students were provided with options both in and out of school hours.

Partnerships and service activities

The partnerships developed and service activities organised for the Merredin pilot included:

- Student host program – students assisted school office staff
- Peer tutoring – linked to local primary schools through Oracy
- Shire related activities including:
 - Events at a local theatre – serving meals
 - Clean up after a concert
 - Film opening of Vets memorial
- Computer Links – IT support for local aged citizens.

Distinctive Contextual Factors

The Merredin pilot was distinctive in a number of ways including the:

- Strong leadership and effective program coordination

While not unique among the pilot schools, the combination of school leadership and program coordination has been critical to the development of the pilot thus far.

- Clear and effective links to the curriculum

By linking much of the work of the pilot program to the curriculum, Merredin was able to use a number of existing programs as part of their commitment to community service. The Oracy program in particular has ensured that in Merredin's case, the Community Service Program has real academic and learning value. Through this program, the students develop their own communication skills while helping primary school students do the same.

- Enthusiasm of the students

The Merredin students were quite enthusiastic and shared in great detail what they thought the real benefits of the program are. It was clear that they saw real value in the program and wanted that value. They truly wanted their participation to be linked to learning outcomes and opportunities.

- Relationship with and support of the Shire

Establishing clear links with the Shire in support of the program has been another effective aspect of the Merredin pilot. Representatives of the Shire know what the needs of the community are and are always planning accordingly. For them the school is now part of the planning equation – for many projects the initial planning now includes discussion about how the school can be involved as well.

Benefits

The benefits in the Merredin model are most apparent in:

- The positive outcomes for the students
 - Developed positive relationships with primary school students
 - Forged a rapport with older community members
 - Actively broken down some stereotypes about teens
- Assisting with developing a positive image for the school
 - Challenges community to stop focussing on the negative
 - Combats perception and reality of people leaving the community
 - Community organisations enjoyed interaction with students.

Challenges

Within the Merredin model there were some challenges to overcome. These included:

- Allocation of time for planning and organising activities and recording student hours
- Some issues of staff negativity / reluctance about program
- Transportation of students to various projects
- Difficulty with students who don't live in the town – they are bussed to and from school and cannot attend activities out of school time
- Questions about defining community service – is it something that should only be done in the students' own time?
- Keeping the journals centrally within the school

- Wouldn't get lost
- Finding a location where students can easily access the books
- Having enough time to address all risk management issues.

Strategies to overcome challenges

Some of the strategies identified by Merredin included:

- Undertaking much of the work outside of school hours
 - Although necessary for the pilot, this should not be required with an appropriate allocation of time for the coordinator
- Ensuring that there are enough curriculum related activities (during school time) for the students who live out of town.

Planning for 2007

At Merredin Senior High School a new coordinator has been appointed for 2007.

Preparation for next year at this stage includes:

- Developing and implementing a staff audit to be used to identify any additional community related projects happening through the school
- Making sure that all staff are well-informed and supportive of the program
- Identifying and implementing as many curriculum based opportunities as possible
- Maintaining relations with the wider community to ensure that new opportunities are easily identified and actioned
- Inviting the participation of year 8's and 9's to begin to build a culture of service within the school.