



C O N S U L T I N G

An Evaluation of the

Community Service Program Pilot

Mirrabooka Education Support Centre

Mirrabooka Education Support Centre is a diverse multicultural secondary school facility that caters for students with disabilities from Years 8 - 13. The Centre is located on the same site as Mirrabooka SHS and together we have developed a positive supportive relationship focused on supporting students and families. Mirrabooka Education Support Centre strives to provide a safe and supportive learning environment, where the rights and responsibilities of the individual are recognised and respected. Our positive approach to learning encourages all students to realise their potential and participate as responsible members of the community.

Mirrabooka ESC has proudly built a school where relationships are based on mutual respect and trust and where partnerships are valued. Developing strong relationships with students and parents has proven to enhance student learning. Parents are encouraged to take an active role in their child's education and have become an integral part in the development of educational programs.

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

Demographic Profile

- Student population: 60 FTE
- Approximately 10% indigenous students
- Administrative Staff: 1.3 FTE
- Teaching Staff: 5.4 FTE
- School Support Staff: 13.1 FTE

Additional information:

- The school community is drawn from a wide range of locations, socio-economic groups, cultural groups and family structures. Student

interests and abilities are very diverse. These factors are taken into consideration in the design and delivery of specialised programs.

- Staff have high expectations of themselves and of students and continue to offer authentic and relevant programs that present challenges to students. Mirrabooka ESC is held in high regard by the wider school community as a centre of learning excellence.
- Educational programs focus on preparing students for transition to future employment, development of life skills required for independence and the social emotional development of young adults.
- Our diverse range of programs are developed and tailored to meet individual student needs.
- Students keenly engage in the rich balanced curriculum offered, as demonstrated by the high retention rates at the Centre.
- High percentage of students from lower socio-economic backgrounds.
- Many students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.
- The Centre has strong existing links with the Senior High School.
- Each student has an individual education plan tailored to meet their educational needs.

Approach to the Pilot

The Mirrabooka Education Support Centre approach to the pilot program involved focussing on school-based programs and connecting the initiative to the existing curriculum. Community Service is already an important part of the student experience as most have traditionally participated in some form of community service activity. Given that each student has an individual education plan and that community service is already a part of the Centre's culture, it was important that Mirrabooka Education Support Centre's approach to the pilot has strong links to the Curriculum Framework and each student's learning outcomes. It is also grounded in a school-wide movement to ensure that the curriculum is connected to the community. Beginning two years ago, the school has been challenging teachers to identify how community service experiences can become part of the overall strategy for addressing students' needs.

Planning and Implementation

The planning and implementation of the Mirrabooka Education Support Centre's approach was undertaken as follows:

- Used Term 1 for planning and preparation – including making links with the curriculum
- Developed a number of school-based opportunities which would fulfil the requirement
- Also looked at partnerships that would also enable students to fulfil the Community Service requirement
- Ensured that the coordinator was on-board and had opportunities to attend professional development sessions offered by DET
- Prepared excursion policies for all off-campus activities
- Developed and implemented appropriate risk management plans
- Modified Community Service logbook for verbal and non-verbal students
- Worked to foster whole-of-school ownership of the program and ensured that all staff ultimately were responsible for implementation of community service activities
- Focussed on developing a culture of doing for others, especially as many of the students are accustomed to 'having things done' for them.

Partnerships and service activities

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

- Pancake Day – raising money for homeless and people with disabilities
- Making dolls for children in South Africa
- Red Nose Day – raising funds for SIDS
- Daffodil Day – fundraising for breast cancer
- Australia's biggest morning tea – supporting the cancer foundation
- Washing uniforms for Senior High School students
- Folding, collating, sorting for the Centre's Office

- Making gift shoe boxes for children in developing countries
- Working with local senior citizens – serving tea
- Maintaining and developing the school grounds.

Distinctive Contextual Factors

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

- Willingness to see past the potential obstacles and envision a real opportunity for the school and its students

Much like the other schools who participated in the pilot, Mirrabooka Education Support Centre's journey through the pilot year presented a number of significant challenges. However, throughout the entire process, the leadership of the school, the pilot coordinator and teachers only saw opportunities. Where an ESC could clearly make a case for exemption from the program altogether – on the basis of the added difficulties of engaging students who require educational support and because most students do not achieve their WACE and therefore would not need to fulfil the requirement – in the case of Mirrabooka, there was total commitment to encouraging and facilitating students to engage in a new set of positive, enriching experiences.

- Commitment to integration with the curriculum

As integrating the Community Service Program within the Curriculum Framework is not part of the requirement of running the program, it was somewhat unusual among the pilot schools to start from this basis. Although many schools eventually came to understand the value of integration, Mirrabooka ESC was one of a few who undertook this approach from the beginning. This was in part due to a clear understanding of how the Community Service Program fits within the school and how it will be of benefit to the school and the community.

- Intentional links made with each student's Individual Education Plan

A key element of the program design at Mirrabooka ESC was to envision how the program would complement the education plans already in place for each student. In this way, integration within the curriculum actually became quite straightforward. Teachers are already clear about how they will work with each student to achieve the desired educational outcomes and the community service experience simply becomes another tool for attaining those goals. In this model, planning for the community experiences is ultimately much like planning for any other learning opportunity.

- Clear vision for how students will benefit from participation

Again, stemming from the school's commitment to seeing the program only as an opportunity to add value to each student's learning experience; the staff of the Education Support Centre saw clearly that integration of the community experiences within the existing curriculum would add real value to the student's learning. In addition, they also saw a real opportunity to connect the students to the community, to build 'real life' skills and to place students in a position where they were doing for others rather than having others do for them – which for many students is the day-to-day reality of life.

- Challenges regarding recognition for students

One of the clearest distinctions between the Education Support Centre and the other schools participating in the pilot program lies in the relationship between fulfilling the requirements of the Community Service Program and achieving the WACE. As the Education Support Centre students do not normally graduate, the potential consequences of not participating in the program are minimal for each student. However as the school is moving towards a full integration of community service with both the curriculum and the Individual Education Plans, it is likely that all Mirrabooka ESC students will fulfil the requirement. As it is a departmental requirement, it would seem to be important that the Education Support Centre students who do fulfil the criteria should be formally recognised by the Department of Education and Training. Simple recognition within the school (through a certificate or other means) while nice, could in some ways devalue the commitment these students have made and the learning that has resulted.

Benefits

The benefits in the Mirrabooka Education Support Centre approach are most apparent in:

- The connections being made between the community experiences and the curriculum.
 - As the literature is quite clear that the maximum benefit achieved in this sort of model is through links to academic outcomes, the Education Support Centre approach will certainly support the learning and development of the students.
- The new relationships being developed between the students and their community.
 - The young people at the school have a changed view of themselves and their relationship with the world around them.

- They know that they can make positive contributions and that doing so can sometimes be confronting and challenging.
- Have learned to use public transport and to connect to other community resources.

Challenges

Within the Mirrabooka Education Support Centre model there were some significant challenges to overcome. These included:

- Developing the whole staff approach to the program including links to school-wide planning and the Outcomes Framework
- Developing a register of appropriate community service projects
- Ensuring that the appropriate risk management procedures are in place
- Modifying the logbook for Education Support Centre students - created two versions, one for students with communication difficulties (verbal and non-verbal) and one for students who require support, but have communication skills
- Getting parents involved and supportive of the work their children are doing in the community.

Strategies to overcome challenges

Some of the strategies identified by Mirrabooka ESC included:

- Using school resources to appoint a coordinator for the pilot year
- Developing an excursion policy for all activities undertaken off-site (as with any other activities that would take students away from the school)
- Staff involved in Professional Learning on the Community Service Program to foster ownership, understanding and integration within their teaching programs
- Staff assisted in the re-development of the logbook for the ESC students.

Planning for 2007

At this stage the leadership group and staff are very clear about where the Community Service Program fits for 2007 and beyond. As community service will be integrated across the school from Year 8 – Year 12 the planning for 2007

includes developing strategies for ensuring that implementation is effective across all year levels. This planning includes:

- Adopting a service-learning approach to the implementation of the program
- Working to ensure that all staff understand how to effectively integrate community service into the curriculum
- Using Term 1 for further planning and preparation before moving to implementation in Term 2, 3 and 4.