

GROWING AND RESOURCING 'GREAT IDEAS' TO MAXIMISE IMPACT

Storied accounts of practice by the Tender Bridge – Bringing schools and funds together

CASE 1:

'The Outdoor Classroom'

Tenison Woods College and Anglican Community Care, South Australia

(Model: school and not-for-profit)

In brief:

This storied account of practice looks at the development of a program for boys who, for various reasons – learning difficulties, behaviour, family and emotional concerns – were struggling. 'The Outdoor Classroom' project idea grew out of the national 'Green Corps' program for 17-24 year old unemployed youth. Waiting until boys were 17, however, did not seem like a good idea; boys were 'at risk' of leaving school before then. This is the story of how Anglican Community Care and Tenison Woods College came together to grow and resource 'The Outdoor Classroom' to identify and redirect boys who might have otherwise continued to struggle.¹

In full:

Social justice has always been a strong focus for Tenison Woods College, a co-educational Catholic school located in Mount Gambier, South Australia. When Anglican Community Care's Graham Holloway and Tenison Woods College Teacher, Joe Moriarty approached the principal of Tenison Woods College in 2006 about an idea to run a program modelled on the Federal government's 'Green Corps' program, the principal was enthused about the possibilities. Anglican Community Care (known as ac.care) and Tenison Woods College were local neighbours, the school already had a social inclusion policy and students accessed an outreach building program one day a week in the city; it seemed like a good fit. What they did not have was funding. But before seeking funds, they needed to crystallise their 'great idea'.

The 'Green Corps' Program targeted 17–24 year olds who were disadvantaged and had complex and multiple needs. A senior teacher at Tenison pointed out, 'We could get to them earlier in Years 7 and 8'. Why wait? Boys who left school without getting their SA Certificate of Education automatically cut short their post-school options, such as TAFE.

The decision was made to develop a project, which they called 'The Outdoor Classroom'. Modelled in broad terms on 'Green Corps', the project sought to provide invited boys from Years 7 and 8 with the opportunity to grow and develop as learners and people through broad environmental community service experiences.

The Program:

One day per week the boys participate in community project work that has a clear educational focus (e.g. developing walking trails in National Parks; prevention of coastal erosion; laying paving stones; repairing and restoring fences, signs, community areas and gardens; collecting seeds for re-vegetation purposes). Initially, the program was for two terms, but due to its success it is now ongoing. Project Leaders (a teacher to support the educational value of the activity and a support worker to provide project management, training and support to the boys) oversee and coordinate 'The Outdoor Classroom' project. Various community members, groups and agencies are drawn in and become involved in the development and delivery of the program activities. These include: Park Rangers; Elders talking about the aboriginal history of an area where the boys are working; and the National Parks and Wildlife Service assisting projects by funding materials and equipment.

Program goals:

By implementing the project, the team sought to achieve a number of outcomes:

- Enhance student learning opportunities through active participation in hands-on, competency-based learning; recognising that traditional methods of education do not suit all young people.
- Re-engage the boys back into classroom learning on their days at school.
- Improve the boys' self-esteem, motivation and abilities to use their initiative.
- Develop the boys' communication skills (e.g. all boys fill out a weekly diary and are expected to do presentations in public about their project work).
- Assist the boys to understand the importance of good time management and planning.

Teamwork development was central to the outcomes that the organisers wanted to achieve with the boys. An issue for the boys that were targeted for the program was their individualistic attitude and behaviour. They were very intolerant of differences and rarely played sport – a natural avenue for the development of team thinking and practice. Consequently, there are very few occasions in the program when the boys complete a task on their own.

¹ This account is based on an interview with Graham Holloway, Anglican Community Care.

The project's program would be offered to a maximum of nine boys in Years 7 and 8 from Tenison Woods College. This was a practical decision: Anglican Community Care would provide the school with the use of a 4WD vehicle and the maximum number of passengers it could hold was ten.

Seeking and securing seed funding for wages and operating expenses (especially of the 4WD) was the next task/challenge. Graham Holloway, the Manager of Accommodation and Youth Services at ac.care took on that responsibility in consultation with the principal and staff at Tenison Woods.

To get funding was not easy. What the project team were seeking did not quite match what funders had on offer as their priorities for the next 12 months. Government funding tended to have too many limitations (e.g. The funding model of such projects as the Outdoor Classroom required that it be delivered just as described in the approved submission. Other constraints were the complex reporting systems). What was needed was a program that could be more flexible in its funding model (e.g. the ability to review and change the program based on ongoing feedback from the boys).

One unanticipated barrier was the perception of some funders that a Catholic school is 'rich' enough to fund its own project. In other cases, funds were 'out there' but only for grants of around \$5,000 when what they needed went well over this amount.

The school was providing the teacher's wage and ac.care was providing the use of a 4WD vehicle, but funding was also needed to:

- Employ a Project Leader/Coordinator (in addition to the school teacher);
- Purchase 'work clothes' as a 'uniform' for the boys;
- Support the ongoing running costs of the 4WD;
- Support the resourcing of some specific project activities (e.g. paint, nails).

A 'uniform' was to give the project and those who participated in it status. This became one strategy the project team used to offset any disparaging comments from other students that the project was only for the 'dumb kids'.

As Graham explains; *We put in several grant submissions to different philanthropic funders, but were unsuccessful. It's difficult to know why we missed out in some instances. When we did get feedback, the messages about why we missed out related to the competitive nature of vying for limited funds and in one case the funder after reviewing all submissions decided to divide the funds into smaller grants: unfortunately for us, the amount was too small to facilitate our project. In another instance, it was identified that as a rural service we were located too far from the funder's business catchment area for their marketing purpose.*

Past experience had shown Graham that they should not give up too soon. He kept searching the internet and by chance, came across The George Alexander Foundation. Graham felt the Foundation was a good fit for their project because the amount of funds available suited their needs and importantly the Foundation was seeking to support new and innovative ways to support youth. Graham also felt that their proposed project was a good fit with the Foundation's funding guidelines and history. The team used the Foundation's website to guide the content and format of their Outdoor Classroom Project proposal. From his experience of preparing proposals, Graham knew that they needed to read the guidelines carefully and to follow up with the funder if they were unclear about anything. Part of his research involved looking at previous successful applications in order to prepare the submission.

In their application to the Foundation, the team made it clear that their project was based on an existing externally evaluated successful model,

'Green Corps'. But they also explained how their model needed to be different because it had to suit the needs they had identified from the local community.

The Foundation rang us about our application and asked us a few questions. One of the questions was, "What will happen post the seed funding from The George Alexander Foundation?" My response was that we would use the pilot and its outcomes as an evidence base to demonstrate the likelihood of further success. On this basis, the plan would be to seek new funding through other philanthropic organisations, through direct business sponsorship and to gain direct program support through the catholic education budget. Other parts of the conversation focused on what our reporting requirements would be – the provision of a mid, interim and final report.

The George Alexander Foundation, through the Ian Potter Foundation agreed to fund the project \$36,000 for 12 months. The project commenced in February 2007.

A lot of planning goes into a project like this one. It is not enough to simply secure the funding. Various community organisations and groups need to be consulted with and genuinely engaged with the program. They need to understand and support the vision and purpose of the program. This was the key role of the project's Team Leader who had daily responsibility for project management.

The school decided which boys to invite. A much larger number of boys than those who would eventually participate in the program were invited. A parents' and carers' meeting was held to explain the concept. It included a slide show and pictures to help bring the concept to life for people. The principal took a lead and visible role in the establishment of 'The Outdoor Classroom' and its communication to teachers, parents and carers. This show of support from the principal was critical to bringing on board the parents, carers and teachers.

Initially, some teachers needed to be convinced of the educational benefits of the program. The appointment of a dedicated teacher to lead and coordinate this aspect of the program soon overcame this issue. For example, the boys were not simply 'laying a stone path'. They were explicitly expected to develop and use mathematical knowledge and skills. In liaison with the boys' classroom teachers, 'The Outdoor Classroom' programs' activities were constantly reviewed and shaped.

Acquittal and evaluation

The Foundation wanted to see in an acquittal report what the personal outcomes had been for the boys who had taken part in the project. How had their participation in the program changed them? Throughout the project, the school took the lead role in monitoring the benefits and impact of the program. This included monitoring;

- Student attendance in the program;
- Classroom behaviour (e.g. their ability to concentrate in class; disruptive/non-disruptive; general attitude; handing in homework);
- Student achievement results;
- School attendance;
- Involvement of parents and students at regular meetings set up about 'The Outdoor Classroom'. The boys in the program would do presentations to the parents about the projects they were undertaking. By doing these presentations, the boys were being exposed to the opportunity to develop their confidence and skills in public speaking;
- Graduation of boys from 'The Classroom Project' – project results and attendance.

These sorts of evaluation measures required others beyond those directly involved in the program to observe and provide feedback. It meant that communication about the purpose and benefits of the program could not be a once off event. Put simply, without the support of teachers, the program would not have got off the ground or been sustainable.

Culturally, a communication challenge was to overcome a negative perception that 'The Outdoor Classroom' was just for the 'dumb kids'. Consistent with the goals of the program, from the outset the school set up ways for the program to have status. First, as indicated earlier, each boy was provided with a work uniform. This purchase gave them a clear identity as a 'group'. Second, the boys did regular presentations to the parents and carers about their projects. This activity gave the boys a formal space to practice their public speaking skills and gave the parents the opportunity to witness the benefits of the program for themselves. Third, as part of an awards night, every year the school recognises the achievements of the boys in 'The Outdoor Classroom' program.

What has happened since the initial funding?

From humble beginnings, the program now has so many boys wanting to do the program that the school could run it five days a week. In 2008, part funding of \$16,000 was secured through 'Pilot Light' from 'The Panel Christmas Wrap Limited'. Since that time, the school has taken on sourcing the funds for the program. They continue to dedicate a teacher's salary to the project. Ac.care donated the 4WD vehicle to the school and the school community is providing the 'in kind' support to maintain the working order of it. The program continues to work closely with agencies, such as the Department for Environment and Heritage and Local Government. The program's duration was two-terms but now runs two days per week for the whole year.

It is the parents who are now approaching the school asking that their boy be part of the program. Parents talk. Anecdotal feedback from the parents of boys on the program suggests that they too are noticing differences at home: positive attitude changes and behaviour.

All the boys who took part in the initial pilot are still in school. Two want to work for the National Park on a Wildlife Service. Two want to go into the army. 'The Outdoor Classroom' project exposed these boys to pathways they had never ever imagined before or thought were possible for them. The initial group of boys have become mentors to the younger boys coming into the program. This provides another tangible way for the 'graduated' boys to grow and develop as learners and people. But this unanticipated benefit has also brought an unanticipated issue - so popular is it to be a 'mentor', that the boys who take this on want to keep doing it year after year. This is great for the program and the individuals involved, but it limits the opportunity for new graduates to take on this role within the school.

Learning points for schools about developing projects to maximise impact:

- 1 People with passion need to 'sell' and 'drive' the idea forward – great ideas don't go anywhere without great people to bring the ideas to life.
- 2 Create explicit ways for other people to become involved.
- 3 Be clear and simple about what the project/idea is trying to achieve.
- 4 Re-evaluate as you develop your 'great idea'. This helps you to remain flexible and open to new possibilities. It can also help you adapt to unanticipated outcomes (e.g. a cut-off date for being an 'official' mentor is a learning point from 'The Outdoor Classroom' project).

Learning points for organisations who want to develop a partnership with a school or schools:

- 1 Do your 'homework' and connect with the 'right' people. Who is the person responsible for the School Council? Might it be easier to get some initial time with the Deputy Principal rather than the Principal?
- 2 Go and 'talk' about the project – face-to-face and/or telephone.
- 3 The school may want to 'try you out' first before going full-bore ahead into a project with you. In Graham's case, he also did some presentations to students about the Green Corps project, how it worked and how the Outdoor Classroom model would be similar.
- 4 Living in a rural community has a distinct advantage as social and work networks often overlap.

Learning points about seeking and securing funds – an applicant's perspective:

- 1 With regard to seeking and securing funds, Graham suggests be patient. He has substantial experience of grant writing. Even so, for every one submission he has been funded for, there are probably three he has missed out on.
- 2 If you miss out on being funded, try to politely seek some feedback on how a submission could have improved the submission. It is hard when a funder does not provide any feedback on a submission because you cannot improve when you do not know what to focus on.
- 3 Check carefully what the funder will and will not fund. If it is not clear in their grant guidelines then ring them up.
- 4 This may seem obvious, but check the funding round dates!
- 5 Make an acquittal report work for you too. In what way can the information you prepare for an acquittal report be used for other purposes? (e.g. an annual report; School Council Presentation; a local newspaper article).

Learning points about securing funds – a funder's perspective

Caitriona Fay (Program Manager The Ian Potter Foundation and The George Alexander Foundation) explains, "Over the years, I have read many an application and had conversations with potential applicants. If I had to summarise what I have learned from these experiences, it is that the best applications I have read and projects I have seen supported are invariably the ones where the applicant has spoken with the Foundation prior to submitting. It's really challenging to write an application that inspires the reader in the same way that speaking with someone involved in a project can. That's why here at the Foundation we encourage people to pick up the phone before they submit.

I had an opportunity to speak with the people involved in the Outdoor Classroom before I saw an application. It was easy to see that the that the proposal was a good fit with Foundation's objectives but critically I was also able to ask all the niggling questions that occasionally go unanswered in written applications. Philanthropy is 99% about investing in 'good people' and putting your trust and funding into the hands of people who you genuinely believe can deliver a positive outcome".