

Armidale High School, NSW/Backtrack Community Partnership

Storied accounts of practice by the Tender Bridge

Tender Bridge Case of Success: Case 6

Armidale High School, NSW/Backtrack Community Partnership

Armidale High School has been a Tender Bridge subscriber since December 2010. The school has had an ongoing partnership with not-for-profit BackTrack Youth Works since 2006. The partnership has been so successful that Carolyn Lupton, the school's Deputy Principal, has recently been seconded out of the school to look at developing the partnership as a regional model.

Armidale High School (AHS) and BackTrack Youth Works (BYW) have had a strong partnership since 2006, when BackTrack first started working with young Indigenous people in Armidale.

AHS, established in 1921, is a comprehensive, partially-selective high school situated on the south side of Armidale in NSW. The school has about 90 Aboriginal students out of a total school population of just over 600. The school has a range of community partnerships that have been initiated to cater for a wide variety of student career transition programs.

BackTrack Youthworks is a not-for-profit organisation based in Armidale NSW. BackTrack's mission is "to offer young people who have lost their way an opportunity to reconnect with their education and training, to become work ready, find jobs, lead happy and productive lives and participate fully in the community."

Four established BackTrack programs are available to Armidale High School. These are:

- **Iron Man Welders**, focussing on metal engineering skills and qualifications,
- **Ag Lads**, providing necessary agricultural based skills, qualifications and employment in areas of rural skills shortage,
- **Paws Up**, where young people work with dogs to improve relationships, communication skills, and
- **Imagine This**, an innovative girls program.



Engagement and attendance has been greatly enhanced as a result of the program.



Hands on skills are key to the success of the program.

Since BackTrack began running programs at AHS, there has been a documentable increase in the number of young people who have been successful in achieving improved schooling outcomes whilst attaining industry qualifications and experience. There has also been a considerable reduction in suspension rates and increases in attendance rates within the school.

How does it work?

The school selects the most appropriate students for the BackTrack programs based on Learning Support and Welfare team recommendations and quantitative data on behaviour referrals, suspensions, attendance and academic performance within the school. Depending on their age, students are enrolled in a Certificate II in either Agriculture or Primary Industries at Tocal Agricultural College delivered through the school. The formal learning is structured around a successfully trialled model that is a combination of “on the job” learning at four identified “training properties” around the region and various real work placement opportunities, and formal learning on site at AHS. Formal qualifications in the safe use of chemicals and chainsaw operations as well as OH&S training are also externally delivered. The school counts attendance at BackTrack as attendance at school.

Who benefits?

Currently there are 51 young Indigenous people involved in the BackTrack programs, 36 boys and 15 girls (this includes students from AHS and Duval High School). Among the 51 participants there are two Indigenous trainee youth workers who have come through the BackTrack program and currently three school-based trainees in Primary Industries. “However, the figure of 51 participants does not accurately reflect the large number of people who benefit from the BackTrack programs” says Carolyn. “The level of engagement of these young people and the outstanding outcomes benefit the whole community, such as through flood relief work and community service activities. There have also been significant reductions in youth crime rates in the Armidale LGA that can be partly attributed to the program. Parents of young people are constantly arriving at the shed and/or school with a plea to ‘take on’ their son or daughter. Community attitudes have begun to change owing to the outcomes of this program. Local graziers who have never had real contact with Indigenous people are welcoming these young people onto their farms to work side by side with them. Word of mouth is spreading like wildfire and some weeks three crews of young people are out working on farms accompanied by youth workers.”

How did AHS develop a relationship with BackTrack Youthworks?

Carolyn goes on to explain how the partnership got off the ground.

“The partnership grew out of a prior existing relationship and identification of the school by Regional support staff as a focus to target improved attendance, particularly by those most at-risk. I knew BackTrack’s founder when I was Head Teacher of welfare at the other high school in town and used to send students to a program one day a week. Once I moved to AHS as Deputy Principal, I could see a real need to do something different for those students who were caught up in the cycle of suspension from school. With the majority of these young people, I knew we were trying to fit square pegs into round holes and it was a no-win situation. I had always been a supporter of Bernie [BackTrack’s founder] and BackTrack and knew that his approach to working with young people was and is unique. So I approached him, and BackTrack were more than happy to help”. BackTrack and AHS worked together to identify students who were in need and maintained regular contact. Since that time it has developed into a very successful partnership.

How is the partnership funded?

The majority of funding for BackTrack comes from philanthropic sources of funding. “Most of the staff at BackTrack had little or no experience in preparing funding submissions so I took on this role as something I can do to ensure that the partnership is sustained. This is how and why we found Tender Bridge. We applied for and were successful in obtaining a Schools First Impact Award in 2010 and for the last two years have been successful in obtaining partnership funding through the Youth Attainment and Partnerships initiative. We have also received smaller amounts of funding through the NRMA, Commonwealth Bank, local government and so on. Obviously we are always on the lookout for sources of funding and Tender Bridge has become invaluable in simplifying the process.”

The program seeks funding from every and all avenues. BackTrack is a partially-funded model as the organisation makes goods and provides services for sale. At the moment there is a promotional push to secure funding for more school-based trainees. The local community has shown significant support for BackTrack and a new method of funding will see individuals or organisations ‘sponsor’ a trainee.

Why do you think the partnership is so successful?

Carolyn is passionate about the partnership. “I think the

overwhelming reason for the success of the partnership is because the participants are motivated. For many of them they are experiencing success at something for the first time in their lives. They are coming through the program with recognised qualifications and recognition from the wider community. They are beginning to develop a sense of where they fit within society, and to see that they do have the potential to make a positive contribution. Support from the school’s senior executive has ensured the flexibility of the program and a shared vision of what can work for these young people.”

The program responds to circumstances and issues that are locally identified and works as a community organisation in a most innovative fashion. The personal development aspect is seen by all stakeholders as the key component contributing to the long-term success of the program over the years. “I have become such an advocate for developing partnerships that can benefit not only students but the entire community. This is probably why I have been seconded to work as a project officer for 12 months to assist other schools with the development of partnerships and programs such as BackTrack.”

What key lessons have you learnt in building this partnership?

Don’t lose sight of the fact that the young people are the key stakeholders in the process.

They need to be consulted at every stage of the process.

Communication is critical to the success of such programs.

If school staff are not aware of what is going on for students they can become quite critical – good communication is vital.

Support from the Principal and other executive staff is essential.

There must be a shared vision between the school leadership and what the organisation is trying to achieve.

Don’t try and go too big too soon.

This organisation grew steadily from a handful of boys in a welding shed on a Sunday.

No one is going to throw money at your cause, you have to get out there and find it.

You win some, you lose some, but you have to keep knocking on doors and writing those submissions.

For more information about BackTrack Youth Works, go to:
<http://www.backtrack.org.au>