YARRAM SECONDARY COLLEGE
YEAR 9 COMMUNITY PROGRAM

School Profile and relevant background

History/Location
Yarram Secondary College serves a 7-12 rural community 220 kilometres east of Melbourne. The township has a population of 1,800 and the College has existed for over 50 years. It is situated between South and East Gippsland and is close to the coast. Its relative isolation is compounded by poor access to public transport. Most post-secondary training and education opportunities involve leaving Yarram.

Demographics
The student population is predominantly from English speaking backgrounds, and is fairly stable at 400.

Curriculum
In 2003 the college changed the curriculum structure, moving to a year level approach, replacing the middle school Vertical Modular Grouping system that had served the college for over 10 years. The extensive curriculum review involved in this change enabled the development of visionary initiatives such as Innovation and Excellence, Leading Schools Program, the implementation of a Community VCAL and consolidation of VCAL. The new structure incorporates a team approach at Year 7 and 8 with fewer teachers delivering blocks of Whole Group Learning, class work groups and a team approach to student management and well being.

In Year 9, a community based curriculum offers students extensive opportunities outside of the college to participate in community service, environmental programs, outdoor education and emergency services. This program has wide endorsement from the community and members of our college community.

The year 10 program has been closely aligned with the Year 11 and 12 program to better prepare students for the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE) and VCAL and to enable more extension opportunities for year 10 students. It also allows the college to maximise its post compulsory offerings. The college offers the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL) onsite, an offsite Community VCAL program using community facilities, and a strong range of Vocational Education Training (VET) subjects.
Influences and reasons for establishing the project
A review of our Student Attitudes to School Survey, Staff Opinion Survey, and Parent Opinion Survey highlighted a need to develop a program which increased the engagement of students and staff. A catalyst for change occurred in 2001 when our school developed a Middle Years Reform Action plan. Once the action plan was completed, our staff was quite willing to follow through with the recommendations because the need for change was evident.

The Year 9 Community Program developed from dissatisfaction with the vertically integrated Middle School system that operated until 2002.

The college made a commitment to change and entered into a long series of discussions that began in 2001 and continued well into 2002, before the following four principles were established to redevelop the year 7 to 10 program at the college.

1. Strengthening relationships between primary and secondary schools to improve tracking of students.
2. Curriculum review and re-design to take advantage of the opportunities made available by the VELS, and improve student engagement.
3. School re-organisation to support transforming teaching and learning.
4. Pathways for young people, and tracking of progress and student movements.

On the basis of these principles, three goals were established for new curriculum within the college to promote
- engagement, leading to successful, achieving adolescents
- more effective curriculum, teaching and organisational practice
- genuine partnerships and long term support for teachers

Scope and Sequence of Activities
The Community Program has a year long structure and incorporates three 75 minute periods of community involvement. During the first semester all Year 9 students undertake a common Community Program which teaches and assesses such areas as Teamwork, Leadership, Goal Setting, Enterprise Skills, and Beliefs/Values. During this time students are expected to participate in a three day bushwalk, and present their learning through a portfolio (Year 9 Passport). Students also complete a first aid certificate.

During the second semester the key focuses for our Community Program is the selection of community-based projects. Possible projects may include Community Focus (Elderly Citizens, Hospital etc.), Lifesaving Victoria, Sailing Victoria, Victoria Coast Guard, and the Great Victoria Bike Ride, with a core feature being that the activities are delivered by passionate staff who volunteer their expertise in areas outside the traditional curriculum. We strongly believe that our local community is one of our greatest educational assets and these programs give our students the opportunity to become involved and aware of all that Yarram has to offer.

Aims
The program was designed to develop academic achievers and positive contributors to our community. We have based our curriculum development on five key points:
- Greater emphasis on student-centred learning
- Establishing close links with organisations external to the school
- Increased use of off campus learning resources
- Developing and sustaining a committed community of learners
- Pathways development links to Post Compulsory Education
Our intention for the program was to create a learning environment that encourages students to become independent, self-motivated learners and communicators. This program has been very successful, and has encouraged initiatives in other areas of the school.

Resources
Where possible we have tried to maintain these classes with smaller numbers (approximately 15). Some of the costs are funded through the Youth Advance Program, with other activities funded through the Student Resource Package. Assistance through the generosity of community organisations such as the Yarram CFA, Yarram SES, Woodside Beach SLSC and Yarram Regent Theatre greatly aid this program. Attempts are made to avoid student contributions, but these are sometimes necessary.

Teaching Styles
A core principle of the Community Program is the voluntary involvement of teachers who have a passion for the activity or topic offered. Students are encouraged to participate in activities where that passion can be shared and developed. Essential to the success of the program is removing students from a classroom environment and placing them in the community. Expectations are clearly outlined and students consistently meet the standards of behaviour required in the wider community.

Teachers of the Community Program encourage students to leave their comfort zones and take sensible risks. Student learning utilises students’ knowledge and strengths wherever possible. Students are encouraged to be the experts. Emphasis is placed on students developing independence and empowerment.

Student learning aims:
- To foster collaborative learning and team work.
- To promote awareness of self and others.
- To encourage independence, experimentation and risk-taking in learning behaviour and problem-solving.
- To celebrate excellence.
- To develop learners who can apply their knowledge beyond the classroom to new and different situations.

The Community Program aims to engage students through offering non-traditional learning opportunities in which literacy and numeracy skills are developed in conjunction with the program’s physical, social, academic and community aims. A number of surveys (PoLT, Attitudes to School etc.) have shown our students to react positively to the teaching opportunities made available through the Community Program.

How has teacher pedagogy changed with the project?
Teachers working within the Community Program have improved relationships with students (Principles of Learning and Teaching) student surveys reinforce teacher anecdotal evidence) and behavioural issues (detentions, suspensions) have diminished noticeably. Teachers have been encouraged to utilise multiple intelligence thinking tools and rubrics to cater to a wider range of students’ learning styles and attributes. Teachers have independently sought PD and are more eager to include ICT in developing Passports and tasks for assessment.

Assessment
All students create a portfolio (Passport) which covers various areas of personal development including beliefs and values, teamwork, leadership, thinking, enterprise skills and goal setting. This is assessed using a round table, Assessment by Exhibition process. Self-assessment plays a large part in this process. All Key Learning Domains are
encouraged to incorporate these tenets into their teaching and learning, and class time is made available for this. Domains may use some parts of the Passport to assess student learning in their areas, while the complete task is used as a passport for entry into the senior school.

Assessment by exhibition is undertaken involving a classroom teacher, parents/guardians and peers. Students self-assess demonstrates skills essential for success in the senior school such as organisation, resilience, independence, social competency and responsibility.

**Reporting**
Teachers are asked to report on each student. The reports include a statement of the student’s goals set at the start of the semester, student self-reflection on their success and an overall comment completed by the teacher. Parental feedback on reporting has been very positive and is included on the report.

**Victorian Essential Learning Standards**
Yarram SC designed the Community Program in 2002 to better address the needs of students, teachers and the community in our area. The release of the Victorian Essential Learning Standards have endorsed the changes we have made, providing justifications for the time, effort and cost put into teaching the ‘whole student’. In recently completing an audit of our Year 9 curriculum, we have found that all three strands of the VELS are reflected by the program and can be assessed within our current program structure. A reporting map for Year 9 is shown in the attached table.