Helping teenage mums return to school

New research proves that the first high school in Victoria to have its own child care centre for student mothers really is making a difference.

Corio Bay Senior College (CBSC) encourages young and expecting parents to continue their education by providing flexible learning options which encompass practical support. The Young Parents Access Program (YPAP) aims to make the transition back to school easier, with intensive case management and on-site child care.

Corio Norlane was identified as a Neighbourhood Renewal site in December 2002 in recognition that these communities experience high levels of social, economic, physical and environmental disadvantage. In 2007 DEECD commenced planning for the Corio Norlane Education Regeneration Project under the Building Futures policy framework which puts improved educational outcomes for students at the core of all planning and investment decisions.

Challenges confronting teenage mothers in Corio are complex. Not only do they face the same tasks as other teenagers in negotiating the risks of school completion and transition from school to sustainable employment and/or further education and training, they also face the challenges of negotiating the transition to adulthood and first-time parenthood under conditions of social and economic disadvantage (Shacklock, Harrison & Angwin 2007).

YPAP is one local response to this multi-faceted challenge. The objectives of the program are to:

• retain, re-attract and support young parents into the education system;
• improve education levels and future educational and employment opportunities;
• improve the parenting skills of the students;
• provide positive role modelling for the parents and their children, and life skill education to the parents; and
• develop opportunities for CBSC child care students to use the child-care centre for work placements (Armstrong 2003).

When mapping the establishment of YPAP, researchers from Deakin University investigated the teaching and learning needs of young parents returning to school and found that they faced specific hurdles. Many had been out of school for considerable periods of time and often did not have the literacy, numeracy, ICT and life skills to enable successful transition into a Year 11–12 learning environment (Angwin, Harrison, Shacklock & Kamp 2004; 2006).

Young parents have to balance the needs of their children with the demands of schooling as well as satisfying their own needs to retain social contact with their peers.
The research team also identified access to child care as a real challenge for young parents. The college recognised that even if places were available in community child care, the logistics of taking up an available place without access to transport created a disincentive to school attendance (Shacklock, Harrison & Angwin 2007).

In response to this challenge the college became the only Victorian secondary school to feature an accredited on-site child-care centre, built with the help of a Community Facilities Fund grant and opened in 2003. The centre is the cornerstone of YPAP, making it easier for more young parents to stay at school or return to school after several years out of the system.

The early research into YPAP also identified the need for stronger evidence on what counts as best practice in meeting the needs of young parents. To investigate how it can best support these students during their transition back to school, Corio Bay Senior College obtained a grant from the Department’s 2009–10 Practitioner-led Research Program. The college was interested in adopting a holistic approach which interconnects curriculum and pedagogical reform with welfare and support needs.

The current research project involves the college working in collaboration with Deakin University and RMIT University to:

- provide evidence around the development of transition programs that best meet the needs of young parents;
- develop a digital and print repository of individual cases of students which highlight a range of transition issues for use in professional development for both beginning and experienced teachers;
- provide recommendations for the professional development of teachers; and
- support workers on how to best meet the transitional, educational, parenting and personal development needs of this cohort.

The methodology includes semi-structured interviews with past and present parenting students to explore their experiences of transition back to school. In December 2009, the research team from Deakin had completed 16 interviews. The interviewees provided diverse feedback concerning the challenges they face, their hopes and aspirations, and their plans for the future. Some have clear goals for further study, e.g. nursing; others access the program for the support and social contact it offers.

The interviews revealed a number of issues for young parents. Challenges include child care, illness, subsequent pregnancies, transport, family crises, homelessness or its threat, and discouragement from others. Young parents have to balance the needs of their children with the demands of schooling as well as satisfying their own needs to retain social contact with their peers.

For the support workers in YPAP, measures of success for YPAP can include both ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ outcomes. A focus on personal growth can lead to re-engagement with education as participants gain a sense of the future and see a place for themselves in it. There is an identified need for scaffolding of learning units – a flexible approach enables students to complete the VCE over three years. However, the research team also reported anecdotal evidence reflecting a general misunderstanding of VCE, VCAL and VET pathways. The notion exists that completion of VCE is socially more acceptable, where in effect alternate pathways might lead to better outcomes.

Partnerships with the community extend the range of services provided by YPAP. External agencies such as Glastonbury Family Services, City of Greater Geelong, Bethany and Salvation Army deliver a range of programs and extra curricular activities. Other partnerships with, e.g. Geelong Business and Professional Women, Telstra and Vic Roads have supported the provision of scholarships, mentoring and material aid.
YPAP is an outstanding model of a targeted intervention program making a significant difference to education outcomes for young people. The research has broader application to issues around disadvantage, disengagement and the multifaceted needs of community. The project’s research report will be publicly available in mid 2010.

Bibliography


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