

Community Mentoring — Building Community Capacity

McGowan L F*

Launceston City Council, Launceston, Tasmania, Australia

Abstract

Co-Pilots is a community mentoring program that developed out of a partnership agreement between the Launceston City Council and the Department of Education in Northern Tasmania. It aims to develop skills, confidence and pathways to learning and work in students at risk of disengaging or underachieving in mainstream education.

The program is entering its fifth year of operation in 2005 with 19 schools and agencies adopting the program throughout the state. In mid 2005 another three schools will be adopting the program. The continued expansion of the program is clearly related to the benefits and real impact that the program is having for young people and the general community.

Co-Pilots is:

- providing options for catering to the learning needs of a greater proportion of students
- creating the development of networks for lifelong learning by interagency coordination and partnerships between education department, local council, universities and local businesses
- helping create 'the village to raise the child', encouraging social responsibility
- providing opportunities for authentic learning and achievement, developing connectedness in the community and developing resilience
- addressing the cause not just the symptoms of social disconnection by developing skills in the community that are being taught to others.

The impact of the program in our community has been recognised in 2004 by receiving the Community Development Category Award and the Gold Award for the State at the Local Government Awards in Tasmania in May, and the Youth Engagement Category Award at the National Local Government Awards in November.

Keywords

Mentoring, community, capacity, resilience, partnerships

Introduction

The development of the Co-pilots program was a direct response to a need that was identified by stakeholders in the Launceston community. Young people were feeling that the education system involved too much pressure and competition and was not addressing individual needs

and this was resulting in poor school retention rates, potential unemployment, high teen suicide rates and other serious health issues (The Deepening Divide 1999, cited in Poot 2001, p. 1). An innovative approach was needed to get the needs of young people met outside the mainstream setting.

The program was envisioned in 2000 by an interagency group of human service professionals. This group came together with the shared concern for the welfare of young people in Launceston who were not being catered for in the mainstream classroom. Over the next twelve months a project profile was developed in consultation with young people that addressed critical needs that were not being met for this target group.

The program would need to:

- be relevant to varied needs
- allow for students to lead learning
- have a 'real' world context
- allow students to experience success
- provide a significant adult
- have outreach support
- link existing programs and services
- have a 'community' dimension.

The Westpac–Cleveland Street High School 'Mentoring in the Community' Program 1998 has been acknowledged in the development of the Co-Pilots program (Poot 2001, p. 2).

The Department of Education and the Launceston City Council share the intellectual property rights of the program and provide in-kind support, an operational budget and wages for a coordinator. The Tasmanian Department of Premier and Cabinet also contributes funding, which continues until 2006.

The program recruits and trains volunteer mentors from the community who are then matched with students referred from schools. Training comprises 12 hours of personal development training covering issues such as anger management, assertiveness, communication skills and ethics and confidentiality. In addition, six hours of youth issues specific to the target group are provided such as Youth Suicide, Child Protection, Drug and Alcohol Issues, and Youth Justice. When the program was first initiated, around 15 human service industry representatives as well as young people were consulted in the development of a framework for the program (Poot 2001, p. 2). Many of these people remain as members of a reference group who are still consulted and informed regularly. Some continue their involvement more directly, for example, as part of the training in youth issues. These representatives are experts in their fields and are invited to present information to mentors. The speakers typically talk

about what their services offer and then present relevant information, answer questions and stay for coffee and a chat with mentors. They then become a resource for mentors and students as they work on their projects. Their contact numbers are provided in a journal that is completed over the course of the program by students and mentors.

Once training is completed, the mentors and students attend two social events where they meet and have an opportunity to make natural pairings. Some icebreaking activities are facilitated as well as group work on project ideas. At the end of the second social event the student and mentors will have decided where they will work, what day and time they will meet and on what project. The student and mentor then begin working on a community-based project based on their mutual interests, for a minimum of two hours a week for eight weeks. The project often involves local business support. At the end of this time, a celebration event is held where the student and mentor present their project to friends, family, educators, and members of the community and representatives of local businesses. It is strongly encouraged that mentors continue meeting with their students for a minimum of an hour a fortnight for three months after the program finishes.

The program has grown from its pilot in 2001 with seven mentors from seven schools in Launceston, to around 100 mentors in 19 schools state-wide in 2005. For the first time in 2004, the program was offered to primary schools with the aim of early intervention. All primary schools have elected to participate in 2005 with one licensing out the program. Over the life of the program only one school has elected not to run the program again. The complete program is able to be licensed out to other organisations as two manuals with accompanying CD-ROMs. Together they contain all necessary information to implement the program. Training workshops are offered to those wanting to deliver the program. A minimal cost is charged for the workshops and certificates of competency and license agreements are issued once participants have satisfactorily completed training.

The Co-Pilots experience develops skills and confidence in young people that can be applied at both school and in the workplace. By encouraging mentoring in the community, habits and expectations are developed for lifelong learning for people of all ages, from all walks of life and in a variety of settings. The program makes learning accessible and flexible, recognising the varying learning needs and strengths of individual participants. The program embodies both current and future directions of policy and philosophy of the Department of Education and the Launceston City Council (McGowan and Vogt 2004, p. 1).

The basis of the mentor–student relationship is one of mutual learning and so when students and mentors meet they need to develop an idea for a project that is based on their shared interests and which they both plan and develop and ultimately present. The mentors assist and guide but try not to dominate the relationship. This process enables the development of a

wide range of projects that are 'owned' by the student and mentor which ultimately provides a great sense of achievement and personal satisfaction. It is through this process and experiencing success that students can develop the confidence and motivation to attempt to achieve their dreams and goals. Other student benefits as described in exit surveys by teachers, parents, mentors and the students include increased happiness, persistence, goal setting, improved relationships, a sense of achievement and success, connectedness, usefulness and greater acceptance of themselves. Overall, resilience is enhanced or developed (McGowan 2002, p. 8; 2004c, p. 18).

The general community is the area in particular where there has been an unexpected tangible benefit. Not only are the student needs being addressed but the program has tapped in to a growing concern in the community about the lack of community cohesion. Volunteer work has become a part of many people's lives and with the realisation that with less extended family contact, more estranged families and both parents working, our young people are not having enough contact with positive role models. In conjunction with the desire to put back into community, mentors are coming forward to offer their time, with the view to not only giving of themselves but the desire to be better communicators and human beings. Involvement with the program is selfless but exceptionally rewarding and mentors are returning year after year. As the reputation of the program continues to grow, it is actually getting easier to recruit mentors. A wonderful sense of community responsibility and connectedness is beginning to develop. As the mentors are interacting with their students, new skills and positive changes in behaviour are being observed. This aspect of the program has the greatest impact in our community, as it is addressing the causes of social disconnection and not just the symptoms (McGowan 2004a). The program therefore provides a realistic solution that is long-term and potentially generational.

The schools involved in the program have found that the students are easier to deal with, gain better communication skills in getting their needs met in the school environment, have better self-control (evidenced by less fighting) and generally relationships with the school have improved. It also gives the teachers an opportunity to observe the positive attributes of the young person that they have previously been unable to appreciate often because of needing to deal with negative behaviours. Both parents and teachers are able to view the young person with a new attitude once they have seen what they are capable of and the young person's self-esteem brings out a more positive, negotiable persona (McGowan 2004c, p. 18).

Parents in the community are feeling supported that there is someone out there in the community who also cares about their young person when they feel they have exhausted all avenues. Punitive measures do not result in a positive change in behaviour, but feelings of resentment and revenge. By the school being able to offer a democratic method of behaviour

management, the negative behavioural expectations that are held for the young person by parents, the student and peers can begin to break down.

With parents, teachers and mentors all beginning to create a new positive set of experiences for the young person, the 'village to raise the child' is being resurrected.

Our local economy will benefit as the young people involved in the program are given the opportunity to discover their talents and skills and be able to use them in a supportive environment. They are taught not only applied skills but also social skills necessary in the broader environment that will be essential in the workplace. They understand that being reliable, persistent, punctual and trustworthy and having the ability to make and maintain friendships are all vital attributes. To be able to network effectively and find the information you need all contribute to skills that will be recognised in a valued employee in the future. The program prepares young people to be not only valued contributors at school and work but also in society (McGowan 2005, p. 1).

The integral role as partner in the program is fostering a greater understanding of council's role in the general community and provides evidence of the progressive nature of council and its willingness to role model to other organisations and community members. Launceston City Council was the first organisation to allow employees to participate in the program in work hours in return for personal development training provided as part of mentor training. The potential benefits of participation include an improvement in work relationships, less stress due to better time management, an increased sense of fulfilment and the development of new skills such as project management. The Co-pilots program represents concrete evidence of council's commitment to work with the community in addressing issues of shared concern, to be able and willing to tackle difficult issues, and to make a real difference. This continues to increase the credibility of council in the eyes of the public (McGowan and Vogt 2004, pp. 1-2).

As a result of the program, many partnerships have developed between the participating schools, local businesses, universities and TAFE. The major partnership with the Education Department has been beneficial through the sharing of resources, networking and infrastructure and has been the basis of sustainability of the project (McGowan 2004a). In 2005, the University of Tasmania Education Faculty agreed to grant Recognition of Prior Learning to Year 2 education students for participation in the program. The hours spent in the program are equivalent to a liberal studies unit. The benefits for students include increased classroom experience, relationship building skills and behaviour management strategies, networking for future employment and increased confidence in the classroom environment (McGowan 2004b). Feedback from some of the 11 participating students so far is that the program is strongly complementing their teaching course (B Dalton, J Grey, C Jones, R Britton 2005, pers. comm., 24 May).

Participating schools have identified local business partnership benefits such as the development of interpersonal skills and knowledge in students that encourage student readiness to participate in further training, education or work. Access to local businesses facilitates networking and identifies future employers in the local community who may also potentially support the school in future projects. Local business also reaps benefits through their involvement. Most businesses that participate have the philosophy that their business is part of the community and that they have a responsibility to nurture our young people and develop their skills. Businesses gain wider recognition in the community as a socially responsible business who are prepared to give young people a go and to invest in their development for no financial advantage. The Celebration Event, where around 160 people attend, provides a further opportunity for recognition for the business but also facilitates the opportunity to network with other local business representatives who operate from the similar mindset of community responsibility (McGowan 2005, p. 2).

Following are some examples of projects that have been completed as part of the program:

Places for Youth to Go

In 2001, Phillip and Anita produced a banner to give a visual representation of where youth could go in Launceston. A local art store donated paint and the canvas and the school provided the remaining resources. The banner was then mounted in the local Youth Centre. Phillip was involved in the 2003 production of a DVD about the Co-Pilots Celebration Event, co-MC'd the 2004 Celebration Event and has returned to be a mentor in 2005.



A new school uniform for Brooks High School

In 2002, Michelle and Tamsin designed a new school uniform for Brooks High School. The uniform comprised of a tartan skirt, white shirt and green tie worn with knee high socks. They initially sent out 80 surveys in the school community to get their opinions and they received 190 back! The uniform was accepted by the school uniform committee and Tamsin was involved in the design of a windcheater to complement the uniform.



Pigeon holes for Youth Shelter

In 2003, Jayden and Cheryl built some pigeon holes for the local youth shelter. Jayden had spent some time in the youth shelter and really appreciated their help so he thought this would be a good way of giving back to them. At the Celebration Event the pigeon holes were presented to a delighted representative of the Youth Shelter. Jayden is now working as an apprentice chef at a local restaurant.



Tree planting for Jim Bacon

In 2004, Stacey and Jason raised money to buy a tree by cooking biscuits and selling them and washing staff cars at lunchtimes. A granite plaque was donated and they planted the tree with Paul Lennon, Premier of Tasmania and Honey Bacon (Former Premier Jim Bacon's wife). On the day of the planting and associated media appointments, a state funeral was announced and, expecting a cancellation, Stacey and Jason were amazed when Paul and Honey rang to say they were flying up so they could make the state funeral and the tree planting. That kind of commitment made a huge impact on Stacey. To add the final touch, the premier then donated \$1000 to the school.



The sustainability of the program has been secured by factors such as the trust of community in the training of mentors and the integrity of the program, consistency, confidentiality, communication and professionalism. The development of partnerships has given the program credibility and financial and human resources. Evaluations have provided observable results and have allowed the refinement of the program through experience and feedback from evaluations. Finally the development of a Training Manual and Resource Package has made the program transferable to other organisations (McGowan 2004a).

The program has been successful due to thorough development in consultation with representatives from a wide cross section of human service agencies and young people, and the commitment by several partners to see the project through. The support by community, business and education sectors has been incredible. At each stage of development and implementation staff that possesses passion, commitment and belief in the program have

been recruited. Finally, the implementation of the program was well timed with the emerging recognition in society and government of the importance of mentors in young peoples lives (McGowan 2004a).

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