

Hands on Learning

providing imaginative education solutions for disengaged students

Confidence and the love of learning are powerful tools in getting kids on the road to educational success. However, traditional school learning environments often have an abstract and theoretical focus which can quash those traits in students who have broader, untapped talents, thereby encouraging them to give up and leave school early.

Hands on Learning (HoL) is a flexible in-school program that tackles the root of student disengagement before it becomes costly to manage and difficult to fix. It works with students in Years 7 to 10 who are struggling with mainstream schooling, identifying and treating negative attitudes before they become negative behaviours. HoL offers a supportive learning program that encourages individual growth, team work and confidence by involving students in creative and building projects around the school and in the local community, usually one day a week.

Examples of HoL's work with participating schools include the construction of straw bale huts, outdoor classrooms, and the design and building of BBQ areas with outdoor pizza ovens. Within the community, they have rebuilt residential fencing, built community steps, boardwalks, seats and tables and refurbished scout halls.

The program is based on the concept of 'learning by doing' and emphasises the everyday value of literacy and numeracy skills. Students enter a practical environment where they gain new skills that they would not ordinarily be exposed to in a classroom. By working in small groups, they gain experience in teamwork, leadership and conflict resolution. Consequently, they develop a strong work ethic, a sense of achievement and of personal value. They improve their communication

and social skills and typically end up with increased feelings of self-worth and confidence.

The program creates positive impacts on engagement in school life, interest in learning and pathways to future education and employment. The HoL teachers and artisans act as role models and mentors to the students, providing incidental counseling when required.

The success of HoL is based on the development of quality relationships between all members of the program. It helps them to reconnect with their school and their community while developing practical skills.

Introduced at Frankston High School in Victoria in 1999, HoL has drawn praise from the Victorian State Government and has now established a program at Bamaga College in Far North Queensland.

WHY SVA BACKS HANDS ON LEARNING

SVA supports this venture as it demonstrates an effective method of addressing the primary causes of student disengagement within the mainstream school system before students drop out. HoL is an early-stage venture with high social impact and replication potential. SVA has supported this venture to establish a strong foundation through portfolio management, mentoring, financial management training, funding and strategic planning to plan for replication of HoL in other schools.

GROWTH

Funding and pro bono support from SVA has seen the HoL program replicated from a single presence to seven other Melbourne schools and one on the Cape York Peninsula. There are plans to introduce it into six more schools during 2008.

HoL has grown substantially in terms of the number of young people who can access the program and the number of trained staff. Since the venture was established, over 800 students have participated in HoL – some for two years. The project has formed strong links to other schools, community groups and businesses, and HoL has established relationships with education academics. Schools, parents and other organisations have shown enormous interest in the program. The core group of staff, partnerships and the documented operating procedures positions the venture for substantial growth in the next two years.

PERFORMANCE HIGHLIGHTS

Participating students have a retention rate of more than 92 per cent and more than 80 per cent report a high positive impact on their interest in school and engagement with learning. Students have shown consistently improved levels of commitment towards completing their secondary schooling, with some remarkable academic success stories emerging from the program. And, significantly, employer levels of satisfaction with HoL graduates has been high.

WHAT'S AHEAD

The HoL program has established itself as an important partner in the Victorian education system. The next step is to develop a framework for tracking participants one to three years after they have left the HoL program – to measure their engagement with future schooling, training and/or employment. This evaluation framework will be further formalised by HoL's participation in SVA's Future Builders evaluation program, which seeks to improve our understanding of what works and why, allowing us to scale and replicate the most efficient programs within our portfolio.

With SVA's assistance, HoL is now primed for replication across Australia. Negotiations are underway with three more schools in Mornington, and discussions have commenced with three new schools for a Berwick cluster. There is also strong potential for establishing two Gippsland clusters and to grow into three more schools in Far North Queensland.