



GERALDTON FLEXIBLE LEARNING CENTRE

Submission to the –
Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs
*Inquiry into Educational opportunities for Aboriginal
and Torres Strait Islander students*

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GERALDTON FLEXIBLE LEARNING CENTRE

The Context

The Geraldton Flexible Learning Centre (GFLC) has been operating since 2010 providing a much-needed alternative option for education in the Midwest region of Western Australia. The region itself has been thriving under the umbrella of mining expansion and local development projects but with the mining development now declining there has been a significant decline in local development. For those who are marginalised and disenfranchised from the education system the mining expansion brought few benefits and now the decline sees many young people further disenfranchised. The Geraldton Flexible Learning Centre offers one of very few options available in regional WA for young people who have disengaged from mainstream education.

The young people who attend GFLC have disengaged from mainstream education for some or many of the following reasons:

- Poor attendance
- Young parents
- Low literacy and numeracy
- Poor self esteem
- Racism
- Engagement in the justice system
- Domestic violence
- Family dysfunction
- Poor impulse control and limited self regulation
- Poor peer relationships
- DCP concerns
- Drugs & Substance abuse
- Mental health concerns

Our Philosophy

The philosophy of GFLC is drawn from the inspiration of Edmund Rice Education (ERE) and the Christian Brothers. The spirit of GFLC has its origins in Blessed Edmund Rice, the founder of the Christian Brothers, who began his formal educational ministry with the young street kids of Waterford, Ireland, in 1802.

ERE's inspiration is captured in "The Charter for Catholic Schools in the Edmund Rice Tradition" which defines the four Touchstones for an authentic Edmund Rice School. These Touchstones are: Gospel Spirituality, Inclusive Community, Liberating Education, and Justice and Solidarity. These Touchstones guide all aspects of the work of GFLC.

Youth+ is the organisational arm of EREA that supports the development and delivery of Flexible Learning across Australia. The Youth+ Foundation Statement provides the broad rationale for the operation of all EREA Youth+ Flexible Learning Centres.

GFLC enlivens this foundation statement through its clear commitment to social justice and standing in solidarity with those whom society has made poor and disenfranchised. Our philosophy has a practical application in establishing a 'Common Ground' based on our four principles of "Respect, Safe and Legal, Honesty and Participation". The establishment of this common ground, among staff, students and parents and carers, creates a collective forum or sacred space and a means to resolve conflict, negotiate learning, enjoy their human rights, understand their responsibilities and experience restorative practices being modelled within the community.

GFLC also seeks to respond to the 2008 Melbourne Declaration for Young Australians and in particular where it states that

"Australian Governments commit to working with all sectors to

- 'Close the Gap' for young indigenous Australians
- Provide targeted support to disadvantaged students
- Focus on school improvement in low socioeconomic areas"

GFLC's aims are also aligned with this declaration's goals for young Australians namely:

Goal 1: Australian schooling promotes excellence and equity.

Goal 2: All young Australians become: successful learners, confident and creative individuals, and active and informed citizens.

As a WA CARE school GFLC seeks to respond to the complex needs of young people who have been disenfranchised from mainstream education. GFLC aims to do this by building honest and authentic relationships with our students and their families and carers, celebrating the uniqueness and dignity of each individual student. GFLC provides holistic learning experiences that address the social well-being needs of student and support them in their academic development and to achieve educational outcomes. The learning experiences provided will empower our young people to take personal responsibility for their actions and learning, achieve greater autonomy and self-reliance and enable them to transition to further education and/or employment.

The learning experiences aim to build self-esteem and confidence in the student and assist them to develop the knowledge, skills and attitudes necessary to enjoy "life in all its fullness" (John 10:10). GFLC offers learning experiences that address the curriculum areas of literacy, numeracy, study of society and environment, sciences, information communication and technology, indigenous culture, physical education, outdoor education, vocational education and religious education. Learning is focused around the individual needs of students and progress is carefully monitored and documented.

Programs

MEP (Mobile Education Program): An offsite program with a teacher and a youth worker offering schooling to a mixed age group (Yr 7-12) in a bus using a number of community based resources such as the Geraldton University Centre and PCYC to provide an educational program. The focus of this program is building relationships, trust and wellbeing with a view to transition into one of our other programs.

Immersion: (Yr 7-9) The focus of this program is to immerse young people into a school environment via the 4 principles. Generally our younger cohort. A teacher and a youth worker provide a flexible program that balances academic work with activity based learning. Subjects and activities include reading, spelling, maths, computing, art and physical education.

Project: (Yr 9-10) An emphasis on literacy and numeracy embedded in project based learning. This class also draws upon key learning areas from the West Australian curriculum.

Transition: Generally our older cohort with a focus on literacy and numeracy and formal VET qualifications as well as support in transitioning into further education or employment. Subjects include “Life beyond school”, “Applying for a job” and “Money matters” as well as registering with Centrelink, obtaining a learners permit, Medicare card, bank account, independent living, connection with a variety of support services.

After hours: A cohort of young people that are not attending any schools in Geraldton due to complex social and wellbeing issues including anxiety. The focus is on engagement with education and wellbeing with a view to transition into one of our other programs.

Outreach: a youth worker has been employed to work with young people at their point of need usually in homes or in the community. Designed for those severely disengaged who would struggle even to commence enrolment processes, the worker links closely with families and young people to commence transition into our setting.

Outcomes & Successes of the GFLC Education Model

Access to, participation in, and benefits of different school models for indigenous students in different parts of Australia are critical to our consideration of our operations at GFLC.

GFLC operates with a cohort of young people that most schools would not be able to support and through its practice has provided the opportunity for young people to experience success. The following data highlight some of the outcomes we strive to achieve. GFLC is about helping these young people step onto the first step of a new educational and wellbeing journey.

To enable engagement in the GFLC programs all young people are provided with transport to and from the school. This pick up and drop off program is an intentional part of our practice and involves our teachers and youth workers engaging in the protective behaviours curriculum with our young people during this time. This involves checking on the student’s wellbeing and family issues or concerns. It also provides an opportunity for some personal interaction with families and carers to support the engagement with our school community.

GFLC also provides a simple breakfast and a nourishing lunch for our young people each day. If staff are aware of families without adequate food our Centre arranges food parcels.

GFLC has an enrolment in 2016 of 87 secondary students counted and funded at Census, 75 of whom are Indigenous. We currently deal though with over 100 young people who have had a connection in some way with the school this year.

Transitions Semester 1 2016

36 students transitioned as outlined below during Semester 1. These figures highlight the work of GFLC in providing the support to ensure possible further pathways focusing on education, training and employment.

Youth Justice - 2

Relocation - 2

Other - School - 22

 TAFE - 0

 University - 0

Employment - 2

Seeking Employment - 5

Student Whereabouts Unknown - 2

Beyond School Age - 1

Many of these young people will reconnect with GFLC either for ongoing support or to re-enrol for school.

Educational Outcomes

Each of our school class groups are offered courses from the WA Curriculum, with the senior cohort also being given opportunities for TAFE Certificate level courses. The intention is not for WACE (Secondary) graduation, it is to provide the opportunity for re-engagement into education and to provide skills and qualifications which will serve these young people to enable them to function within their community. As our curriculum develops, it is our hope that our young people will gain qualifications relevant to their future transitions and to workforce requirements.

Additional Support

GFLC provides a range of support to the families and carers of our students including the following:

- Breakfast and lunch program everyday – staff and young people share meals together – good community building time.
- Morning meeting – all staff and young people meet to start the day and be present to each other.
- Range of engaging activities.
- Strong relationships are the core of all we do.
- Operation by principles – no school rules – young people and staff all operate within a common ground framework which breaks down traditional power – authority paradigms. This approach gives young people a voice and a responsibility for their actions.
- Development of learning spaces which support greater engagement.
- Working closely with other agencies – CPFS, YJS, PCYC, STAY, etc.
- Developing Personal Learning Plans with young people which focus on high interest areas and areas of need both educational and social emotional.
- Building relationships with young people and families fundamental to the success of the school.
- Regular follow up with families/ guardians including home visits and support checks.
- Daily follow up of non-attendance.
- Celebration of achievements e.g. attendance, participation, learning outcomes.
- Community Engagement Day on a regular basis as an opportunity to build Young People's resilience and increase opportunities for YP to interact and engage with the wider community.
- Growth of Student Welfare Worker programs – including Vaccinations, Health and Dental checks, Food parcels.
- Friday program developed as Wellbeing Day with programs aimed at engaging and supporting Young People's mental and social/emotional development.

Additional Support continued

- Mobile Engagement Program – an alternative program set up for extremely disengaged young people who struggle to engage with school based education. A bus staffed with a teacher and a youth worker caters to a group of up to 12 young men with a program which utilizes community infrastructure such as PCYC, public library, museum, gallery etc. The program focusses on re-engagement and building capacity for school.
- Mayu Wanggajimanha Cultural Program – a program celebrating local Indigenous culture through language classes and other offerings. Initiated by our Indigenous Youth worker, the program is offered to Young People once per week and engages local organisations and community groups.
- Bidi Bidi Yagu (Butterfly Mum) Program – aimed at Young mums and bubs. As no other school in the region offers the ability for teenage mums to attend school with their children, we enable these parents to remain in education by providing transport for the family and support while onsite. There are currently up to 5 babies attending school with their parents.

Recommendations for the Committee to Consider

CARE School and Special Assistance Funding – This needs to recognize that GFLC does not collect any fees from students and requires extra funding so as to allow our school to provide the extra support such as transport, learning resources including ICT, feeding program and all excursions.

Capital Funding for Facilities – the GFLC educational model and funding does not have the capacity to fund loans for capital development of its educational facilities. Some States have provided Capital funding for this but more is needed to ensure that young people who are marginalized from education are not further marginalized by the quality of the facilities available. Suitable facilities are essential to ensuring the success of a school like ours.

Sharing our Expertise – Our educational model has been developed over some 20 years and our expertise is able to be shared with others seeking ways to further the education of many disenfranchised Indigenous young people.