PARLIAMENTARY INQUIRY INTO THE POTENTIAL FOR DEVELOPING OPPORTUNITIES FOR SCHOOLS TO BECOME A FOCUS FOR PROMOTING HEALTHY COMMUNITY LIVING.

SUBMISSION BY VICTORIA UNIVERSITY, ACCESS & SUCCESS TEAM.

This submission addresses several of the Parliamentary Inquiry’s key areas of consideration including:

a) existing activities carried out by schools to promote holistic healthy living within their school communities involving healthy eating, active lifestyles, sun smart awareness and appreciation of the effects of harmful substances;

b) successful programs which have been instituted in schools in other states or internationally;

c) whether it is appropriate for the State to encourage schools to extend health programs to be directed at the broader school community and, if so, what the most effective and efficient approaches are;

d) opportunities for linking with community leaders and forming partnerships with business and community organisations;

f) how school-based activities could relate and coordinate with these to maximise impact and efficiency.

INTRODUCTION
The Bulldog Friendly Schools program is based primarily on innovative partnership work with schools undertaken by Victoria University and the Western Bulldogs Football Club, supplemented by further examples of other school based partnerships in which Victoria University has been able to contribute to activities within schools that promote awareness of health and healthy lifestyles.

BACKGROUND
Victoria University (VU) is located in the Western Metropolitan Region of Melbourne. Together with the Western Bulldogs Football Club it is one of the two most recognisable local icons for people in the area.

Schools in the Western Suburbs of Melbourne have been described as having the lowest aspirations, attendance and academic completion rates in the
metropolitan region. (Teese 2003). In light of this, Victoria University’s Mission Statement specifically addresses the need to transform young people’s lives in the Western Melbourne Region, primarily by enhancing academic access and success so that education can create opportunities and give young people greater choices about their future.

One way that VU develops the capabilities of young people and the capacity of their communities is to work with schools where locally identified concerns can be raised and the solutions can be worked on, in collaboration, by both the school community and the university.

The Access and Success (A&S) project, within VU, was created for the purpose of supporting the University’s Mission Statement by growing capacity in school children in the Western suburbs. A&S works with schools to engage school children in richer, deeper, stronger and long term partnerships through projects that last between three to five years.

This strategy has been based on VU’s School of Education model, where preservice teachers (psts) not only do their compulsory teaching rounds at a school but also work on an Applied Curriculum Project (ACP) each Tuesday at the school for the duration of the academic year. The objective of the ACP is to contribute to an aspect of school students’ learning in the school. Thus, schools working with the School of Education take psts for two reasons, firstly, to develop the profession but secondly, as a valuable resource, to accommodate projects such as the ACP within the school.

A&S works closely with the School of Education, using the same model but creating another layer of facilitation for longer projects as identified by Cherednichenko and Williams (2007), for developing the capacities of young people.

By using psts as an available resource, schools can grow educational knowledge in school children in ways that might not otherwise be possible. When this capacity is further enhanced by linking schools in with community partners, this experience can grow school children’s social capital, by them being networked in the wider community. Students develop social capital through networks of relationships and skills resulting from community and civic action (Alison 2006).

Accordingly one objective of A&S is in the ‘Schools Plus’ category, where project outcomes include the development of productive links between schools and community organisations for the purpose of growing social capacity by optimizing student engagement with their curriculum and with their broader community.
Engagement is seen on two levels, firstly, the academic perspective (transmitting formal knowledge for academic gain) and secondly, engagement for school life and how this affects school children’s outlook on schooling in the future (Thomson 2005).

Engagement in school life helps school children to develop psychologically, socially and physically. One well documented way to tackle school engagement is through Extra Curricular Activities and one such program that A&S facilitate in Melbourne’s West is the Bulldogs Friendly Schools Program (BFSP).

a) Existing activities carried out by schools to promote holistic healthy living within their school community.

In 2007 the Western Bulldogs Football Club approached VU about the possibility of upgrading and improving on a football program that they were then driving in schools. The program had involved their elite football players visiting schools to encourage school children to get involved with football and follow the club. Evaluations at that time however had found the Bulldogs Friendly Schools Program (BFSP) to be ineffective. Essentially it was felt that while the elite players’ visits engaged school children in the short term there were no lasting impacts and as a result some schools were withdrawing from the program.

Current Delivery (2007-2009)
The BFSP now involves an 8 week program in schools, divided into 2 areas. First is the Multicultural Schools program, supported by the AFL, which allocates a staff member to this program. A Multicultural Schools Officer assists those school students in schools with beginner football skills while the Footy in School program, supported by AFL Victoria, provides a part time staff member and a football squad to assist school students in schools who have advanced skills in football. A&S facilitate this program, working in approximately forty-five primary schools and working closely with our partners. Both programs involve player visits but are co-delivered and supported by preservice teachers from the School of Education at Victoria University. Within each primary school the preservice teachers form the link to the classroom, assuring the program of greater depth, longer term commitment and strong curriculum relevance.

The program now includes information about healthy eating, wellness and the development of leadership skills. The ‘schools’ area of the AFL has given this part of the program strong direction in advising about 2 programs that they have developed. The ‘You Can Kick Goals’ program formulates the basis of the Leadership
component and the ‘One Seven’ program gives information about healthy eating and well being.

The Western Bulldogs (WB) support the program with school visits from their elite players, who act as role models reinforcing the leadership values and healthy eating messages from the program. In addition and to enrich the program, the WB and the AFL give school children and their parents the opportunity to see an AFL game for free. In specific schools with high numbers of refugee student, free transport is also be provided.

Based on the Advisory Group suggestion, and supported by the AFL, the WB have created a ‘Scrapbook’ to give out information about football, confirm the program’s values (leadership and healthy eating), but an underlying purpose of the booklet is for the school children to take something home to share with their parents and family, thus extending the reach of the program.

The BFSP aims to build the social and educational engagement of school children through the model of football, where they can take the skills of the field, to the classroom and into their lives. If they are having a good time in this Extra Curriculum Activity, according to Thomson (2005), they will be more likely to view school in a positive manner, to value school-based relationships and to stay at school and eventually to engage in voluntary community activities on their own account, growing community capacity.

a.1) How successful has it been and how is it measured?

The program has been evaluated employing formative evaluation methodologies, which allow for ongoing monitoring and review from the outset. Principal, teacher and preservice teacher feedback has been sought through regular meetings, preservice teacher reflections and case writing have been developed and a student survey has been created to capture school student dispositions knowledge prior to and after participation in the program.

The survey has been administered by preservice teachers in each school and has used mainly closed questions with multiple responses, some on a Likert scale.

Open ended questions on leadership ask school students to provide answers about leadership in their own words. Free text answers were also sought in case ‘other’ information was needed.

The questions in the survey addressed students’ understanding of the particular fields identified by the stakeholders:
Early findings from the survey suggest that primary school students come with a good degree of knowledge on leadership and healthy eating, and that this has been applied and enhanced over the course of the project.

These findings are supported by four focus groups conducted in past months with principals, teachers, University Colleagues and preservice teachers. These have generated data showing that school students embraced and enjoyed the program, experiencing an immediately engaging in-school activity with clear connections to the school curriculum but also growing social capacity, community connection and literacy skills.

b) Successful programs which have been instituted in schools in other states or internationally.

While this submission does not deal in any detail with other programs operating elsewhere in Australia or internationally it is clear that the BFSP model has the potential to grow beyond schools in the western region of Melbourne.. In fact in
2009, the AFL funded the BFSP pilot at the WB for the purpose of creating an exemplar for other Australian clubs to consider. If schools are willing to use football or other sports as a strategy for teaching about wellbeing and leadership then VU in partnership with sporting clubs could facilitate a greater program.

The leadership component is essential because it encourages school students to make their own decisions with the first basic principal ‘leadership starts from within’. School students need to make their own decisions about maintaining a healthy life.

But preservice teachers from VU have also been involved in other programs that link with community partners to promote health and well being in schools. Examples include the Stephanie Alexander’s Kitchen/Garden and the Gould Group’s Multicultural Garden projects. Here VU has supported these programs by meeting schools’ requests for preservice teachers to work on these particular projects. Under these arrangements preservice teachers with their teacher mentors assist in connecting the project to the classroom curriculum, ensuring that they have relevance and a sustainable identity within their school settings.

c) Identify whether it is appropriate for the State to encourage schools to extend health programs to be directed at the broader community and, if so, what the most effective and efficient approaches are

Schools are in the best position to know their community. The key is to engage the school students and through them engage their families. The BFSP works because it is both engaging and fun. It connects directly to curriculum via VELS in the area of Physical, Personal and Social Learning. At the same time the three way partnership between the school, the University and the Western Bulldogs allows the school community to tap into broader resources and networks to access health education and recreational opportunities.

Generally speaking an interest in football is broadly shared across the community; it is a common interest with a common language. For multicultural school communities particularly, football provides a means of engagement and involvement for many members of a diverse community.

School students naturally enjoy the ‘hands on’ activities that football brings, where the learning is engaging because it is connected to the real world. Feedback tells us that the program has a strong ‘excitement’ element when the elite players visit the schools, supporting and reinforcing the program themes. Star player Brad Johnson, who is the BFSP ambassador, and the player connected to Sunshine North PS, mentioned at one visit that he loved oranges. The next day school students were bringing oranges to school! The influence of a role model cannot be denied.

Similarly engagement values of the program extend beyond school children to parents and members of their broader communities. Principals and teachers
mention for example, connections made by recently arrived families to their broader communities through their participation in school based activities generated by the program, extending then to weekend sport activities and stronger and more diverse social engagement.

Partnerships such as these have clear social and health benefits, especially in school communities with limited resources. VU works with many schools where students are drawn from low SES families. Some of our schools have breakfast or lunch clubs because school students do not bring any food or money to school. Health promotions need to be in line with these families. Health promotions and projects might include tips on Gardens and growing food which could be useful especially in schools where they have a garden. As shown, longer term programs of some weeks duration or more could see a benefit to families in encouraging activity and social capacity. The school for such communities provides an important focus for social activity and engagement: things to do when money is short. These might include activities that could attract children and their parents – for example free Wii activities with plasma screens.

d) Opportunity for linking with community leaders and forming partnerships with business and community organisations

VU has created relationships with schools in two ways. Firstly with the School of Education in the placement of preservice teachers in schools and secondly with the A&S project where schools and the A&S team work collaboratively to support richer deeper projects that range from 3 and 5 years. BFSP is a 5 year program with the potential to be sustainable. Relationships with schools are the key. Mutual trust needs to established for the benefit of school students. Partnerships with community groups and schools needs to meet criteria that ‘adds value’ to the school. A&S are able to broker genuine relationships with schools and community partners.

The partnership between VU, WB, AFL and the 45 schools is wonderful in that this community supports the school student in engaged learning and providing positive role models for mutual community development and benefits.

f) How school-based activities could relate and coordinate with these to maximise impact and efficiency

Programs that complement the schools curriculum (as opposed to stand alone activities) are more sustainable, more educationally beneficial and more influential in attitudinal and behavioural change. Links to families, too, can be made more effectively and if the family has general knowledge about the program then they too
can contribute to student learning. The potential for developing opportunities for schools to become a focus for promoting healthy community living is possible only if it adds value to what is already happening in the school.

The BFSP can be inclusive of all school students through its broad mix of activities offered through learning the skills and the language of football. Extensive print and electronic media coverage and opportunities to attend games and training mean these students can immediately feel part of a wider community, with demonstrable benefits for literacy and engagement.

VU, A&S would be willing to trial a health promotion using the BFSP model. A health promotion to parents would add a deeper connection to program and create family involvement.

CONCLUSION

Victoria University, Access & Success, would like to thank the Parliament of Victoria for this opportunity to show case our work.

The relationships that we develop in our community are strong and based on mutual trust and respect. Our commitment to schools, school students and their families is reflected in our Mission statement: to transform the lives of individuals through the power of vocational and higher education.

The BFSP is an example of that commitment. A&S are able to broker and facilitate such projects with external partners for the benefit of school students.

The BFSP connects schools with our external partners, WB and AFL to bring a fun and exciting way to learn about football, leadership, healthy eating and wellbeing. Promoting healthy community living could be the next step in this program.

9. REFERENCES

Allison, Janelle, Gorringe, Scott, Lacey, Justine 2006, Building learning communities: partnerships, social capital and VET. Adelaide NCVER.


