

Back from the brink

ET finds that Toogoolawa Schools' holistic approach has made for progress with some of our most troubled boys



Improving self esteem is at the core of Toogoolawa's approach

Every day at Toogoolawa School begins with meditation. If you thought getting 20 students to sit still and in perfect silence is remarkable, it's all the more so when you consider that the group lost deep in reflection is drawn from some of the most troubled kids in the country.

Gerry Moloney, the principal at the school's Ormeau (south-east Queensland) branch says that more often than not the students, and these are kids who have been excluded from regular schooling, serial truants

and the oft suspended, take to meditation like fish to water.

"I had one kid come up to me after a session recently and ask me for a candle to take home so he could show his mum how to meditate," Moloney says.

Small victories like that mark an often arduous path towards improving the students' sense of self worth, which is intrinsic to the Toogoolawa schools' – there are three in the country; at Ormeau, Newcastle in New South Wales and Hastings in Victoria – very successful way of bettering the prospects for some of our most difficult kids.

Often sitting in on the meditation session is Gold Coast based property tycoon John Fitzgerald, who siphons hundreds of thousands of dollars of his own money into the Toogoolawa schools.

Once a troubled, angry soul himself, Fitzgerald established the Toogoolawa schools with the intention of sparing kids from the vicious cycle of exclusion from school, crime and drugs and graduation to jail, which he had faced.

Prospective students are referred to Toogoolawa by school principals, the Department of Child Safety and its associated bodies or by parents. The kids are interviewed and Moloney says that it's essential that the prospective student express a personal interest in entering the school. There is no shortage of applicants and the waiting list grows daily.

"The first thing a boy will do when they run into some trouble is say that they were forced into attending and that their failure is all someone else's fault. We put the onus on them, they have to choose to be involved in Toogoolawa."

The schools take students of all ages, having been accredited to teach primary school age children last year. Younger children have a separate set of challenges than teenage students Moloney says. The older boys have an awareness that something is not working in their lives. The younger students rarely have that self awareness.



“If a younger kid has fallen behind, it is only by a few years. It’s when a teenage boy who has fallen behind badly is faced with a secondary school curriculum with primary school level abilities that the real alienation and humiliation sets in. It’s then that we get the anger and truancy.”

Making any kind of progress takes a lot of work and a staff/student ratio of four students to one teacher speaks volumes.

“The staff are essential, we pick people who will be good role models, people with a strong spiritual core. They work hard to create relationships with the kids’ parents or guardians and involve them in the kids’ education,” Mr Moloney says.

Staff members also need to be tough, pushing other people’s buttons is often where Toogoolawa’s students do excel.

Staff and children eat together, which in many cases is the boy’s only sit down meal of the day and sole opportunity to engage adults in conversation.

The school teaches literacy and numeracy skills as well as life skills and employability skills, playing to each student’s strengths.

“Some are just dying to get out and use their hands, that’s their way of learning,” Moloney says.

Toogoolawa’s successes have been many, one star alumnus with a background of petty crime

and truancy is now completing a law degree. But the more modest wins count as well.

“Often these kids don’t have many friends. We’ve got a group of our old students now sharing a house and living successfully. We see ex-students who come back and continue to have a relationship with the school as our biggest wins.”

One of them, a heavysset chap, had been sacked twice from work experience jobs for sleeping. Moloney and the staff at Toogoolawa persisted.

“We got him another job as a bricklayer, which he loved. When he last visited he looked like he’d halved his weight and his life was on track.”

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