



BackTrack Youth Works

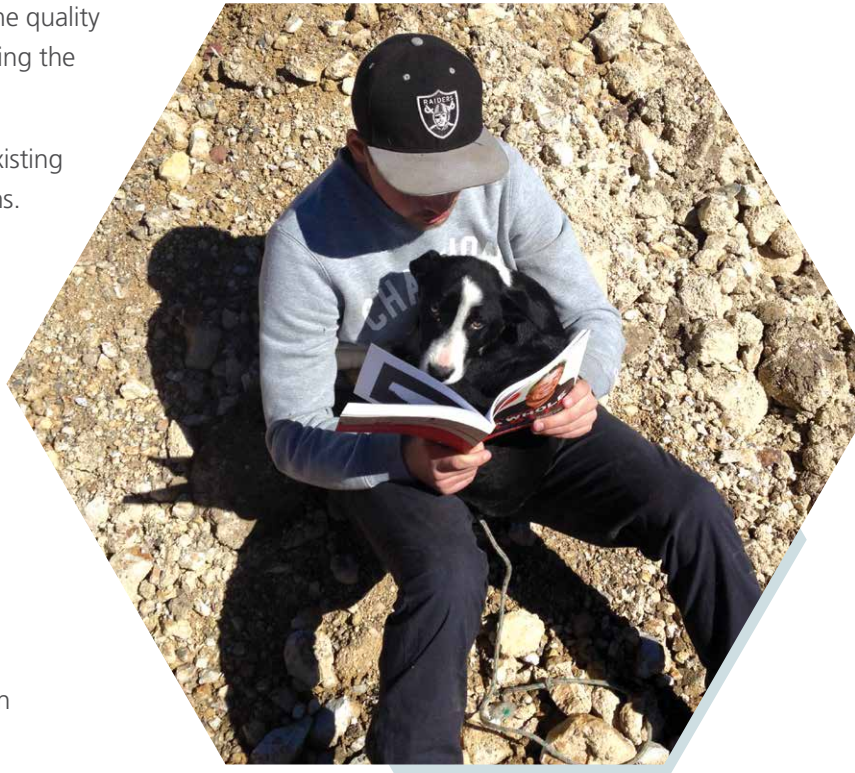
www.backtrack.org.au

Innovation

BackTrack School began as a pilot in March 2013. The school is part of the broader offerings of BackTrack Youth Works, a not-for-profit organisation servicing Armidale and surrounding areas in New South Wales since 2006. BackTrack's goal is to take the most marginalized and disengaged youth demographic and empower them to make positive life choices and foster successful long term integration into industry and the community, thereby not only improving the quality of life of the participants, but also strengthening the wellbeing of the entire community.

BackTrack School seeks to complement the existing BackTrack skills training and life skills programs. Three of these programs have been a staple part of the organisation for many years:

- ▶ Paws Up – began as an engagement tool where participants train dogs and now jump them in competitions, performing at Agricultural Shows and invitational events
- ▶ Iron Man Welders – a fully functioning welding shed offering training in trade engineering skills
- ▶ AgLads – provides training and progression to paid work crews in agriculture



The BackTrack School pilot was the initiative of Carolyn Lupton, then Deputy Principal of Armidale High and Jim White, NSW Department of Education Regional Director for New England. In collaboration with BackTrack Founder, Bernie Shakeshaft, funding for the pilot was provided through the NSW Department of Education, and space for the classroom – also known as ‘the paddock’ – was made in an annexed area of ‘the Shed’ at the BackTrack premises in Armidale.

Classroom activities in ‘the paddock’ are led by a NSW Department of Education teacher, with additional support also provided by Backtrack staff, which includes youth workers and



artists-in-residence. Traditional subjects, such as Maths and Literacy, are taught alongside a range of activities including music; sports and recreational training at the local University of New England; healthy eating incentive programs designed by the University of Newcastle; and the Quicksmart online literacy program supported by the University of New England.

Outcomes

For around five percent of young people in Australia, continuing their learning at school is a challenge. Often caught in a cycle of suspension, the traditional school environment does not work for these young people.

Consistent with BackTrack’s mission and approach, the BackTrack School learning programs start with where the young person is ‘at’, finding out his or her prior knowledge, interests and aspirations. Re-engagement and retention in learning are key outcome areas of focus and while it is early days for the pilot, by looking at where the young person is at now rather than laboring over past problems and looking at where they want to be in the future continues to pay dividends.

Examples include

Improving	What might help you notice whether improvements are being made? Through... Evidence and approaches, such as
<p>Student engagement</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students either continuing with the BackTrack school or reengaging with local educational options such as formal school, TAFE or alternative certification training methods. • Questions directed at teachers and fellow students in discussion indicate a desire to learn. • Discussions continuing out of the classroom. • Completion of set tasks. • Students requesting continuation and extension of tasks including literacy and numeracy activities. • Functional literacy and numeracy which has permitted extended learning options and improved self-competency. • Students supporting each other with skills and knowledge (i.e. helping each other). • Students referring the program to peers with similar challenges. • The students’ emotive reactions to the school (i.e. happy, smiling youth!).

continued





Examples include

Improving	What might help you notice whether improvements are being made? Through... Evidence and approaches, such as
Student behavior	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improved concentration. • Attendance and participation – ‘show up and have a go’. • Greater interaction between teacher(s) and students. • Actively participate in creating a safe space to learn for all students. • An absence of behaviours previously seen as standard (e.g. aggression towards staff and students).
Community engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Previously identified rural skills shortage is being addressed by the agricultural and industry training of the BackTrack participants. • Feedback from teachers, parents and the community about improved family engagement and community involvement (e.g. http://vimeo.com/105406986). • Rural skills shortage is being addressed.

Lessons learned

Expanded approaches to learning: In order to evaluate ‘what’s working’ and ‘for whom’, there is first a need to understand that this particular student demographic is quite individual. They face a broad spectrum of social challenges. Although the formal schooling aspect is a vital part in the reengagement of the youths with their learning and education, it forms a part of the holistic learning program and “by the way” learning opportunities.

As such, we have learnt that we have to create an environment that is not a threat to having a go. By involving the young people in the “rules” of creating a neutral learning space has been a challenge but is starting to have an enormous impact. Some examples include the length of the lessons, using peer pressure in a positive framework to find solutions to use of mobile phones during class and, most recently, finding and trialing activities such as reading to dogs in situations where a young person will not have a go at reading. What we are noticing then is the need for continued creativity and varied teaching methods in educating this largely kinesthetic dynamic group of youths and to incorporate learning opportunities in diverse ways.





Traditional and expansive approaches: Our improvement approaches integrates with the local public schools. We map the learning skills back into the Board of Studies curriculum. This enables the students to be able to receive the applicable study recognition. The resources and time involved in the process are large and can be quite challenging, especially when the available staff are addressing and supporting the youths with social issues. This might include substance abuse, homelessness, significant contact with the legal system, drug and alcohol dependency, mental health concerns and a lack of connectedness to the community.

Act on what you learn: Use of volunteers is a well-regarded approach to improving outcomes for students. In our context, however, we have learned not to persist with this approach in a traditional sense. For the young people we support, having volunteers sit with them in one-on-one reading situation did not work. It seems as though it was too much of a gamble for these students to take the risk of being seen as “dumb” in front of someone that has not had sufficient time to build trust into the partnership. These issues are overcome, however, when the ‘volunteers’ are of the ‘four paw’ kind (i.e. dogs). We are learning that volunteers can come in different guises.

