

SPECIAL ASSISTANCE SCHOOLS

SHOWCASE



INDEPENDENT
SCHOOLS
AUSTRALIA

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY

Independent Schools Australia acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of Country throughout Australia and recognises continuing connection to land, waters and community. We pay respect to Elders past and present, and commit to the ongoing journey of reconciliation.

INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS AUSTRALIA

Independent Schools Australia (ISA) is the national peak body representing the Independent school sector. It comprises the eight state and territory Associations of Independent Schools (AISs). Through these Associations, ISA represents 1,209 schools and more than 688,638 students, accounting for approximately 17 per cent of Australian school enrolments.

ISA's major role is to bring the unique needs and contributions of Independent schools to the attention of the Australian Government and to represent the sector on national issues.

Independent schools are a diverse group of non-government schools serving a range of different communities. Many Independent schools provide a religious or values-based education. Others promote a specific educational philosophy or interpretation of mainstream education. A number of Independent schools have been established by community groups seeking to meet particular needs or to reflect the religious values of a community. Independent Catholic schools are a significant part of the sector, accounting for eight per cent of the Independent school sector's enrolments.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Independent special assistance schools play an important role in removing barriers to education, providing vulnerable young people with the opportunity to complete school.

Students enrolling in an Independent special assistance school have usually experienced long-term disengagement from education. With specialised support they can re-engage in learning and determine future pathways for further study or employment.

The *Australian Education Act 2013* defines special assistance schools as those which ‘primarily cater for students with social, emotional or behavioural difficulties’.¹ Although Independent special assistance schools enrol a high proportion of students with disability, these schools should not be confused with Independent special schools, which cater solely to students with disability, usually with significant adjustment needs.

Independent special assistance schools provide an alternative option to mainstream schooling to re-engage young people in education. Many students who attend special assistance schools are educationally disadvantaged. This is often due to their social or economic circumstances, and poor levels of achievement or school participation.

This *Special Assistance Schools: Showcase* report presents an overview of Independent special assistance schools in Australia and their unique role in providing inclusive and relevant education to young people who have not experienced success in mainstream schooling.

This report provides a national picture, data analysis and research on Independent special assistance schools including case studies of Independent special assistance schools across seven states and territories.

In October 2022, the Senate Education and Employment Committee launched an inquiry into the national trend of school refusal, acknowledging that this trend is increasing across all schooling sectors and year levels, seeking feedback as to the ongoing impact of school refusal on students and their families and input from stakeholders as to how to reverse this trend. This report will highlight the important role that Independent special assistance schools play in re-engaging students in education.

There are 96 Independent special assistance schools across Australia with an additional 80 campuses enrolling more than 13,000 students. Most Independent special assistance schools are in metropolitan areas, with some schools located in regional and very remote areas. In Western Australia, special assistance schools are called Curriculum and Reengagement in Education (CARE) schools.

The number of student enrolments in Independent special assistance schools between 2014 and 2022 almost tripled. The number of new schools and campuses doubled during these eight years.

Since the implementation of the Schooling Resource Standard funding model in 2014, there has been an increase in funding for special assistance schools. This appears to be largely due to the introduction of a differentiated loading for students with disability.

Under the current funding model, the base funding of a non-government school is reduced, based on the capacity of the parent community of a school to contribute to the school’s operating costs. In recognition of the level of educational need experienced by students attending a special assistance school, capacity to contribute (CTC) does not apply to special assistance schools.

Students attending Independent special assistance schools can access a range of support services and flexible approaches to attendance, curriculum, assessment and teaching and learning. Vocational education, including workplace learning, school-based traineeships, apprenticeships and vocational education and training (VET) courses are a key feature of many Independent special assistance schools, including individual transition support to post-school pathways.

¹ Federal Register of Legislation, ‘Australian Education Act 2013’, 2013, <https://www.legislation.gov.au/Details/C2013A00067/Html/Text>, <http://www.legislation.gov.au/Details/C2013A00067>.

School leaders, teachers and highly specialised support staff contribute to creating a safe and caring environment for students by developing positive relationships and using differentiated, flexible and inclusive approaches to teaching and learning. High staff to student ratios and small class sizes support individualised education strategies.

As students who attend Independent special assistance schools often have a background of school refusal or long-term disengagement from school, having effective engagement strategies to support students in their transition back to school is essential. Providing students with the opportunity to determine their own goals focused on interests, abilities and strengths, results in engaged learning and participation in relevant projects.

For some students, enrolling in an Independent special assistance school may be their last chance to complete their education, to change a negative trajectory into a positive one.

CASE STUDIES

A team from ISA visited several special assistance schools to inform this report. The experience of these visits is reflected in the seven case studies throughout this report which highlight similarities and differences between Independent special assistance schools and their student cohorts and illustrate how each school meets a range of complex student needs according to their specific context.

Independent Schools Australia takes this opportunity to thank the following schools, their principals and staff for taking the time to be a vital part of this project to illustrate this important work.

1. Galilee School, ACT
2. Macleay Valley Vocational College, NSW
3. Port School, WA
4. Youth Inc, SA
5. Hester Hornbrook, VIC
6. Carinity Southside, QLD
7. Indie School, TAS

The following case study is an example of an Independent special assistance high school catering for a wide range of student needs, situated close to the city, but in a rural setting.

CASE STUDY 1

GALILEE SCHOOL

Canberra, ACT



SNAPSHOT

Principal: Tim McNevin
Founded: 2005 (Kambah campus) and 2017 (Holder campus)
Caters for: Year 7-12 students
Enrolments: 89 over two campuses
Staff: 27.4 FTE
Hours: 9.30am to 2.00pm

“

It takes one positive relationship in a young person's life to make a difference. We get to be that difference.

Lisa Hivers, Head of Teaching and Learning

VISION

Principal, Tim McNevin describes the school's vision for Galilee to be a place where young people become self-reliant, able to navigate life challenges now and into the future and for students to not only feel valued by the school community, but to also recognise their own value as individuals. The school seeks to inspire their students to realise their full potential by developing and utilising their unique talents and capabilities.

IMPRESSIONS

As the ISA team arrived for a visit, we were warmly greeted by staff and the school's beautiful therapy dog, Halle, who was keen to know who we were.

Galilee School is part of the Communities at Work not-for-profit organisation, a broad-based social enterprise serving the Canberra region. Galilee School has two campuses, Holder and Kambah. Galilee Inc was originally set up in 2003 to provide respite and support for young people in care, funded by Youth Justice. It then became an Independent registered school in 2005.

The Kambah campus is set on rural acreage as a farm-like environment for years 7-10. Currently year 11 and 12 students are at the Holder campus, both being southern suburbs of Canberra.

WRAP-AROUND CARE

The teacher to student ratio is 1:5 to provide high-level, individual support. In addition, there are seven youth workers, a chaplain and therapy dog, Halle. A volunteer from Rainbow Paws animal rescue also comes twice a week with reading dogs to improve literacy levels and wellbeing for reluctant readers. This program allows students to sit quietly with one of their dogs that patiently listens to students reading. There is no judgement or anxiety and reading outcomes are improving.

Some students leave at the end of year 10 to go into employment and may return to complete years 11 and 12. To keep this option open, students can return up to the age of 25.



UNIQUE PROGRAMS

Years 7 to 9 students are encouraged to re-engage and reconnect with learning through individualised flexible learning models that put students at the centre, are based on students' strengths, and are driven by relationships. There is a different focus for year 10 students as it is not assumed that all students want to continue to years 11 and 12. Therefore, year 10 is about fostering independence and responsibility and creating work or apprenticeship-based pathways based on individuals' strengths and interests.

A new building is being constructed at the Kambah rural campus for the 11 and 12 students, so they can be mentors for the younger students. It is then planned that year 10 students will move to the Holder campus. Senior students can complete VET courses through Communities at Work or other external agencies such as the Canberra Institute of Technology or they may participate in a school-based apprenticeship or move into full time employment.

Galilee School does not offer an ATAR pathway as they focus on VET and employment pathways. If a student wants to achieve an ATAR, they can enrol in another school at the end of year 10. These transitions are managed by a dedicated Transitions Coordinator who works with each year 10 student to ensure their chosen pathway is as successful as possible.

Galilee School used trauma-informed practices to develop their own Positive Behaviour Support Framework which utilises role modelling, skills development, collaboration, student voice and inclusive practice. The framework is used to promote positive student connections with other students, staff, family and community and to support safety and wellbeing.

Galilee School's Restart Plan was developed on the understanding that not every day is a great day. Students are provided with voice and choice. If a student is not managing, they are given the option to go home, not as a punishment, but as a positive choice with clear steps and agreement. Restorative practices and principles are also used for both students and staff when harm has been caused and a situation requires remediation.

Galilee School is very deliberate about staff wellbeing and gives staff access to external support when needed. Student programs are often informed by staff passion and interest such as bike riding, music, gardening and outdoor education.

2. BENEFITS OF INDEPENDENT SPECIAL ASSISTANCE SCHOOLS

Independent special assistance schools respond to the individual needs of some of the most vulnerable young people in Australia.

For some young people, the decision to attend an Independent special assistance school may be their last chance to complete their education and reverse a negative trajectory such as long-term unemployment, risk of incarceration, substance abuse or poor mental health.

Independent special assistance schools provide diverse curriculum options, flexible arrangements and individual student-centred strategies to improve learning outcomes and support mental health and wellbeing, attendance and school completion. Students are encouraged to develop greater independence and are taught self-management strategies.

Independent special assistance schools act as a refuge for many students, providing them with much more than education. Basic needs such as critical dental, medical or housing assistance, or supporting students to obtain a driver's licence, birth certificate or access mental health support is all part of the range of services many Independent special assistance schools provide. A key feature of many Independent special assistance schools is the provision of training and skill development to increase employment or further study options.

RE-ENGAGEMENT IN EDUCATION

Re-engaging in education provides an opportunity for young people to re-imagine their future and set realistic, achievable personal and educational goals.² Achieving individual goals improves social and emotional wellbeing and mental health leading to improved outcomes in health, increased self-esteem, confidence and resilience.

Most Independent special assistance schools will only consider enrolling a student who has disengaged from school if the student is willing to commit to re-engage in their education, attend school and participate to the best of their ability with the individual flexible support provided. They may not have been enrolled in a school for a prolonged period and have a history of high absentee rates, skipping classes, not completing work or demonstrating disruptive behaviours, often resulting in suspension, expulsion or exclusion.

Independent special assistance schools create supportive and flexible environments. There is a strong focus on building positive relationships and connection to staff, family, peers and community. Through these supportive connections, students are empowered to seek help and to help each other.³

Some Independent special assistance schools change their term dates and even change the number of terms, so there are shorter holiday breaks. (Long breaks can make it difficult for some students to return to school.) Other schools provide holiday programs so that students can keep their routine, be safe and learn new skills.

POST-SCHOOL PATHWAYS

Many Independent special assistance schools offer alternative senior secondary pathways where students may elect to participate in work integrated learning such as school-based apprenticeships, traineeships, or study a VET certificate. Some Independent special assistance schools are Registered Training Organisations (RTOs), and others facilitate VET courses through external RTOs. Due to its practical, project-based approach and orientation to workplace opportunity, a VET pathway can be effective in re-engaging students in education.

2 Anna Zajacova and Elizabeth M. Lawrence, 'The Relationship between Education and Health: Reducing Disparities through a Contextual Approach', *Annual Review of Public Health* 39 (1 April 2018): 273–89, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-publhealth-031816-044628>.

3 Kitty te Riele, 'Putting the Jigsaw Together: Flexible Learning Programs in Australia Final Report' (The Victoria Institute, 2014), <http://dusseldorp.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/Victoria-Institute-1-7-MB2.pdf>. p. 56

Each Independent special assistance school that enrolls senior secondary students provides options best suited to their students. They offer extensive transition support to students in identifying and applying for preferred post-school pathways. Transition support for future study or employment generally extends beyond school graduation. In one school this support is provided up to seven years after graduation.

ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL BENEFITS

Education has an intrinsic value and a wide range of benefits to both individuals and society, contributing to increased productivity and economic growth.⁴

Research into the economic, fiscal and social benefits of improving academic achievement shows that there are significant potential gains from improving the academic achievement of students.⁵

Independent special assistance schools provide young people with another chance to successfully complete high school. By re-engaging students in education, improving academic achievement and supporting transitions from school to work or further study, Independent special assistance schools play an important role in improving the economic and social trajectories of their students and the community.

Improving academic achievement, particularly for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and students from low socio-economic backgrounds has significant economic impact. For example, halving the difference in academic results between the wider population and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students could generate a long-term economic impact of \$58.8 billion, equivalent to almost \$130,000 per Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student.⁶

Similarly, for low socio-economic-status students, an impact of \$148.8 billion, equivalent to \$72,000 per student could be generated over a 50-year working life.⁷ The benefits of education in contributing to long term economic and social benefits cannot be overestimated and Independent special assistance schools are therefore creating positive benefits for individuals, their families and the wider society by re-engaging young people, supporting employment or study opportunities and reducing disadvantage.

The following case study is an example of a regional Independent special assistance school in Northern NSW with high enrolments of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

4 OECD, 'Review Education Policies - Education GPS - OECD: Economic & Social Outcomes', 2021, <https://gpseducation.oecd.org/revieweducationpolicies/#!node=41761&filter=all>.

5 Department of Education, Skills and Employment, 'Unpacking Drivers of Learning Outcomes of Students from Different Backgrounds', 2019, <https://www.dese.gov.au/download/4812/unpacking-drivers-learning-outcomes-students-different-backgrounds/7171/document/docx>.

6 Department of Education, Skills and Employment.

7 Department of Education, Skills and Employment.

CASE STUDY 2

MACLEAY VOCATIONAL COLLEGE

Kempsey, NSW



SNAPSHOT

Principal: Ryan Martin

Founded: 1999

Caters for: Years 9 to 12 students who have been suspended or expelled from traditional education settings

Enrolments: 120 to 130 (More than three quarters are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students)

Staff: 54 (not all full time)

Hours: Varies according to unique programs

“

The school's role goes beyond the fence.

Ryan Martin, Principal

VISION

Students attending Macleay Vocational College (MVC) are given a fresh start. Principal, Ryan Martin states that, 'The level of trauma experienced by students is eye-watering' and that, 'Every student has experienced significant mind-boggling trauma and many are living with catastrophic domestic violence'. It is no wonder these students have not experienced success in schooling. The vision of a fresh start is real. Students are provided with a new opportunity to re-engage in education and change their life trajectory. MVC cannot solve all their problems, but supports students to build resilience and strategies to enable them to leave school with choice, purpose and direction.

IMPRESSIONS

Kempsey is a rural town situated halfway between Sydney and the Queensland border on the Macleay River. As it was bypassed by the highway in 2013, it no longer supports highway trade and its population of 10,000 rely mainly on rural industries for survival. Most MVC staff are Kempsey locals and finding additional staff can be difficult.

MVC looks like any other school from the school gate, but once inside you can feel the difference. Staff are casually chatting with students or

playing a game, class sizes are small and staff numbers are high. 'Building positive relationships between staff and students is key across all aspects of the school and all staff play an important role in mentoring students.' Ryan said, 'This school is unique. It is like one big family'. The definition of success is highly individual as there are no set outcomes. Success for one student may be a smile for the day. For another, it might be that they simply showed up.

The school works closely with the local Aboriginal Dunghutti community and allows community groups to use their facilities. A local Elder working at the school as a landscape gardener has created a welcoming yarning circle and the study of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and language is compulsory.

WRAP-AROUND CARE

Individual student support is provided both inside and outside school hours and staff form authentic relationships with their students. Students have access to teachers' phone numbers and can call them when they need support. The school psychologist conducts assessments and provides ongoing support, which may include a range of therapies or access to external organisations, depending on student needs.

Although options are limited, MCV will fund emergency accommodation if needed, as



some students live with grandparents, some in residential care, others in caravan parks, or some may be couch surfing or homeless. MVC has a partnership with NSW Community Housing and supports young mums with accommodation close to the school.

A hurdle for some students wanting to leave Kempsey after school is the fear of moving away and finding accommodation, employment and ongoing support. MVC staff try as much as possible to support graduates who wish to relocate and they are working towards providing a mentor to support students once they leave school. Staff regularly monitor student attendance and go out to check on students who do not arrive at school. Like students, staff can also access wellbeing support.

UNIQUE PROGRAMS

MVC has a set timetable with six lessons on Mondays and Tuesdays, four lessons plus sport on Wednesdays and five lessons on Thursdays and Fridays when most students leave at lunch time. Period 7 is a successful special program offered three afternoons per week from 2pm to 5pm available for a small group of students who require one-to-one support and a quiet space to learn without being distracted.

MVC uses the '8 [Aboriginal] Ways of Learning' framework, an Aboriginal teaching framework

based on story, visual learning, the environment, practical activities and community connection. The arts program strongly links to this pedagogy and the arts room is endearingly called 'the halfway house'.

There are many alternative education programs available for students, which cover areas such as anger management, drugs and alcohol, physical fitness, outdoor education experiences, Dunghutti language, boys' Aboriginal culture and girls' health. MVC have a childcare centre on site run by the school specifically for students with children. Students also have access to external agencies such as Centrelink, Legal Aid, community health programs and dental and health services.

MVC is a RTO delivering a range of industry approved courses, especially in hospitality and agriculture as these are the main industries in Kempsey. MVC also supports students to enrol as an apprentice or trainee, where students can work, learn and be paid while they study their preferred employment option.

3. PROFILE OF INDEPENDENT SPECIAL ASSISTANCE SCHOOLS

There has been significant national growth in Independent special assistance school enrolments between 2014 and 2022 following the implementation of the SRS funding model.

The new funding model assisted in the establishment of new schools and campuses to meet the need for alternate schooling options to re-engage some students in education. (Read more about changes to funding in section 4.)

In 2022, the Independent school sector had 96 special assistance schools (7.9 per cent of all Independent schools), catering for 13,100 students (1.9 per cent of all Independent school students). The number of special assistance schools in the Independent school sector doubled between 2014 and 2022, highlighting the need for these schools. In contrast, mainstream Independent schools, increased by 8 per cent over the same eight-year period.

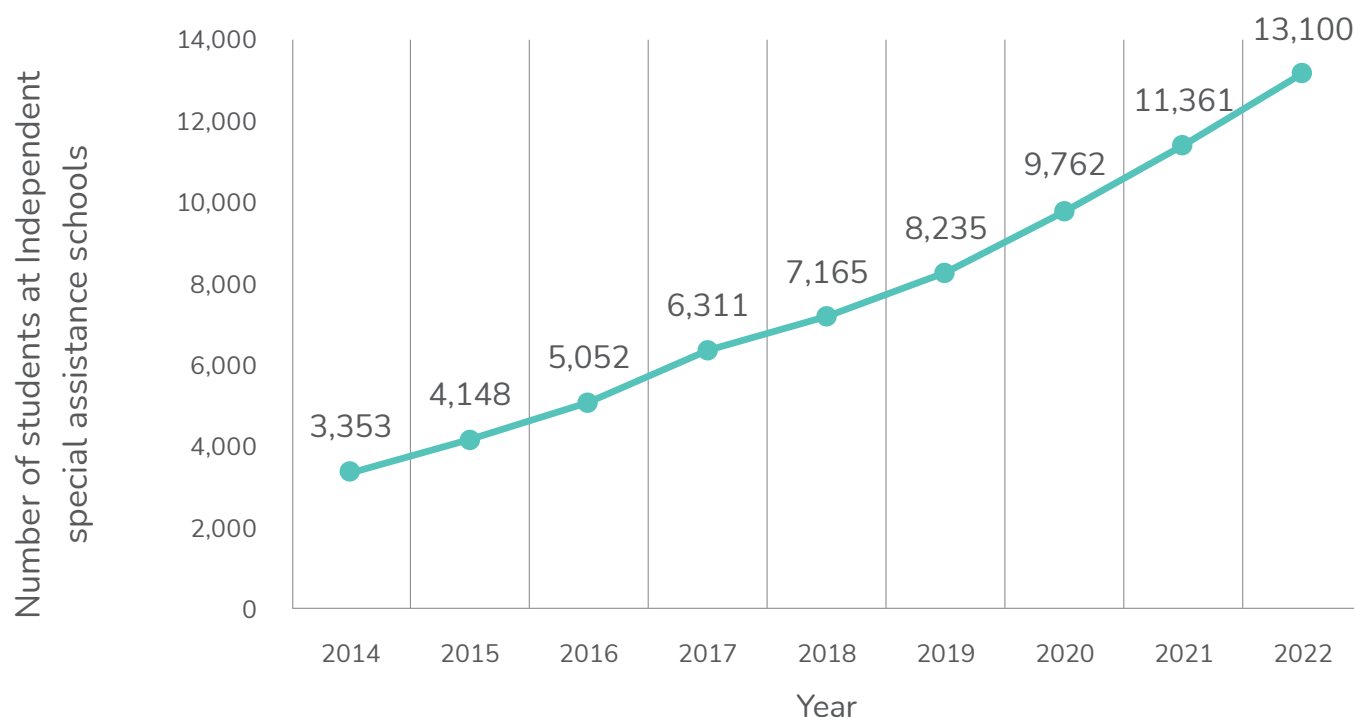
In the Catholic school sector, there were 28 Catholic special assistance schools, enrolling 2,775 students with overall student enrolments at Catholic special assistance schools increasing by 56 per cent between 2014 and 2021.

While government school systems have programs directed towards disengaged students, it does not appear that the nomenclature of special assistance schools is used.

TABLE 1: NUMBER OF INDEPENDENT SPECIAL ASSISTANCE SCHOOLS BY STATE, 2022

State	Total number of Independent special assistance schools	Total number of Independent schools	Independent special assistance schools as percentage of Independent schools
NSW	31	421	7.4%
VIC	21	227	9.3%
QLD	28	230	12.2%
SA	3	105	2.9%
WA	10	149	6.7%
TAS	2	34	5.9%
NT	0	25	0.0%
ACT	1	18	5.6%
Total	96	1,209	7.9%

In 2022, New South Wales had the greatest proportion of Independent special assistance schools (32 per cent of all Independent special assistance schools), while the state with the greatest growth in enrolments since 2014 was Queensland with an increase of 180 per cent. Queensland also had the highest proportion of Independent special assistance schools per state/territory at over 12 per cent. The Northern Territory does not have any Independent special assistance schools.

CHART 1: GROWTH IN STUDENT ENROLMENTS IN SPECIAL ASSISTANCE SCHOOLS, 2014-2022

Growth in student enrolments in Independent special assistance schools over the past eight years between 2014 and 2022 was an extraordinary 291 per cent (9,747 students), compared to an 18 per cent growth in mainstream Independent schools. During this eight-year period, the highest growth rate of Independent special assistance schools was 25 per cent between 2016 and 2017. These growth rates indicate the great need for Independent special assistance schools to provide these young people with an opportunity to continue their education.

CHARACTERISTICS OF INDEPENDENT SPECIAL ASSISTANCE SCHOOLS

Independent special assistance schools vary in educational approach, size, location, philosophy and religious affiliation, providing inclusive and relevant education to young people who have not experienced success in mainstream schooling.

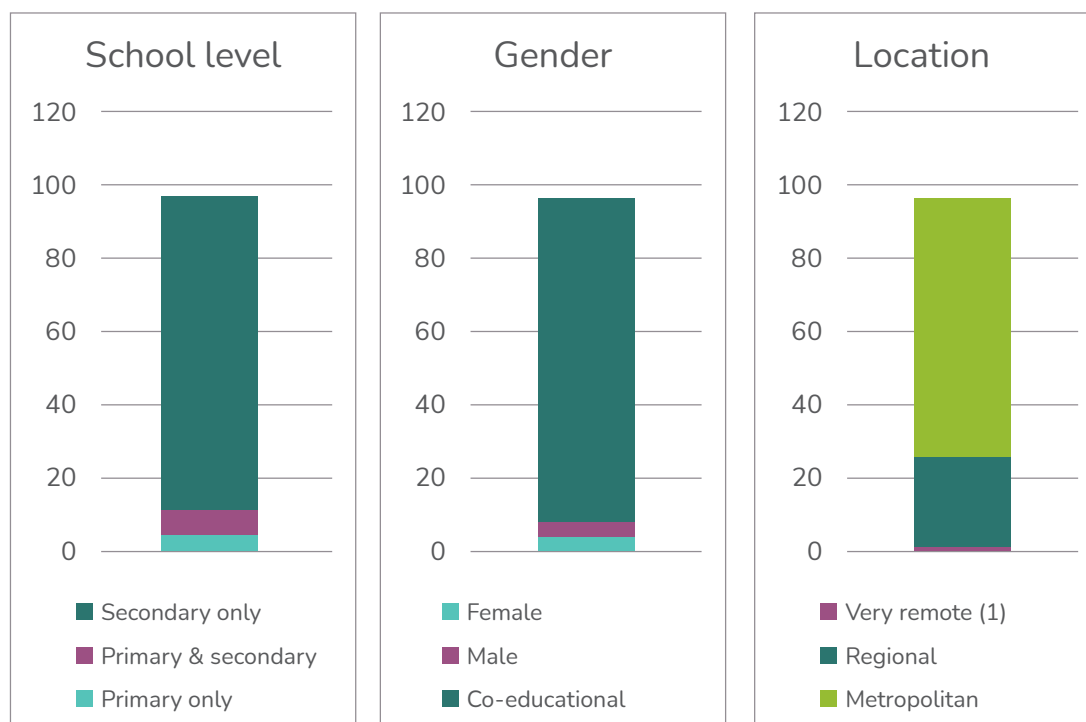
Each school has its own particular focus according to student need such as:

- workplace-focussed schools, offering VET qualifications and work integrated learning opportunities in industries such as agriculture, hospitality or music
- schools that cater for a particular student cohort such as young parents, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, or a particular gender
- schools for particular age groups such as senior secondary schools and young adults up to 25 years returning to complete their education.

There is a range of special assistance schools in the Independent sector with the following characteristics:

- **Primary level:** In 2022, there were four Independent special assistance primary schools and seven Independent special assistance schools enrolling both primary and secondary-aged students. Most primary-level schools aim to integrate students back into mainstream schooling to complete secondary education.
- **Boarding schools:** In 2022 there were three Independent special assistance schools with boarding facilities. Two of the three special assistance boarding schools were Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander schools (one in a regional area) with a majority enrolment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

- **Regional schools:** In 2022, there were 25 Independent special assistance schools in regional geographical areas. There were no Independent special assistance schools in remote areas however there was one Independent special assistance school in a very remote area of Western Australia. In 2022, there were 70 Independent special assistance schools in metropolitan settings.
- **Gender-specific schools:** Some Independent special assistance schools are gender-specific catering to only female or male students. In 2022, there were four Independent special assistance schools that had 100 per cent enrolment of female students and four schools that had 100 per cent enrolment of male students. Some of these schools focus on gender associated issues, such as targeted parenting support and education, with young parents encouraged to attend school with their babies or children.


TABLE 2: STUDENT CHARACTERISTICS AT INDEPENDENT SPECIAL ASSISTANCE SCHOOLS BY STATE, 2022

State	Number of students at Independent special assistance schools	Number of enrolments in all Independent schools	Independent special assistance school enrolments as a percentage of all Independent school enrolments	Average number of students per Independent special assistance school	Median number of students at Independent special assistance schools
NSW	2,792	227,226	1.2%	90	58
VIC	2,839	159,179	1.8%	135	63
QLD	4,578	141,466	3.2%	163	109
SA	398	53,380	0.7%	133	103
WA	2,208	75,985	2.9%	221	144
TAS	203	10,705	1.9%	102	102
NT	0	5,863	0.0%	0	0
ACT	82	14,836	0.6%	82	82
Total	13,100	688,638	1.9%	136	82

In 2022, Queensland had the highest number of students enrolled in Independent special assistance schools at 4,578 students. The state with the highest proportion of students at Independent special assistance schools when compared to the total number of students in the Independent school sector, was Queensland at over three per cent. Western Australia had the highest average number of students per Independent special assistance school at 221 students.

Sixty-one per cent of Independent special assistance schools had enrolments up to 100 students compared to 21 per cent of mainstream Independent schools. Only three per cent of Independent special assistance schools had enrolments of more than 500 students, compared to 46 per cent of mainstream Independent schools.

In 2022, 83 per cent of Independent special assistance schools (80 schools) had fewer than 200 students. In contrast, the largest Independent special assistance school in Queensland had 1,026 students and the second largest school in Western Australia had 815 students.

The following case study is an example of an Independent special assistance school which has unique outreach programs to cater for those students who are unable to attend onsite.



Image courtesy of Youth Inc.

CASE STUDY 3

PORT SCHOOL

Hamilton Hill, WA



SNAPSHOT

Principal: Barry Finch OAM

Founded: 1992 in Fremantle, now located in Hamilton Hill (5km south of Fremantle)

Caters for: At-risk students, years 9 to 12

Enrolments: 98 on site, 140 total

Staff: 35 full time and 16 part time

Hours: 8.45am to 2.15pm

“

They are survivors. It's amazing they come every day.

Barry Finch, Principal

VISION

Port School is located at Hamilton Hill, a quiet suburb 22km south of Perth. Port School aims to re-engage at-risk youth who have not been able to succeed in mainstream education. In WA, special assistance schools are called Curriculum and Re-engagement in Education (CARE) Schools and this sums up what happens at Port School. Staff deeply care about each and every student, acknowledging the difficult and traumatic time that these young people have experienced. Their vision is to provide a safe, nurturing and supportive environment where students are given a new chance to learn and build self-confidence. Empowerment, diversity, growth and community are all-encompassing school values embedded in the school's culture and programs.

IMPRESSIONS

Port School aims to find the 'right fit' option for every student who journeys through the school. Success is defined as personal success, tailored to each individual. Principal, Barry Finch received an Order of Australia Medal (OAM) in 2022 for services to education and at-risk youth. His calm, pragmatic, relational but no-nonsense leadership style has served the school since 2001, first as a teacher and then as principal. As Barry walks around the school, students seek him out, asking his advice, or for him to solve a problem, or simply to check in.

Port School caters for the majority of their students on site but also provides targeted specific offsite programs for those with greater needs and extreme life challenges. Both approaches aim to prepare all their students for success and life beyond school.

WRAP-AROUND CARE

At Port School, wrap-around care means anything and everything, depending on each student's needs. This might range from subsidising or paying for dental assistance, glasses or gym membership if deemed essential to a student's mental health. Each student has an individual education or support plan to eliminate barriers to learning, enable them to experience



success or provide opportunities that might otherwise be out of reach, such as a pre-driver program. Class size is ten students or less, always with two staff in attendance.

UNIQUE PROGRAMS

Port School provides academic and vocational pathways outside the Western Australia Certificate of Education (WACE). The school is a registered training organisation and students may study Certificate II and III in General Education for Adults and choose from 11 other VET courses, with support for transition into tertiary study, apprenticeships, traineeships or the workforce.

A feature of Port School is that year 8 and 9 students complete all general classes with the same teachers and education assistants who cover the entire curriculum, similar to a primary school environment. There is a strong focus on explicit direct instruction, which improves participation and engagement, as concepts taught are checked for understanding multiple times throughout a lesson so that mastery is gained before moving on to a new concept. Teachers report that this is often the first time a student has actually experienced success and not felt they have been left behind.

The mobile classroom is an offsite program for young people who struggle to engage with the school environment. Two staff, usually a teacher and youth worker drive the bus to meet students

in and around Fremantle and Perth, teaching a maximum of five students in parks, at the beach or in familiar community areas. Staff build rapport and trust to create a space where the most disenfranchised students feel they belong.

The outreach program is another offsite program providing one-to-one support for long-term disengaged students. These young people may live in residential care, have extreme anxiety or be at risk of suicide. The program is staffed by male and female youth workers, counsellors and teachers, using community spaces such as libraries, youth centres or other public places. If the student is unable to transition back to school, they may remain in this program until they graduate.

The Port Young Parent Centre is an education program for teenage mums (pregnant or parenting). They receive parent education and support to complete their education, with their children next door in the early learning centre operated by the school.

Year 13 is an option for students not quite ready to leave school. They are expected to contribute to the community and take on a leadership role whilst completing an agreed vocational course.

4. FUNDING ARRANGEMENTS

Funding for non-government schools in Australia relies on partnerships between the Australian Government and state/territory governments, parents and school communities.

Government recurrent funding to non-government schools is determined by the Schooling Resource Standard (SRS) funding model. The SRS is an estimate of how much public funding a school needs to meet its students' educational needs.

GOVERNMENT FUNDING FOR SPECIAL ASSISTANCE SCHOOLS

The SRS funding model provides base funding with loadings for all students in all sectors of education. Under the funding model, a non-government school's base funding is reduced based on the capacity of the parent community of a school to contribute to the school's operating costs. However, this capacity to contribute (CTC) calculation does not apply to special assistance schools, special schools, schools enrolling a majority of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and remote sole provider schools. These schools are referred to as being CTC-exempt.

Under the SRS funding model, in addition to base funding, there are six loadings to address disadvantage; four student-based loadings and two school-based loadings. These loadings are the student with disability loading, the low English language proficiency loading, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander loading, the socio-educational disadvantage loading, and the loadings for school location and school size.

Since the implementation of the SRS funding model in 2014, there has been an increase in funding for special assistance schools. This appears to be largely due to the introduction of a differentiated loading for students with disability.

Many of the students attending Independent special assistance schools are included in the Nationally Consistent Collection of Data on School Students with Disability (NCCD). The NCCD is the basis for the allocation of the loading for students with disability. Independent special assistance schools reported that a large proportion of their students attract funding under the student with disability loading with many requiring high levels of adjustment.

Unlike other types of Independent schools, recurrent funding for CTC-exempt schools, including special assistance schools, can be used for capital works such as building improvements and the purchase of land for infrastructure development.

PARENTAL FEES AND PRIVATE INCOME

Independent schools are mostly funded by parents through fees, however Independent special assistance schools receive very low levels of income from parental fees and private income. Students in Independent special assistance schools come from a range of (often disadvantaged) backgrounds. For example, they may live in residential care or their families may not be in a financial position to pay parent contributions. Some Independent special assistance schools ask for a nominal contribution to the cost of education however most special assistance schools either charge very low or no fees.

In some states, there are specific regulations that govern what fees special assistance schools are able to charge. For example, under state regulation, special assistance schools in Queensland are not permitted to charge fees, leaving them solely reliant on government funding to provide services.

In 2021, on average, Independent special assistance schools received 77 per cent of their recurrent funding from the Australian Government, 18 per cent from state funding, with the remaining five per cent being provided by parent contribution and private income. This compares to other types of Independent schools, which receive 37 per cent of their recurrent funding from the Australian Government, 10 per cent from state funding, with 53 per cent being provided by parent contribution and private income.

REPORTING CHALLENGES

Many special assistance schools face challenges in meeting data provision requirements, particularly in relation to Australian Government funding.

The difficulty in obtaining meaningful data is often inherent to the very nature of the students, families and communities that rely on Independent special assistance schools.

Non-Government School Census

The process of reporting student enrolments for the state and Commonwealth non-government school censuses can be extremely challenging for special assistance schools as it requires having students on site during the reference period for the school to be eligible for recurrent funding. The Commonwealth Census Reference Period is 20 school days leading up to Census Day and regular attendance is a common challenge for Independent special assistance schools.

There are options to apply for Special Circumstances to include students unable to attend during the reference period but these processes can be complex and onerous for schools with limited administration staff.

Students with Disability

A large proportion of Independent special assistance schools reported that either most or all of the young people enrolled at their school have a disability funded under the NCCD. Many schools have students who require a diverse range of adjustments ranging from the Quality Differentiated Teaching Practice (QDTP) level to the Extensive level of adjustments. The workload required to collate data for large numbers of students in the NCCD is substantial and places a significant administrative burden on schools.

Examples of adjustments may include planning, reporting, teaching and learning, extracurricular activities, curriculum, environment, infrastructure, assessment and resources.⁸

Assessments for disability

While not necessary for NCCD funding, medical and/or specialist assessments can be of significant assistance to schools in understanding what adjustments a student may require to fully participate in their education. It can be difficult for schools to obtain assessments for students with disability due to a lack of services, long wait times and/or parents and carers inability to afford external assessments.

In the absence of a formal assessment, schools can impute that a student has a disability based on their assessment of the functional impact of the student's disability on their education. In consultation with parents, carers, students, staff and possibly external specialists, the school will then determine the level and type of adjustments to be made for each student.

⁸ Education Council, '2021 NCCD Guidelines', 2021, <https://www.nccd.edu.au/tools/nccd-guidelines-0>.

CASE STUDY 4

YOUTH INC

Adelaide, SA



SNAPSHOT

Principal: Fred Heidt

Founded: 2018

Caters for: Young adults aged 17 to 24

Enrolments: 110 (usually 60 to 70 on site each day. Others access online learning)

Staff: 17 FTE

Hours: 10am to 3pm (seasons, not terms. 50 weeks per year)

“

You never change things by fighting the existing reality. To change something, build a new model that makes the existing model obsolete.

R. Buckminster Fuller,
Philosopher and Systems
Theorist

VISION

The quote above is embraced by Youth Inc as they aspire to build and lead a world-class transformative school model that engages young people in a flexible and supportive adult learning environment. The school aims to avoid normalising systemisation by 'blowing up the box'. Youth Inc's vision includes an additional campus in a new Adelaide shopping centre and another campus at Forestville with a focus on sustainability and the environment.

Exploring and expressing who you are and who you want to be lies at the heart of Youth Inc programs. Youth Inc is an 'imagination factory' where young people can develop their own ideas based on the motto: *Be yourself. Change the world.*

IMPRESSIONS

Youth Inc is a well-designed, dynamic modern space in the very heart of Adelaide city with large, open co-learning spaces and quiet retreat areas. Youth Inc has developed a transformative school model using a student-centred, strength-based approach, by co-designing, scaffolding and facilitating learning experiences that respond to student motivation, interest and needs. Student wellbeing is not seen as something separate, but integrated into all they do, aiming for learner

agency, transcending limiting beliefs and focusing on identity.

Staff meet daily as a multi-disciplinary team to work through complex issues, provide each other with feedback and create new ideas to benefit students. They also engage in two hours of professional development every week to continue to build skills and knowledge.

WRAP-AROUND CARE

Youth Inc caters for young adults who have not completed year 12 or a VET qualification and may have:

- experienced personal or social barriers to learning
- mental health challenges such as anxiety and depression
- a disability
- experienced discrimination
- experienced underemployment or unemployment.

The school deliberately focuses on students who are past compulsory school age and creates an opportunity for young adults to re-engage in formal learning and make sustainable change by finding a sense of purpose and direction. Students can begin two days per week as part of a slow transition back to school before attending full-time.



The school prefers positive psychology over a trauma-informed approach, to develop mindfulness and positive mental health. Teachers are seen as learning facilitators and students have access to life coaches, mentors and 'navigators'. The school believes that developing a strong mentor-to-student relationship and connection is a vital step to empowerment as this may be the first relationship where a student has felt seen, heard and valued. 'Navigators' link students to external support such as Centrelink, Headspace, homeless shelters or housing services and an educational psychologist is available one day per week.

UNIQUE PROGRAMS

Youth Inc's evolving education program works outside the box of 'normalised education' so that students have a transformative, flexible education experience. Staff reverse-engineer student interest projects to meet the requirements of the South Australian Certificate of Education (SACE) as they want students to engage deeply in their learning, not worry about the 'checklist'. Youth Inc works with the SACE Board to pre-approve local programs and aims to have a pre-approved whole-school flexible curriculum within five years.

Youth Inc moved away from implementing My Awesome Plans (MAP) to student-directed individual story-based plans. One teacher commented, 'You can have pain and possibility all

at once. We ask students what possibilities they can draw from their own story, even if painful'. Students prepare progress reports, reflecting on their own learning journey and based on identity, participation and agency. Outcomes for each student are individual and developed through conversation: This is not a linear or formal process.

Students engage in research projects, community studies and VET to complete their SACE studies. This integrated approach is experiential, creative, entrepreneurial and work-integrated with a particular focus on positive social impact to promote a sense of relevance and purpose. The learning program does not include subjects, classes or classrooms, but is based on workshops, projects and opportunities that arise. Their learning model centres around personal passions, arts and media, active citizenship and support, and is built on trusted and respectful staff and student relationships.

5. DISADVANTAGED STUDENTS

Responding to the individual needs of students and providing specialised additional support are key features of Independent special assistance schools in their goal to reduce barriers to education.

Generally, students who attend special assistance schools are educationally-disadvantaged in some way. Educational disadvantage is when a student derives less benefit from their education than their peers. Disadvantage may be attributed to the student's social or economic circumstances and often results in poor levels of achievement or school participation.

In the international assessment context in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), educational disadvantage is measured by parents' highest occupational status, parents' highest educational level, and home possessions. PISA results have consistently shown a connection between disadvantage and academic achievement.⁹

Independent special assistance schools that ISA visited indicated that educational disadvantage was experienced by a considerable number of their student cohort. These schools report that many students who attend Independent special assistance schools may:

- live-in residential care
- have experience of poverty, bullying, homelessness, discrimination or intergenerational unemployment
- be subject to domestic violence.

These circumstances may result in trauma, absenteeism, poor mental health or drug addiction. These challenges impact learning and can cause low levels of academic achievement, including literacy and numeracy, requiring extra support to reduce or eliminate these barriers so these young people can confidently participate in school.

REGIONAL AND REMOTE STUDENTS

Locality can be a measure of educational disadvantage for students, with research showing that students in more regional and remote locations may have poorer educational outcomes.¹⁰ The 2015 PISA results showed that as the distance from metropolitan centres increased, Australian students had lower scores.¹¹

Independent special assistance schools in regional and very remote locations experience additional barriers in catering for disadvantaged students including access to support services such as health and wellbeing, social support, recreation activities and reduced staff availability.

In 2022, there were 25 Independent special assistance schools located in regional areas enrolling nearly 4,000 students and one remote Independent special assistance school enrolling fewer than 30 students.

9 OECD, 'Are Countries Moving Towards More Equitable Education Systems?', vol. 25, PISA in Focus, 2013, <https://doi.org/10.1787/5k4bwpbqz9s-en.9,16>], "issued": {"date-parts": [{"2013"}]}], "schema": "https://github.com/citation-style-language/schema/raw/master/csl-citation.json"]

10 Stephen Lamb, Sara Glover, and Anne Walstab, 'Educational Disadvantage and Regional and Rural Schools', 2014, https://research.acer.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1228&context=research_conference.

11 Hasley, J, 'Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education - Final Report', 2018, <https://www.dese.gov.au/quality-schools-package/resources/independent-review-regional-rural-and-remote-education-final-report>.

ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER STUDENTS

A target of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap is that by 2031, 67 per cent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people are engaged in employment, training or education.¹² Independent special assistance schools contribute to reaching this target by supporting regular attendance and providing a positive environment for disadvantaged and disengaged Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

In 2022, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students made up 17 per cent of students enrolled in Independent special assistance schools compared to just over two per cent in mainstream Independent schools. In 2022, six Independent special assistance schools had 100 per cent enrolment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

Independent special assistance schools might employ Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educators or Indigenous Youth and Family Support Workers, and/or engage with Elders and community to further reduce barriers and provide cultural education and safety for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

STUDENTS WITH DISABILITY

Many students who attend Independent special assistance schools have complex learning or behavioural needs, often associated with mental health conditions, or physical, sensory, social-emotional and/or cognitive disability. These students often require significant levels of adjustment to enable their equitable participation in education.

There are four levels of adjustment:

- Quality Differentiated Teaching Practice (QDTP): Support through active monitoring and adjustments are not greater than those used to meet the needs of diverse learners
- Supplementary: Adjustments that are supplementary to the strategies and resources already available for all students within the school
- Substantive: Essential adjustments and considerable adult assistance
- Extensive: Students with disability and very high support needs.

Under the NCCD model, adjustments for students under QDTP are not funded.

Independent special assistance schools reported that a large proportion of their students attract funding under the student with disability loading compared to mainstream Independent schools.

Independent special assistance schools liaise closely with families when possible and work collaboratively with external service providers to provide targeted support to students with disability through the provision of suitable adjustments.

LGBTIQA+ STUDENTS

LGBTIQA+ is an evolving acronym for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer/questioning or asexual people. Even though there are laws that protect the rights of all people to be free from discrimination, in Australia, as in the rest of the world some LGBTIQA+ young people experience bullying, discrimination or harassment at school because of their sexual orientation, sex or gender identity.¹³ This may result in increased anxiety and depression, withdrawal or refusal to attend school.

The Australian Human Rights Commission states that more than 11 per cent of Australians may have a diverse sexual orientation, sex or gender identity and that an estimated 1.7 per cent of children born in Australia are intersex.¹⁴

¹² Council of Australian Government and Coalition of Peaks, 'National Agreement on Closing the Gap', 2020, <https://www.closingthegap.gov.au/national-agreement>.

¹³ Australian Human Rights Commission, 'Students', accessed 17 November 2022, <https://humanrights.gov.au/education/students>.

¹⁴ Australian Human Rights Commission, 'Face the Facts: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex People', accessed 17 November 2022, <https://humanrights.gov.au/our-work/education/face-facts-lesbian-gay-bisexual-trans-and-intersex-people>.

An Independent special assistance school can be an opportunity for some LGBTIQ+ students who have disengaged from mainstream schooling to re-engage in education and find a supportive, inclusive environment.

YOUNG PARENTS

Some of the case studies illustrate that Independent special assistance schools can be a positive option for young parents, as there may be an early childhood centre on site or co-located, allowing young parents to continue their education, be close to their child/ren, visit between classes and receive parenting support and education.

One case study, Hester Hornbrook Academy, has a classroom where young parents can go to school and have their young child in class with them. The following case study demonstrates how this Independent special assistance school prepares particular cohorts of students for success in adult life, such as young mothers who might otherwise have limited education options.



Image courtesy of Hester Hornbrook Academy.



Image courtesy of Hester Hornbrook Academy.

CASE STUDY 5

HESTER HORN BROOK ACADEMY

Sunshine campus, Victoria



SNAPSHOT

Principal: Sally Lasslett
Founded: 2017
Caters for: Students aged 15 to 24, disengaged from education for ten weeks or more
Enrolments: 210 maximum
Staff: 35 FTE
Hours: 10am to 3pm

“

**Well-being
above student
outcomes.**

Principal, Sally Lasslett

VISION

Hester Hornbrook Academy has three campuses, Sunshine, Melbourne CBD and Prahran with a South Melbourne campus opening in 2023. Total school enrolments over the three campuses are 378 with 90 staff. Wellbeing and education sit side by side and wellbeing is seen as everyone's responsibility. The school aims to reduce barriers to education for young people, providing positive education experiences through their Healing Oriented Program of Education (HOPE). This vision to make a difference for disengaged youth is supported by a strong team approach with a youth worker in every class so there is always someone to listen to and support each student.

Hester Hornbrook's vision doesn't stop at graduation. In the first year post-school, youth worker support continues, especially in mental health, housing and finding employment. This valuable long-term support for Hester Hornbrook alumni is offered for seven years.

IMPRESSIONS

The Sunshine Campus of Hester Hornbrook is situated in an industrial area and looks like a shop front, but once through the main door, you enter a unique environment. The school has been thoughtfully planned with a trauma-informed lens so there are no institution-like long corridors

or hallways. The space is welcoming, with busy productive areas and quiet, cosy, inviting seating areas. Soft pastel colours have been selected to help create a safe, calm feeling. There are no uniforms or bells and the atmosphere feels very different from a mainstream school.

Staff are strongly aligned with the school's vision. The focus on staff wellbeing pays dividends as they love working at Hester Hornbrook. Staff feel supported with regular wellbeing check-ins and access to external confidential counselling services.

The high level of staff collaboration is impressive. With students commencing school at 10am, staff have essential time for daily meetings to discuss programs and provide feedback and ensure there is appropriate wrap-around support for each student.

WRAP-AROUND CARE

Hester Hornbrook is more than a school: It is a community hub. Young mums can bring their babies to class, students can do their washing, have a shower, take home evening meals and be linked with appropriate external support agencies. Breakfast and lunch are provided daily and every student is given a Myki card (Victoria's public transport card) to access free transport to school.



Student mental health and wellbeing are prioritised and youth workers create strong, respectful, positive relationships and arrange access to external agencies according to individual student need. The school has access to a range of specialised support such as psychologists, occupational therapists, lawyers, drug and alcohol support staff, nurses, health or housing services.

UNIQUE PROGRAMS

The unique, flexible learning programs at Hester Hornbrook are designed to allow students to experience success. All VET courses are delivered at school so that full wrap-around support can be provided.

The Young Parents Program is available to students expecting a child or with a child up to 18 months old. They attend school two days per week with their child in the classroom and study their VET course once per week. Youth workers support access to childcare for VET days. The Young Parents' Classroom is unique with learning areas, tables, whiteboard, high chairs, baby toys and cots.

Outreach programs are available for students unable to attend school. Teachers and youth workers visit students off site to deliver the education and wellbeing programs, with a strong focus on individualised learning needs.

Engage Youth is a program for long-term disengaged students who have not attended school for more than ten weeks. They commence school initially for two days per week to build confidence and capacity – and increase attendance accordingly.

The Living Learning Program in partnership with Melbourne City Mission is a three-year community-based program for young people aged 15 to 21 years with a mental health condition. This program provides mental health and wellbeing support as well as a physical health program with access to youth workers and specialist education support to ensure everyone can finish school.

6. STAFF

Working in an Independent special assistance school can be a significant undertaking, with some educators re-examining long-held beliefs about education and their role as teachers. Many teachers in Independent special assistance schools have a diverse skill set and some have additional vocational training experience.

Independent special assistance schools aim to attract and recruit staff with diverse experience in working with young people with complex needs and to have a consistent pool of experienced relief staff.

School leaders and staff in Independent special assistance schools strive to be innovative and flexible, and to value each young person for who they are, seeing their inner potential and looking beyond behaviour. This may involve thinking outside the box regarding curriculum and assessment, or as one teacher stated, 'blowing up the box'.

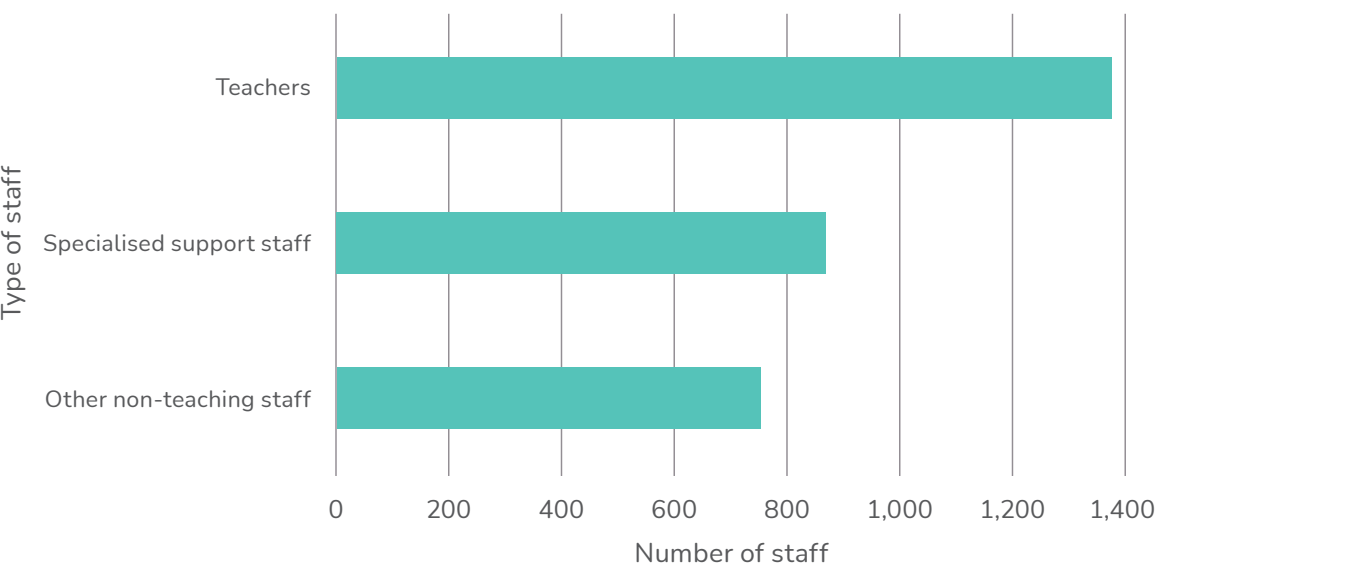
Independent special assistance school leaders support their staff by providing debriefing, counselling and/or staff wellbeing programs with ongoing professional development in whole-school approaches so that every staff member is set up for success. School leaders also understand the importance of staff collaboration, so that educators and support staff can use a wrap-around approach to support students. Due to the complexity and demands of working in an Independent special assistance school, many school leaders prioritised a range of flexible timetables to ensure staff have time to work together.

Fostering trust and building healthy relationships between staff and students are essential in all education settings and of particular importance for Independence special assistance schools. The case studies included in this report highlight that staff understand that the development of positive relationships lies at the foundation of their approach in re-engaging young people in education.

Staff who were interviewed by ISA reported that they work in an Independent special assistance school because it aligns with their own social, educational and personal values. They take this responsibility seriously as they may be the only stable adult figure in a student's life. They stated they have an opportunity to truly make a difference and give young people a second chance at changing their own narrative.

Schools in regional areas reported difficulty in attracting staff with the level of experience they require and the ability to work in positive ways with young people with at times challenging behaviours and a range of complex needs. One principal interviewed explained that before employing any new staff, he invites potential applicants to visit the school for a couple of days, as not everyone is suited to working in an Independent special assistance school.

CHART 2: STAFF NUMBERS AT INDEPENDENT SPECIAL ASSISTANCE SCHOOLS, 2022



In 2022, there were 1,381 teachers in Independent special assistance schools, consisting of 46 per cent of total staff, with the other 54 per cent comprising 873 specialist support staff and 755 other non-teaching staff. The significantly high number of support staff is evidence of the need for high levels of specialised support.

In 2022, the student to teacher ratio at Independent special assistance schools (9:1) was lower compared to mainstream Independent schools (12:1). This lower ratio allows teachers more time to focus on the needs of each individual student, modify curriculum, create flexible education opportunities, and support strategies for learning, independence and wellbeing.

At Independent special assistance schools, the ratio of student to specialised support staff (15:1) was significantly lower than mainstream Independent schools (122:1) in 2022. Other non-teaching staff ratios are also lower in Independent special assistance schools (17:1) when compared to mainstream Independent schools (24:1).

SPECIALIST STAFF

Specialist staff add value to the work of teachers and educational leaders and the learning and wellbeing of students. Together, educators and specialist staff create a strong wrap-around team to support each student.

Specialist staff may include youth workers, learning assistants, social workers, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educators, vocational educators, school chaplains and/or wellbeing officers. Some schools have access to school psychologists who can conduct psychological assessments and provide mental health support.

Specialist staff provide essential social emotional support, pastoral care, wellbeing guidance, specialised learning assistance to students and links to support agencies, collaborating with teachers and liaising with parents and carers and external organisations to advocate for the interests of students.

Independent special assistance schools might engage any of the following support staff, depending on student needs and availability of a suitably qualified workforce:

- **Youth workers** provide student case management and wrap-around support by creating and reviewing Individual Learning Plans, offering guidance to navigate relationships and manage school expectations. They may act as a conduit between targeted external stakeholders such as the justice system and health professionals and can support students with post school options and transitions.
- **Learning assistants** work closely with teachers to support students with a range of learning, social-emotional and/or wellbeing challenges including targeted support and adjustments for students with disability.
- **Social workers** are often the interface between the student and their environment, recognising the impact of social, political, economic and cultural factors on the health and wellbeing of students. Accordingly, social workers provide essential practical support and liaison with families and external agencies to address issues such as housing or drug and alcohol abuse.
- **Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educators** bring cultural value, skills, knowledge and experience to school operations, the school community and curriculum and can act as cultural mentors for Aboriginal and the Torres Strait Islander students, supporting connection to family, community and culture.
- **Vocational educators** facilitate learning for students in VET courses. They may be employed by the school or the partner registered training organisation. Vocational educators are experts in their field and can act as a support for students in post-school pathways.
- **School chaplains and wellbeing officers** develop positive relationships with students, staff and their communities, providing critical support and pastoral care. They may provide whole-of-school wellbeing approaches, small group prevention strategies, targeted programs and/or one-to-one interventions for student wellbeing. School chaplains also provide spiritual or religious support.

In many areas, a workforce shortage adds complexity to schools already dealing with the complex needs of students.

The following case study demonstrates the important collaboration between different types of expertise.

CASE STUDY 6

CARINITY EDUCATION SOUTHSIDE

Sunnybank, QLD



SNAPSHOT

Principal: Leann Faint
Founded: 1997 (moved to current location in 2002)
Caters for: Vulnerable young women, years 7 to 12
Enrolments: 118 (maximum capacity: 125)
Staff: 26.9FTE
Hours: 9am to 3pm

“

Remove barriers to education, don't create them.

Leann Faint, Principal

VISION

Sunnybank is a residential suburb 12 km south of Brisbane developed in the late 1950s. In a quiet suburban street, Carinity Education Southside provides education for vulnerable young women with complex trauma. The school is located on a small site, and uses this limitation wisely, repurposing spaces for specific needs and creating calm areas for students.

Approximately 30 to 40 per cent of students identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander. Carinity's vision is to build a strong sense of community where young women have a second chance at education, their needs are met, and they feel safe and valued. A key part of the school's vision is that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture is nurtured and honoured, creating a sense of connection and belonging.

IMPRESSIONS

All students have a history of long-term disengagement from school before arriving at Carinity. Many students have a history of sexual abuse, domestic violence, or experience of the justice system. Some students currently live in residential care. Respected Torres Strait Islander, Auntie Adelaide has been an Indigenous youth and family support worker at Carinity for 18 years and is like the archetypal mother, spreading

her welcome, love, care, culture and support to everyone who enters the school gate. Auntie Adelaide's mother, Elder Auntie Joan has worked in the Carinity kitchen for 15 years and the family-like feel in the school provides the safety and connection the students need.

Carinity staff feel they make a positive difference every day. Their work is collaborative and innovative, creating new opportunities and programs for young women experiencing barriers to education so they feel a sense of hope; that they are being given a second chance.

In 2014, the Search Light Early Learning Centre moved to the new purpose-built 'Numberlee Kunerra Learning Place' on the Carinity Education Southside campus. The community partnership between Search Light and the school has provided Carinity young mums with access to specialised family support and education, which can continue upon leaving school when they move into further education or employment.

WRAP-AROUND CARE

Years 7 to 10 have approximately 15 students in each class, though numbers increase for years 11 and 12. Every student has an individual plan and the school uses the 'My Mind Star' individualised case-management tool to co-create goals with students, looking beyond academic outcomes.



There is a strong team approach with all teachers and staff trained inhouse in Therapeutic Crisis Intervention to help students regulate their behaviour and work in positive ways. The support team consists of an Indigenous youth and family support worker, a chaplain, attendance officer and youth therapeutic and wellness lead who together work with teachers and youth workers in the classroom to provide students with whatever assistance is required. This can range from organising career advice, access to counselling and mental health services, to basic needs such as clothes, toiletries, medication, transport cards, Medicare cards, Health Care Cards and birth certificates. They also link Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to support groups. Breakfast and a hot lunch for students and staff are provided daily.

UNIQUE PROGRAMS

When young women enrol at Carinity, they may have been disengaged from school for one or two years. Students commence in the multi-age Transition Program and can stay in that class as long as necessary before entering their year level class. This program was developed to allow a gentle return to school, facilitate learning of organisation skills, and welcome new students into the community. The program allows staff to assess each student's academic, social and emotional needs to determine learning and support needs.

Many students gravitate towards hospitality and visual arts courses or enrol in the school's TAFE programs and school-based traineeships. They may also enrol in apprenticeships or TAFE courses not covered by the school's offerings. These courses range from Certificate I to Diploma level and contribute points toward the Queensland Certificate of Education.

As many students identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, Carinity programs encourage connection to culture. Programs also emphasise project-based learning, creativity and expanding natural gifts. Yarning and sewing circles, camps, excursions and arts-based activities such as theatre, dance and music form the creative backdrop, connecting young people to their community and local Elders.

Every Friday, years 10, 11 and 12 go off site to volunteer in community organisations. This contribution adds to Certificate II competencies and gives students the feeling of 'giving back'. Holiday programs keep students connected to school, so they are more likely to return after the break. They might engage in tie dying, cooking, or simply eating a meal together and learning life skills such as setting a table. For some students, these are new experiences.

7. ENGAGEMENT STRATEGIES

Most Independent special assistance schools use a student-centred approach that supports individual needs and utilises strengths and interests to foster self-confidence and build positive relationships to re-engage students in education.

Multiple strategies are used to scaffold learning and practical skills development. Combined with individual targeted transition programs to support school re-entry, teachers and specialist staff co-design Individual Learning Plans with students (and families when possible), supporting them to identify learning, social-emotional wellbeing and personal goals and make informed decisions and plans about achievable future pathways. These plans provide clarity to students, staff, families and carers, identifying when goals are achieved and providing opportunities to celebrate success.

School leaders interviewed by ISA for the case studies are extremely passionate about taking every step they can to ensure their students have the capacity to attend school. They ensure students are supported in basic needs such as breakfast and lunch, transport to school, suitable clothes, health care, doing their washing at school or meals to take home. If there is an obstacle to a student attending school and concentrating on their learning, staff will make every attempt to remove the barrier or lessen the impact. One principal said, 'If they don't turn up, we go and get them'.

Independent special assistance schools use a range of pedagogical approaches and strategies to engage students.

TRAUMA-INFORMED EDUCATION

Trauma-informed education is a holistic approach used by many Independent special assistance schools. It is based on the belief that being able to respond to past negative experiences both in a student's schooling and personal life greatly supports student success.

As trauma can negatively impact social and learning outcomes, increase grade repetition or the possibility of school refusal, many Independent special assistance schools train all staff in trauma-informed education practice. Traumatic stress affects memory function¹⁵ and can impact an individual's ability to moderate stress, resulting in difficulty with attention and emotional regulation.

'Therapeutic Crisis Intervention' is another trauma-informed approach used by some Independent special assistance schools. It targets self-regulation skills and positive interactions with others. Students are explicitly taught strategies to respond to overwhelming emotions such as anger, frustration, and depression. Some Independent special assistance schools train their entire staff with this approach to:

- create a trauma-sensitive environment where everyone can feel safe
- prevent and/or de-escalate crisis situations
- manage crisis situations in a therapeutic manner.¹⁶

Some Independent special assistance schools train their staff in the practice of 'unconditional positive regard'. This is another trauma-informed therapeutic model which aims to heal complex trauma and is described as an attitude of complete acceptance and love. It does not mean that a student's actions are acceptable, but the student can be accepted for who they are, rather than be judged by their behaviour.¹⁷

15 J. Douglas Bremner, 'Traumatic Stress: Effects on the Brain', *Dialogues in Clinical Neuroscience* 8, no. 4 (December 2006): 445–61. hippocampus, and prefrontal cortex. Traumatic stress can be associated with lasting changes in these brain areas. Traumatic stress is associated with increased cortisol and norepinephrine responses to subsequent stressors. Antidepressants have effects on the hippocampus that counteract the effects of stress. Findings from animal studies have been extended to patients with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) P. 447

16 Cornell University, 'Therapeutic Crisis Intervention Overview', 2021, https://rccp.cornell.edu/TCI_LevelOne.html

17 Courtney E. Ackerman MA, 'What Is Unconditional Positive Regard in Psychology?', *PositivePsychology.com*, 22 May 2018, <https://positivepsychology.com/unconditional-positive-regard/>.

It is not an easy strategy, as both staff and students need to commit to the understanding that every day is a new day and a fresh start. When this practice is embedded, it usually has positive outcomes.

SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL WELLBEING

Developing positive social-emotional wellbeing and encouraging student agency are key student re-engagement strategies in Independent special assistance schools. Schools use a range of approaches to support the development of healthy social-emotional wellbeing such as:

- **Restorative practice:** A whole-school teaching and learning approach that encourages supportive and respectful behaviour. Individuals are held accountable for their behaviour and are supported to take steps to repair harm caused to others as a result of their actions.¹⁸ Restorative practice can involve individuals, small groups, whole classes and a range of options, from formal or informal restorative conversation, circles, or re-entry interviews. To be successful, restorative practice needs to be supported by conflict resolution and social-emotional programs, combined with ongoing training for all staff.
- **The five-point scale:** A behaviour regulation strategy used to explicitly teach social and emotional concepts. Students are taught how to map their emotions on a five-point scale, identify actions associated with how they feel at the five different stages and how to respond before a situation spirals out of control. This approach promotes self-management and understanding of one's own emotions through simple self-regulation strategies.
- **Positive psychology:** A strengths-based whole-school psychological approach grounded in wellbeing theory. The PERMA model is an example of this approach, considering school environment, sense of belonging, trust, taking risks, participation, and articulating clear expectations.¹⁹ The PERMA approach defines the following five domains:
 - **Positive emotions:** The identification of positive emotions and reflection on what went well
 - **Engagement:** Strategies that involve differentiation, varied activities, strengths-based approaches and student involvement
 - **Relationships:** Creating opportunities for new interactions and teamwork
 - **Meaning:** Finding connection and relevance with teaching and learning
 - **Achievement:** Setting personal goals and celebrating achievement.²⁰

As students become more adept at regulating their behavioural responses and developing self-management skills, they enjoy a higher level of autonomy and resilience.

EFFECTIVE TEACHING AND LEARNING

Independent special assistance schools embrace a range of teaching and learning strategies to engage students in learning. This includes targeted approaches for at-risk students, students with disability, LGBTIQ+ students, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Though not exclusive to Independent special assistance schools, the following approaches are effective strategies to improve learning outcomes for students in these settings:

- **Project-based learning:** This is a dynamic approach where students actively engage in and explore real-world problems and challenges, developing critical thinking and practical skills. Project-based learning builds collaboration skills as it is typically undertaken by groups of students.²¹ Teachers guide and facilitate, but also allow students to navigate their own learning and build a personal connection to their project, specifically selected for meaning, relevance and purpose.

18 NSW Department of Education, 'What Is Restorative Practice?', 2022, <https://education.nsw.gov.au/student-wellbeing/attendance-behaviour-and-engagement/behaviour-support-toolkit/support-for-teachers/restorative-practices/restorative-practices.html>.

19 Reach Out, 'Building a Positive Learning Environment through Positive Psychology', accessed 16 September 2022, <https://schools.au.reachout.com/articles/building-a-positive-learning-environment-through-positive-psychology>.

20 Reach Out.

21 Anette Markula and Maija Aksela, 'The Key Characteristics of Project-Based Learning: How Teachers Implement Projects in K-12 Science Education', *Disciplinary and Interdisciplinary Science Education Research* 4, no. 1 (6 January 2022): 2, <https://doi.org/10.1186/s43031-021-00042-x>.

- **Transformative learning:** Some Independent special assistance schools, such as Youth Inc in Adelaide utilise this strategy to motivate and empower learners to make informed decisions and actions at the individual, community and global levels. Staff encourage critical reflection for students to find meaning and understanding in their lives, questioning prior assumptions and examining new perspectives.²²
- **Inclusive education:** Inclusive principles provide a safe learning environment where the individual needs of each student are considered. Independent special assistance schools are welcoming and supportive places, identifying and removing barriers to learning and participation. This may involve modifying teaching and learning strategies and making adjustments for each student as required.
- **Individual learning plans:** At Independent special assistance schools, the majority of students have an individual learning plan defining academic, social emotional, behavioural or physical goals, and strategies the teacher and/or student will use to achieve these outcomes. The definition of what success looks like is as individual as every student.
- **Cultural competency:** Independent special assistance schools that have a high number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students embrace a culturally-responsive curriculum, train staff in cultural competency, and embed cultural safety for their students and families to foster a sense of belonging, self-awareness and confidence and to improve learning outcomes.
- **Outreach programs:** Several Independent special assistance schools have developed offsite programs, designed to re-engage students who are unable to attend school on site. Students may return to school on site after a period of time in the outreach program or remain in the program until they graduate. Outreach programs usually operate with small groups or on an individual basis, and include schoolwork, wellbeing check-ins and additional support as required for each student.
- **Direct instruction:** This approach involves the explicit teaching of curriculum content and has great success in improving literacy and numeracy outcomes. It is a step-by-step teacher-directed approach following a specific skill development program or learning progressions to ensure mastery of skills at each level to bridge knowledge gaps and build confidence. Direct instruction works well for students who have experienced limited academic success.

The following case study is an example of a school that uses unconditional positive regard.

22 Western Governors University, 'What Is The Transformative Learning Theory', Western Governors University, accessed 1 November 2022, <https://www.wgu.edu/blog/what-transformative-learning-theory2007.html>.



Image courtesy of Youth Inc.

CASE STUDY 7

INDIE SCHOOL

Glenorchy, Tasmania



SNAPSHOT

Principal: Lauren Watson

Founded: 2019

Caters for: Years 9 to 12

Enrolments: 70

Staff: 10 FTE

Hours: 9.00am to 1.45pm

(and supplementary program 2.00 to 4.30pm)

“

Staff have a deep sense of fulfillment; knowing what we do makes a real difference.

Principal, Lauren Watson

VISION

Indie School, Glenorchy is one of 16 Indie Schools across five states with a humanistic vision to shift away from a traditional curriculum to a holistic focus on each student's strengths and interests so that greater self-capacity and self-belief is fostered. The school wants students to leave school with achievable post-school options, which they may not otherwise have before enrolling at Indie.

At Indie School, students have the opportunity to re-write their own narrative and re-frame how they see themselves.

IMPRESSIONS

Indie School, Glenorchy is led by Principal, Lauren Watson who also oversees the Indie School at Sorell and will oversee the new Kingston school when it opens. Lauren originally saw the future Indie School site at Glenorchy in 2018 when it was an empty warehouse and was asked as a first-time principal to transform the warehouse into a school for the following year!

The school has a quiet but purposeful atmosphere and Lauren believes the physical environment highlights the school's culture and values, therefore the space is light, colourful and welcoming with an interesting assortment of regulation spaces for students to select from

when they need it. These options range from dark, cosy corners, to gentle, meditative spaces, and spaces for completing jigsaw puzzles, colouring in mandalas, finding calmness near the aquarium, or listening to music.

WRAP-AROUND CARE

Students who arrive at Indie School have disengaged from education due to a range of life experiences. Students may be homeless or live in out-of-home care, may be a carer for siblings or parents, be dependent on drugs and/or alcohol, have a disability and/or have a history of trauma/violence.

The school's social worker is affectionately referred to as the 'Wellbeing Concierge'. The school has a team-teaching philosophy so that no teacher is ever alone in a classroom. The staff to student ratio for years 9 and 10 is 1:5, which provides great flexibility as small class sizes with support staff enable many 1:1 learning opportunities.

In years 11 and 12, there are two teachers and one aide. There are 32 students in the senior years but approximately 18 on site per day, as students attend VET courses either off site or at Indie school. Staffing is stretched for the high level of care the school provides. Their strong wish is to have a school psychologist to provide greater mental health support.



UNIQUE PROGRAMS

Teachers focus on the general capabilities aspect of the Australian Curriculum rather than achievement standards and each student has a self-paced individual learning plan. When enrolling, students are consulted about how they can re-engage, what support they may require, and what attendance flexibility they may initially need.

There are six school terms, which means students are not out of school for long periods and this reduces the chance of students not returning. The timetable finishes daily at 1.45pm and there is a supplementary program from 2.00pm to 4.30pm for students who are considered a serious safety risk either to themselves or others. The teacher works one to one with the student through this highly-individualised approach for at least one hour per day. Of the 70 students, there are eight in this program.

At Indie School, students can obtain the standard year 12 leaving certificate, the Tasmanian Certificate of Education (TCE). Students can study levels 1 and 2 of the TCE, and as university is not a preferred pathway goal for the majority of Indie students, the school does not offer levels 3 and 4, which lead to an ATAR score. Students may choose a less academic pathway, the Tasmanian Certificate of Educational Attainment (TCEA). The TCEA formally recognises the

progress and learning of a range of individual achievements. With the TCEA, students may enrol in TAFE, apply for apprenticeships, gain employment or gain supported employment. Many students at Indie School will enrol for a year 13, as they love being at the school and want to stay, especially if they need more time to achieve the TCEA.

A key feature of Indie's supportive approach is 'unconditional positive regard' where staff suspend judgement, isolate behaviours from the student, and listen with an attitude that the young person has the inner ability to change. This approach is powerful as it assists young people to feel positive about themselves and others. Each day is a new day and a new start. Staff are trained in this approach as well as trauma informed practices and continue to learn strategies to keep a positive focus and mindset in a complex, challenging environment. The school works closely with external agencies as Lauren believes the most effective wrap-around care for students is when school, family and external supports work together.

8. CONCLUSION

Independent special assistance schools are a place of hope, a chance for young people to reverse a negative trajectory, be given another chance to succeed in education and find their own valued place in society.

Independent special assistance schools cater for a wide range of students including those with academic, social or emotional disadvantage, those with disability, students living in residential care, young parents, LGBTIQ+ students and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Schools that enrol these students play a vital role in re-engaging young people in education. They provide alternative and flexible learning options for students who have been unable to complete their education in a mainstream school.

A young person may choose to attend an Independent special assistance school due to the school's diverse and flexible approaches, transition programs, focus on each individual and to have another chance to successfully complete school. The schools provide specialised support, calm environments and learning spaces, combined with individualised options for post-school pathways into further study or employment.

Independent special assistance schools use inclusive practices. Trauma-informed, positive psychology and social wellbeing approaches to education are some strategies schools use to meet the often complex needs of their students.

Independent special assistance schools employ specialist staff including teachers, social workers, youth workers, vocational educators, counsellors, health workers, learning assistants and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education workers.

Staff often choose to work in these settings as they find alignment with their own social, cultural and educational values. Staff collaborate with each other and with external services to provide individual and specialised support to students so that they can reach their learning potential and identified goals. This support may continue post-school. Supporting disengaged youth to return to school and complete their education is of significant value to both society and the economy.

With growing enrolments and increased demand for places at Independent special assistance schools to support disengaged youth, there are both benefits and challenges. Keeping more students at school to complete their education benefits students' social and emotional health and wellbeing, society in general and the economy. When students are attending school, they have meaning and purpose, regular routines and are more likely to go on to further study or meaningful employment. High levels of support can reduce risk taking behaviours such as alcohol abuse and crime.

Challenges for Independent special assistance schools include recruitment of staff with the necessary skills in working with disengaged youth and students with a disability and retention. Due to the high level of wrap around support required and small class or group sizes, ongoing government funding is essential for their continued success.







INDEPENDENT
SCHOOLS
AUSTRALIA