Case 5: Evolving Learning Program

(Philanthropic grants to a not-for-profit for a program with schools)

| a 'good fit' | build capacity | **make informed decisions** | **have appropriate knowledge** | **commit appropriate resources** | role clarity | reciprocity | relationships based on trust | **good communi-cations** | **impact focused** |

Priority areas: student engagement; student wellbeing; vocational education; post-school transitions

About the Evolving Learning Program

Evolve is a not-for-profit organisation that supports secondary school age students who, for a range of reasons, experience some form of disadvantage. The organisation has two properties, one in southern Queensland and the other in north-east Victoria, which are sites for residential components of Evolve's program offerings.

The Evolving Learning Program is a one- to three-year experiential and applied learning program. The program utilises one of Evolve's properties and provides participating schools with the in-school support, on a part-time basis, of an Evolve Program Coordinator.

The program provides young people with personal growth and development opportunities through educational and vocational engagement. In addition, it provides skills development of school teachers and leaders, and access to resources.

Overall, the program seeks to prevent early school leaving and/or engage young people into employment and vocational pathways. In doing so, a key objective of the Evolving Learning Program is to break the cycle of disadvantage for young people.

To learn more visit: http://www.evolve.org.au/

About various supporters

The major philanthropic foundations that have supported Evolve in the Evolving Learning Program are:

The Myer Foundation and Sidney Myer Fund. The Education program area supports projects that leverage the best outcomes in educational settings for young people aged 0-25. (http://www.myerfoundation.org.au/)

The Ian Potter Foundation. The Education program area is focused on strategic, whole-of-community approaches to education in order to make real, long-term improvements to education and employment outcomes in communities. (http://foundation.ianpotter.org.au/)

John T. Reid Charitable Trust. The Trustees place importance on the equitable distribution of educational resources, particularly in disadvantaged rural and Indigenous communities. (http://www.johntreidtrusts.com.au/index.php)

The William Buckland Foundation provides funding to support activities, organisations and projects which focus on the health and wellbeing, particularly of children and young people, and scientific and educational activities, particularly agriculture to create lasting benefit for the Victorian community. (http://www.anz.com/personal/private-bank-trustees/trustees/)

Make informed decisions

A big part of making an informed decision about what to focus on was the teams' use of research. The Evolve team used middle years of schooling research literature to guide the development of their programs. This literature presented 10 key areas of need for young people in the middle years, nine of which the program addressed: 1) engagement with a significant adult; 2) learning in places other than school; 3) flexible timetable 4) celebrating learning success; 5) a learner-driven curriculum that facilitates deep engagement; 6) flexible teaching and learning practices; 7) community engagement; 8) adult-like roles and responsibilities; 8) significant events of an engaging nature; and 9) opportunities for off-campus learning experiences. This research helped to frame the focus of the Evolving Learning Program.

Use available research to inform the development of your program

How the team members were going to address these needs through an education program required more information. To complement the middle years of schooling research, the team investigated different ways to teach and learn. This included drawing on their own team members' knowledge and experience of teaching and running other programs in schools. It also involved reading books, such as 'Enterprising ways to teach and learn' and; 'Understanding by design' as well as utilising philosophies from Reggio Emilia teaching practice.

A pilot program may be a useful first step to help you identify challenges and the resources required for a full program.

Have appropriate knowledge

A great idea for a program, with no idea of how to populate the program or who to approach to fund it, is a wasted idea. The Evolving Learning Program was a new idea yet to be road-tested by those it sought to support. Networks across education, philanthropy and the not-for-profit sectors have helped Evolve develop their knowledge base about who to contact, when and for what purposes. As the CEO of Evolve explains, "Prior to Evolve, I worked for Melbourne Cares, heading up their corporate-school partnerships. It was in this role that I first became aware of a particular school identified as being located within a disadvantaged area. When I became CEO of Evolve, the programs we were offering presented a relevant and meaningful way of rekindling this relationship with the principal of this school."

The first part of the equation for a pilot was solved when the then principal indicated an interest in some of their students participating in the Evolving Learning Program. Other schools also came on board. They did so because of their knowledge of Evolve's other programs and also because one of the schools brokered the introduction of Evolve to a further two schools. What eventuated was a proposed pilot of two Evolving Learning Programs. The Programs offered were the same, but one pilot was to run with one school and the other pilot was to run with a cluster of three schools. This left the second part of the equation to solve: who to approach about possibly funding the pilot.

The CEO notes, "The Colonial Foundation had given us support for another boys' program we were running. In turn, this gave us time to develop new relationships and develop our thinking further in the Evolving Learning Program". This was at a critical time in the life of the organisation, which wanted to diversify into news areas of program delivery and needed support and time to achieve this.

Knowing of The Myer Foundation and Sidney Myer Fund after checking what their key priority area was for their large grants, the CEO of Evolve made an appointment to talk with the CEO of The Myer Foundation. The purpose of the discussion was exploratory, to see whether there was potentially a good fit with Evolve's idea and Myer's large grants focus. This turned out to be the case and The Myer Foundation worked with the Evolve team to develop a joint submission. This was then used by Evolve to talk with other prospective partners based on previous associations Evolve had with philanthropic partners.

> Be prepared to network and discuss with potential partners in order to find a good fit.

Commit appropriate resourcing

To bring about substantial change within a school, the intention was for the Evolve team to work with each school for a long time – five to seven years. While this aspiration was not achieved, the CEO notes, "We looked at what the residential and in-school support might cost us and we secured funding to support the program for three years".

The pilot required a six figure sum to run each year. This support was secured from a combination of grants from The Myer Foundation and Sidney Myer Fund, John T. Reid Foundation, William Buckland Foundation and The Ian Potter Foundation.

Commitment of appropriate resourcing also involved thinking through and planning how to approach the program in the schools. This had implications for Evolve and the participating schools. Evolve employed one full-time coordinator to support each of the pilot programs. Each week, the Program Coordinator would spread his time across the two pilot sites. The physical presence of the coordinator in the school offered a just-in-time resource for the students and staff. It also meant that the co-running of program sessions with teachers was possible. An implication then for each pilot group was the allocation of a dedicated space for the coordinator.

The school principals also had to think about how they were going to organise the program into the timetable. In this regard, each pilot ran in different ways. The cluster of schools allocated single lesson times throughout the week. At the school not within the cluster, the Evolving Learning Program was allocated a full day on the same day each week. This allowed for a seamless flow to the day, without interruption or loss of time due to students moving from one class to another.

3

Good communications

The principal from the school not within the cluster played a significant role in the success of the pilot at that school. She made sure that all staff, students and parents understood what the program was about and why the school was involved. Leading Teachers and the Deputy Principal also played a role in the development and delivery of the program with students.

One of the best ways to deal with tensions between program partners is simply through conversation.

At times, there were tensions during the pilot. This was evident in a particular difference of emphasis between Evolve and its philanthropic supporters. The foundation was keen to know whether structural changes, as a result of the program, were being achieved; whereas Evolve were placing a greater emphasis on achieving student engagement outcomes, largely because of the timeframe of the program. The CEO remembers that, "Conversations, not just one conversation, helped overcome any tensions, as did a visit to a residential program by two staff from a foundation". Both forms of communication helped the foundation staff to develop a better understanding of the Program and its complexity.

With the schools, one meeting per term with key stakeholders was held. Students from the Program would also do presentations to parents, as a form of sharing and celebrating what they were learning. These activities were in addition to the day-to-day informal and formal contact between the Evolving Learning Coordinator and staff, students and parents. "Once we got into the second year of the project", recalls the Coordinator, "we had a clear idea of the shape of it. We wrote down the expectations of us and the schools. This really helped to clarify responsibilities and it helped people to recommit. So there was a sense of good will to overcome any differences. We weren't going to let things get too far down the track without addressing an issue."

On the other side of the relationship, the team and one of the school principals went along to a Myer Foundation and Sidney Myer Fund committee meeting. There they had an opportunity to present and discuss with the committee the early outcomes from the pilot.

Impact

A research project undertaken by Victoria University assisted Evolve in determining the ongoing outcomes of the program. The research found that

Look for research partners to support your collection of evidence for evaluation purposes.

teachers' participation in the program had developed their knowledge and skills in project based learning – that is, how to build a curriculum based learning program and how to measure, assess and bridge learning across the curriculum.

Students learnt how to *drive* learning; whereas previously they may have thought of learning as a one-way pathway from the teacher to the student. They also discovered the power and importance of relationships.

The research also indicated that many of the comments students were making about educational engagement depended on the relationships developed between school teaching staff, Evolve staff and the students. Evolve's CEO notes, "We were able to show that dollar for dollar, if schools picked up the Evolving Learning Program as an early interventions for young people who were showing signs of disengaging from learning/school, then this was a more effective way of using funds."

The pilot ran from 2008 to 2010 and led to Evolve being able to develop an educational arm to their organisation. The Evolving Learning Program has spread to other states and captured the interest of other schools. In summary, the Evolve's CEO remarks, "The pilot netted us credibility and further financial resources from business that have gone well beyond the original philanthropic support."

Postscript

More recently, the approach adopted in the Evolving Learning Program was used to inform the development of a natural disaster and trauma based program. As a result, Evolve have secured $1 million over two years to run this program.