



BALLARAT
FOUNDATION

IMPACT IN ACTION



Youth Support: Goldfields Education



28% of youth in Ballarat feel lonely



60% of youth don't feel heard



Youth offending has increased by 36.8%



Long term mental health conditions in youth is 55% higher in Ballarat compared to Victorian average

For a small group of young people in Ballarat, mainstream education had effectively stopped long before they entered the Goldfields Education program. Approximately 82% of students in the Goldfields Education program were subject to a Child Protection Order at enrolment, while many had histories of chronic school disengagement, multiple placement changes, mental health challenges, and involvement with police and other support services.

Most students entered the program with extremely low educational engagement. Only 32% were engaged in any form of education at the point of enrolment, and even this attendance was often sporadic and highly modified. The young people involved had experienced significant cumulative adversity, with 86% exposed to seven or more traumatic or adverse childhood experiences.

Goldfields Education, delivered by Berry Street with support from a range of community partners and funding contributors including the Ballarat Foundation, was designed as a re-engagement program for young people who had experienced chronic school exclusion. Rather than focusing solely on classroom attendance, the program recognised learning occurring across a young person's broader life and support systems. It worked alongside schools, child protection, youth justice, health services and care teams to create flexible, individualised pathways back into education, confidence and community connection.

Program response

The Goldfields Education model recognised that many participants were already engaging in complex forms of learning through daily life, care responsibilities, independent living, counselling,

health appointments, employment preparation, and interactions with support services. Teachers worked one-on-one with young people to formally recognise and scaffold these experiences into accredited learning aligned to the Victorian Curriculum.

The program developed personalised Individual Education Plans (IEPs) and flexible Education Action Plans focused on literacy, numeracy and wellbeing. Importantly, the model centred the young person's own goals, strengths and aspirations. Rather than reinforcing deficit-based narratives, the program focused on building confidence, celebrating achievement, and helping young people see themselves as capable learners with a future beyond crisis and exclusion.

For many young people, success was not immediate or linear. Progress often involved rebuilding trust in adults and systems, improving stability, reducing harmful behaviours, increasing engagement with support services, and developing everyday life skills that created a foundation for longer-term education and employment pathways.

Outcomes

Foundation Outcome 1 - Reduced disadvantage in the Ballarat region

Young people participating in Goldfields Education were experiencing significant and overlapping forms of disadvantage prior to entering the program. Many had histories of chronic school disengagement, unstable housing, child protection involvement, youth justice contact, mental health challenges, and extensive exposure to trauma and adverse childhood experiences.

The program supported young people to stabilise aspects of their lives by creating flexible education pathways connected to their broader support systems, daily routines and future aspirations. By the end of the evaluation

period, more young people had transitioned into independent living arrangements and were developing practical life skills linked to adulthood and long-term stability. "Everything that Goldfields got me to do was useful", stressed on participant.

The evaluation also identified significant reductions in police contact during participation in Goldfields Education, including:

- a 29% reduction in police contacts related to offending and anti-social behaviour
- a 43% reduction in criminal charges
- a 44% reduction in missing persons reports
- a 29% reduction in safe custody warrants.

Importantly, many young people came into contact with police due to concerns for their own safety and wellbeing, not only because of offending behaviour. The reduction in police interactions therefore reflected increased stability, support and safety in the lives of participating young people.

Foundation Outcome 2 - Increased community connection and cohesion

Goldfields Education placed strong emphasis on relationship-based practice, connection and coordinated support around young people who had often become disconnected from school, community and trusted adults. The program worked collaboratively with schools, child protection, youth justice, health services and care teams to build a more connected and supportive environment around each participant. One participant stated many of them were now "more social" than they were prior to Goldfields.

Graduation events were designed to celebrate the achievements of young people and bring together the people who had supported them throughout their journey, including carers, workers, teachers and family members where appropriate. These celebrations reinforced a sense of belonging, recognition and connection for young people who had often experienced exclusion from mainstream systems.

Participants frequently demonstrated empathy, kindness, leadership and perseverance despite significant adversity.

The program's strengths-based approach helped shift the narrative surrounding participants from one focused on risk and deficit to one recognising capability, growth and contribution.

Foundation Outcome 3 - Improved life opportunities for people in the Ballarat region

Goldfields Education was designed to re-engage young people who had experienced chronic school exclusion and limited access to meaningful educational pathways. The program recognised that formal education is fundamental to future employment, social mobility and long-term opportunity.

Through individualised learning plans, flexible curriculum delivery and recognition of learning occurring in everyday life, the program supported young people to rebuild confidence in their ability to learn and achieve.

During the evaluation period, six young people achieved a Year 10 equivalent certificate through the program, representing approximately 27% of participants. For many participants, this represented the first sustained educational engagement they had experienced in years.

The Goldfields Education helped young people

begin shifting their trajectories toward greater engagement, stability and future planning. Participants developed increased confidence, self-advocacy and independent living skills, while also strengthening pathways into employment preparation, further education and ongoing support services.

Why this matters

Goldfields Education demonstrates the importance of flexible, trauma-informed and place-based approaches for young people who are often excluded from mainstream systems. The evaluation showed that when education is connected to a young person's lived reality, strengths and support networks, it can become a pathway not only to learning, but also to stability, safety, confidence and hope.

While the program was not designed to solve a lifetime of disadvantage within two years, the evidence suggests it created meaningful shifts in trajectory for some of Ballarat's most vulnerable young people. The program challenged assumptions about what educational success can look like and demonstrated the value of coordinated, community-based responses that meet young people where they are.

The Ballarat Foundation's contribution to the Goldfields Education project helped support an innovative local response that prioritised connection, dignity and long-term opportunity for young people facing significant barriers to education and community participation.

