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Page 1 of 2

Schools program helps overcome disadvantage

TIM DODD

After years of quiet co-ordination from Melbourne's Victoria University, a successful program aimed at improving education is now going public, and will showcase its record in 51 schools across Australia.

AVID, or Advancement Via Individual Determination, a program pioneered by an American teacher 28 years ago to deal with chronic academic underachievement in schools, has operated in Australia since 2012 and school leaders swear by its success.

Leanne Gagatsis, principal of Wyndham Central College in Melbourne, said that in 2012 about half the school's students applied to go to university. After years of the AVID program, the figure is now about 80 per cent.

"It sets up a culture of aspiration. It's created a university-going culture," she said. "That's really important for students with a challenging background."

AVID has helped turn Wyndham — a school in which 62 per cent of students are in the lowest socioeconomic quartile — into a school of choice for families in its area. Enrolment has risen sharply, from 740 in 2015 to an expected 1150 next year, Ms Gagatsis said.

The AVID program is not easy to characterise simply.

In some ways it is very detailed, putting a strong emphasis on building key learning skills such as notetaking through demonstration and continual practice.

But in other ways it is very broad, emphasising good, healthy relationships among students, between students and teachers, and among teachers.

"It is a long-term change program," said Claire Brown, AVID Australia's director, who launched the program in this country.

"It's not a silver bullet and it's not a quick fix. It requires a lot of commitment and work to really dedicate the way your school is working to a much more student-centred approach than some

schools have."

One thing AVID was not, she said, was reductionist. It did not advocate straightforward, cookie-cutter solutions. For example, it did not pick a side in the debate on the merits of phonics or whole language to teach reading.

"Kids are complex. There are no pat solutions to this, there's no magic formula," Ms Brown said.

She said teachers needed a basket of strategies to use for teaching reading — including phonics, strategies to decode words and whole-language principles — and they needed to learn how to recognise when each should be used.

AVID is currently being used in primary and secondary schools and, while it has proved its effectiveness in schools with large numbers of low socioeconomic and disadvantaged students, it works in all types of environments. Victoria University uses AVID principles to teach bachelor degree students following its radical and successful shift to one unit at a time in four-week blocks.

One of Wyndham College's AVID success stories is this year's school captain, 19-year-old Hassan Nur Hussein, a Somali refugee who came to Australia in 2014 knowing no English and without

any formal schooling behind him. Hassan said that when he started school in Year 10 in 2016 (after a year-long English course), things were very difficult.

"I would spend breaks by myself, not talking to anyone. But since I got AVID I made a lot of friends and I got a lot of support from the teachers at my school," he said.

AVID helped him learn effectively, taught him to ask a lot of questions and introduced him to public speaking and leadership. "There are a lot of things I have learnt," he said.

At the end of Year 11, Hassan applied to be school captain, gave a speech, and won the role in a student vote. For the past year he's

also run a soccer group, twice a week, for new refugee arrivals. Next year he plans to go to university and do a teaching degree.

Grattan Institute school education program director Peter Goss said he believed AVID was "really promising". It brought in a range of "high-impact, low-cost interventions" that could be applied across a range of curriculum and appeared to be scalable, he said.

"It's a collection of things that have real value, put together in a systematic way, which schools seem able to implement in practice," Dr Goss said.

But he said that even though AVID had been operating in the US for nearly 40 years it still lacked high-quality statistical evaluation, mainly because students doing AVID in the US self-select, making it hard to compare them with like students who are not in the AVID program.

"Given that it's now in a fair number of schools, it's important that evaluation gets done," he said.



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Page 2 of 2



DAVID GERAGHTY

Wyndham Central College 2018 school captain Hassan Nur Hussein found the AVID program transformative in more ways than one