

MEDIA RELEASE

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Early school leavers start thinking early about leaving school: Research

NEW research has found more than a quarter of young people who left school before Year 12 had started thinking about it while still at primary school. This rose to 55 per cent by the time they reached high school.

Australian Bureau of Statistics data shows 190 15 to 19-year-olds in the Murray Mallee Local Learning and Employment Network (MMLLEN) region were not working or not in paid employment in 2011.

Department of Education and Early Childhood Development figures show just 70.1 per cent of teenagers in the Swan Hill LGA had achieved Year 12 in 2011. This was significantly fewer than for both regional Victoria and metropolitan Melbourne, where Year 12 attainment rates were 75.3 per cent and 85.6 per cent.

As part of the MMLLEN Reasons for Disengagement from School Research Project, young people, parents, youth service providers and school wellbeing staff were interviewed over a three-month period in 2013.

Of the 33 young people who took part, 80 per cent had left school by the age of 16, but 75 per cent had since enrolled in either a course at Sunraysia Institute of TAFE or the Swan Hill Flexible Learning Option (FLO) program.

Why had they left school early? The top three reasons they gave were bullying, a lack of individually-tailored learning and poor attendance.

They said things that could have helped them stay in school included addressing bullying, more one-on-one learning and better understanding by teachers of different learning styles.

The survey found students connected with the FLO program were overwhelmingly positive about it, with 90 per cent reporting it was better than high school and 84 per cent indicating an interest in further study or training with a view to pursuing a trade or professional career.

Michelle Lawson, 16, of Nyah West, will be among the first group of FLO students to finish Year 12 and move on to work or further study at TAFE.

She is completing her senior VCAL, has a Certificate III in Children's Services and is studying for a Certificate III in Aged Care and a Certificate III in Home and Community Care at the Swan Hill campus of Sunraysia Institute of TAFE.

Miss Lawson says she didn't like primary school and by the time she reached high school was too far behind in spelling, reading and writing to catch up to her peers.

"I just didn't like sitting down and having to read off a board. It was boring," she said.

"Because I didn't like school I never really cared and didn't do the work. Now I'm really bad at spelling writing and reading, so I wish I'd liked primary school ... then I would have enjoyed high school more, I reckon.

"When high school came, it was good in Year 7 because you meet all the new people and make new friends. But in Year 8 and Year 9 everyone starts to turn on each other ... in Year 10 I came to FLO."

Miss Lawson said the FLO environment was vastly different to school.

She attends classes four days a week, has one day for home study and works part-time as a domestic cleaner.

"It's heaps more flexible," she said.

"We can work at our own pace and you get the work done. If there's something you don't understand you can ask without being judged by others. You can be yourself here. You know everyone.

"Some people think it's like a drop-in centre, but I've worked (really hard) for what I've achieved in two years. If I was still at Swan Hill College I don't reckon I would have done Year 12."

MMLLEN Chairman Ron Stanton said he was not surprised by the research findings.

Mr Stanton, who was a teacher for more than 20 years, said some children found it difficult to get any enjoyment from school.

"And I'm not surprised that bullying is one of the things that makes them unhappy," he said.

"Bullying makes kids' lives dreadful and it's an indictment on the system that we can't retain more of those children. If school is not an enjoyable experience, they won't stay."

Other Australian and overseas research has found early leavers were more likely to become unemployed, stay unemployed for longer and have lower earnings. But students with dreams for their future were less hampered by socio-economic status.

A lower level of parental education has long been associated with students not completing high school. And this was borne out in the research, with 40 per cent reporting neither parent finished Year 12 and 27 per cent saying one parent had.

The report noted the presence of seven formal education options at Swan Hill and Kerang that are outside the traditional school setting. But none provide for children under the age of 14, and there are no transition programs to help young people return to study after they have been disengaged from school for more than a short time.

The 52-page Reasons for Disengagement from School Research Project report contains nine recommendations.

The first is that the MMLLEN initiate the creation of a steering committee including representatives of business, community and education, as well as parents and families.

The Reasons for Disengagement from School Project report can be found at <http://www.mmlen.com.au/resources/downloads>

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Notes:

MMLLEN is a not-for-profit organisation responsible for the area of north-west Victoria covered by Swan Hill Rural City (excluding Robinvale), Gannawarra Shire (excluding Cohuna), and Sea Lake in the Buloke Shire.

MMLLEN works to establish partnerships with local education and training providers, businesses and industries, community groups, parents and families to help young people aged 10 to 19 get involved in study, training or work, stay committed and succeed in their chosen careers.

Further information about MMLLEN is available at the website <http://www.mmlen.com.au/>