

Case study: Experience and impact of inclusion

Special Education Schools: Community integration through volunteering

Volunteering Geelong has partnered with special education schools in the region to help young people with disabilities participate in volunteering. The program supports students to build confidence, develop life and work-ready skills, and create more opportunities to engage in the community.

Special education schools provide tailored education and support for students with disabilities or higher needs. These young people may face academic, social and emotional challenges, often experiencing low confidence and difficulty navigating unfamiliar situations.

Program aims

The program aims to help students reach their personal potential and explore future pathways – whether that's employment or contributing to their community through volunteering.

Key goals included:

- Enhancing students' understanding of what it means to contribute to community
- Developing employment and life skills
- Building confidence

Why it matters

For many students in special education, transitioning from school to employment is challenging. Pathways to work can be limited, and navigating adulthood can be overwhelming. In Years 11 and 12, the school curriculum begins focusing on their post-school pathways – preparing students for what comes next.

Volunteering can play an important role in this transition. It helps students build skills, explore employment options, and connect with their community. For some, employment may not be possible – but volunteering can provide a meaningful way to participate and create a sense of belonging.

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Program structure

❖ *Step 1: Classroom presentation*

The program began with an interactive classroom session introducing students to volunteering. They explored what volunteers do, the types of organisations they support, and how volunteering can benefit them as individuals, through improving their skills, confidence, and community engagement.

❖ *Step 2: Futures Expo*

The Futures Expo brings together organisations that support students and families in special education as they prepare for life after school.

The expo provided opportunities for parents and students to have meaningful discussions about the services and programs on offer. These conversations with parents provided a great insight into how these young people learn, including through different sensory inputs such as touch and visual cues. This led to a deeper discussion with the school's Inclusive Industry Engagement Coordinator about the idea of arranging site visits to see volunteering in action.

❖ *Step 3: Provide an 'in place' experience*

Several volunteer-involving organisations hosted half-day site visits, where students could meet volunteers, observe their roles, and hear first-hand how their work benefits the community. Students also took part in short volunteer activities themselves, supported by local organisations including Our Village, Geelong Foodshare, and the Lifeline Warehouse and Op Shop.

❖ *Step 4: Extended volunteer placements*

Following the site visits, some students expressed interest in returning and continuing to volunteer. This prompted two of the participating organisations to offer extended placements over the school holidays, providing valuable hands-on experience and further learning opportunities.

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Program outcomes

- ✓ Greater understanding of how volunteering can support young people with disabilities through hands-on learning opportunities.
- ✓ Increased student awareness and comfort with volunteering as a positive option for their futures.
- ✓ Established a practical program model that can be replicated across special education schools – first piloted with Nelson Park School and later adopted by Armstrong Creek School, with interest from others in the region.
- ✓ Stronger relationships between local special education schools and partner organisations committed to inclusive volunteering.

“Students learnt about the different places people can volunteer, why people volunteer, and about volunteering as a valuable way to gain experience and learn workplace skills.

Volunteering provides opportunities for students to try different things, gain confidence and learn their strengths. This contributes to helping students make decisions about their future careers and pathways.”

- Amanda (Inclusive Industry Engagement Coordinator)

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Keys to success

- **Active involvement from Volunteering Geelong** – delivering presentations, attending events and site visits, and helping facilitate connection between students and organisations.
- **Choosing the right partner organisations** – ensuring they could provide a safe, positive, and meaningful experience for the students.
- **Hands-on, sensory activities** – allowing students to see volunteers in action and participate in volunteer activities, demonstrating their capabilities.
- **Setting clear expectations** – preparing students and families with presentations and discussions ahead of each activity so they understood what to expect from the experience.
- **Adapting activities** – offering simple, achievable tasks supported by regular breaks and guidance tailored to each student's needs. Understanding the limitations the students may face and offering activities accordingly.



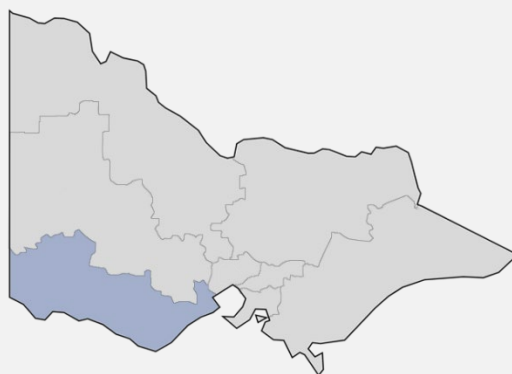
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<https://www.volunteeringvictoria.org.au/leading-volunteers/vma-2022-2026/>



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Volunteering Victoria acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of country throughout Australia and their connections to land, sea, and community. We pay our respect to Elders past and present.