

# Case study: Leading change towards inclusive practice

## Engaging Schools for Community Participation

**Year 12 Vocational Major students from Leongatha Secondary College are learning that real education doesn't always come from textbooks. In partnership with Gippsland Southern Health Service, the students are regenerating a garden attached to the hospital's maternity wing – transforming it into a space that grows native plants, fresh ideas, and strong community connections.**

This is the inaugural year of a partnership designed to continue annually. Each new Vocational Major student cohort will take up the project, ensuring the garden evolves over time and remains a living symbol of collaboration between education, health, and community. The Vocational Major is a two-year applied learning program within the Victorian Certificate of Education system, designed to provide students with hand on experience to develop skills for their life after school.

This is more than a gardening project. It's an opportunity for young people to develop practical experience, for patients and staff to enjoy a restorative space, and for the community to take pride in creating something meaningful together.

The project intentionally creates opportunities for groups who benefit from inclusion:

- **Young people** in Vocational Major programs who thrive through hands-on, community-based learning.
- **Patients and families** at the hospital who benefit from accessible, restorative green spaces.
- **Community partners** such as the local Men's Shed and small businesses, who contribute knowledge, skills, and resources while strengthening ties with youth.

By weaving these groups together, the project breaks down barriers and creates a truly inclusive, shared space.

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### Student leadership and learning

From the very beginning, students have taken the lead. As part of their Vocational Major curriculum, they've been responsible for design, planning, and delivery of the garden – everything from researching planting design, to drawing up budgets, to pitching their ideas to community partners.

A big learning curve has been fundraising. Students discovered that successful fundraising isn't just about putting in hours of effort – it's about understanding impact versus effort. They've compared the return on different activities, refined their strategies, and learnt the value of working smarter, not just harder.

A highlight of the project was the students' formal presentation to the Gippsland Southern Health Service Board and GippSport Board. Standing before health service leaders, students outlined their vision, explained how it would benefit patients and families, and secured vital support. This experience not only strengthened their public speaking and persuasion skills but gave them confidence in presenting to decision-makers.



*Student doing some work in the garden.*

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*Fundraising is part of the diverse activities that have contributed to the overall project.*

Through the process, students also developed strong communication and negotiation skills – both with their peers as they worked through group decisions, and with external stakeholders as they built partnerships, presented ideas, and secured resources.

These experiences have provided students with a foundation in problem-solving, project management, communication, negotiation, and financial literacy – skills that will stay with them long after they graduate.

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*Students have been able to apply their creativity, planning, and communication skills to this project.*

### **Building community connections**

At its heart, this project is about **connection**. Students are not just regenerating a garden – they're cultivating relationships across the community. By reaching out to the local community organisations, hospital staff, and businesses, they are learning to collaborate, negotiate, and share ideas.

Importantly, the students have also worked alongside skilled volunteers from the community. These volunteers shared their expertise in areas such as construction, landscaping, and horticulture, giving students the chance to learn practical techniques while building trust and respect across generations. This exchange of knowledge has helped students see the value of teamwork and the importance of drawing on community strengths.

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The garden has become a shared space where everyone contributes something different – whether it's gardening knowledge, physical labour, donations of materials, or encouragement.

For students, this collaboration has not only developed new skills but also fostered a deep sense of pride. They can see the tangible results of their work, take ownership of the garden's success, and feel proud to represent their school as active contributors to the wider South Gippsland community.

### Outcomes and impact

**For students:** it has provided a platform to apply classroom learning in a real-world context while developing teamwork, leadership, communication, and problem-solving skills. Taking on meaningful responsibilities and presenting their work has boosted confidence, pride, and a sense of purpose. Participating in volunteer activities has fostered social responsibility and given students transferable skills for future study, work, and community engagement.

**For Gippsland Southern Health Service:** it has shown that taking a risk and working with young people can lead to remarkable outcomes. The partnership has revitalised a garden space while strengthening connections with youth, opening up conversations about future pathways in health and community services. This model highlights how volunteering projects can bridge education and local employment opportunities.

**For the community:** the garden has become a source of pride – a living example of what can be achieved when schools, young people, health services, and volunteers work together with a shared vision.

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**Economic impact:** The program delivered a net benefit of \$71,245 from an initial outlay of \$10,000, equating to \$3,238 per participant and a benefit-cost ratio of 6.50, reflecting both social and economic returns.

### Student feedback

Students highlighted how the project shaped their learning, confidence and sense of pride:

*“Getting put into real-life situations, and being able to use this experience in a job interview, also giving me the chance to extend my skills.”*

*“Social connections and the responsibility of taking on the tasks, using my existing skills to drive the team.”*

*“Learning through the connections I have made through the hospital.”*

*“Doing something with the community and making connections.”*

*“Build new connections and experiences, and getting the chance to communicate with the wider community.”*

*“Making school more enjoyable as I can see my classmates all working together.”*

*“Giving me the chance to showcase my art in my studies and be more creative.”*

*“More hands-on experience and getting out into the community.”*

Most importantly, the project has given students a stronger sense of belonging and pride in their community.

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### What made it possible

- **Curriculum alignment** – the Vocational Major program gave structure and purpose to the project. Building on insights from our *Breaking Down Barriers* conversations, the project deliberately took volunteering opportunities to young people, meeting them where they are and embedding it in their learning.
- **Partnership support** – champions within the school and Gippsland Southern Health Service ensured the project had leadership backing and the resources to succeed.
- **Community collaboration** – contributions from community groups, such as the local Men's Shed, and local businesses provided knowledge, resources, and intergenerational learning, giving students the chance to work alongside skilled volunteers.
- **Celebration and recognition** – the students' presentations to both the Gippsland Southern Health Board and the GippSport Board built credibility, showcased achievements, and encouraged ongoing commitment from partners and the wider community.

### Lessons for others

- **Empower young people** – when students lead, they take ownership and pride in the outcomes.
- **Start with a meaningful space** – choose a location with impact, like a hospital, aged care facility, or community centre, where outcomes are visible and valued.
- **Secure champions on both sides** – identify a key contact in the school and in the partner organisation to drive the project forward.
- **Embed sustainability** – link the project to curriculum or program cycles so it continues year after year.
- **Focus on connection, not categories** – genuine partnerships thrive when everyone's contribution is valued, regardless of age or background.

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### Project transferability

This model is highly adaptable. Any region with a school and a willing community partner – whether a hospital, aged care service, council, or even a local sporting club – can replicate it.

The key ingredients are simple but powerful:

- **A real-world project that matters to the community.** The focus doesn't have to be a garden – it could be a mural, a community event, or an environmental project. What matters is that it has clear value for both young people and the wider community.
- **Student leadership built into curriculum.** Linking the project to programs like the Vocational Major ensures that young people's time and learning are recognised, and that each new cohort is able to continue the ongoing project or has the partnership to start a new one.
- **Partnerships that share resources, skills, and pride.** Success comes from schools and community organisations working side by side, with each bringing something to the table – whether it's land, funding, knowledge, or volunteer time. When students see their efforts valued by community partners, the sense of pride and inclusion multiplies.

This model shows that when schools take learning into the community and when organisations open their doors to young people, both sides benefit. Students gain real-world skills, confidence, and connections. Community partners see fresh energy, new ideas, and potential pathways for future workforce development.

In short, this is a model that can be lifted and shifted into almost any region:

- In health – by partnering with hospitals, aged care, or disability services.
- In environment – through Landcare groups or conservation projects.

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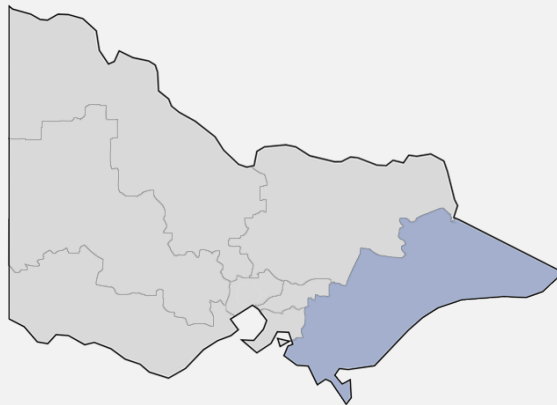
- In local government – via councils looking to involve youth in town beautification or the design of youth-based activities.
- In sport – by working with local clubs or associations to connect young people with volunteering, community events, and pathways into coaching or leadership.

The essence is the same everywhere: give young people meaningful responsibility, connect them with skilled community volunteers, and celebrate the shared achievement.

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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.*