Educators alarmed by lack of funds for helping troubled kids

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Education Editor

Billy White was kicked out of class so often in primary school he had his own desk in the principal’s office.

“It had my name tag on it, I was literally in there every day,” Mr White says. “I always struggled to read and write and when I was given a bit of paper I felt like the teacher was setting me up to fail because they knew I couldn’t do it.”

By the time he got to Frankston High, he had decided to drop out in year 8. But then a couple of mates suggested he get involved in “Hands On Learning”, a program that takes troubled kids out of the classroom one day a week and gets them building.

Suddenly, Mr White was in his element. His father is a plasterer, so for once he had a log up. “It was stuff I could do – everything from concreting, laying bricks, doing gardening and building tables.”

His teacher was adamant: if he continued to truant school there would be no Hands On. “I went to every class, I didn’t miss a day.”

Mr White stayed at school until year 10, when he was offered an apprenticeship. He started his own plastering business at the age of 20 and modestly admits he has already saved a couple of hundred grand. “It wasn’t until later in life I really realised what an impact Hands On had on me.”

Mr White is one of thousands of success stories. The program started 15 years ago by English teacher Russell Kerr out of a Kombi van in the carpark of Frankston High – is now a non-profit charity operating in almost 50 schools around Victoria.

An evaluation by Melbourne University’s Youth Research Centre found suspensions at Benalla College dropped by 74 per cent after Hands On Learning was introduced at the school.

And a study by Deloitte Access Economics in 2012 found the program had saved the economy $1.6 billion in “workforce outcomes alone” in the 13 years it had operated by preventing students dropping out of school.

Despite the charity fiercely lobbying both sides of politics – Education Minister Martin Dixon even launched a Hands on Learning hut last year, built by McClelland College students – the program receives no dedicated government funding.

A government document obtained by The Age earlier this year shows that more than 10,000 vulnerable children in years 9 to 11 are dropping out of Victorian schools, training and apprenticeships every year.

But Hands On Learning is not the only program worried about the lack of funding commitments for young people not enrolled in education.

Youth Connections, which helps 3500 young Victorians re-engage with education, work or training every year, is set to close at the end of this year when federal funding expires.

Program co-ordinators have met Labor and the Coalition in Victoria and, although both understand the need for such a service, neither has committed to funding it.

“Schools have no record of these young people so therefore they are not on their radar,” said Victorian Youth Connections Network chairwoman Tracey Fenton.

Both parties have committed funding to Local Learning and Employment Networks, which provide local career and learning pathways.

However, Victorian Council of Social Service chief executive Emma King says education election promises have largely focused on capital projects rather than early-intervention programs.

“We are seeing a lot of disengagement as early as year 7 and 8,” she said.

Philanthropist Sam Brougham is also frustrated with the lack of government funding for Hands On Learning. He says donors like him are “100 per cent convinced” by the program and can’t understand why it isn’t rolled out across Australia.