Student Action Teams:
Acknowledging Citizenship Through Community Action

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Abstract
In 1999 and 2000, a group of 20 secondary schools in Victoria operated student action teams around issues of community safety. These teams of students were commissioned by the Victorian Department of Justice, through the Department of Education, Employment and Training, to research and develop programs that would enhance the safety of their communities. In 2001 and beyond, these teams will operate within a 'middle schooling' context.

The operation of such teams provides a model to link with and go beyond formal governance ideas of 'active citizenship' in schools. It can both provide something 'real' for students to investigate, and also acknowledge that active citizenship means having roles of value within a community. Curriculum outcomes and assessment have a reality beyond that of the teacher's comment or mark.

This paper describes the operation of Student Action Teams, outlines what was learnt through their operation, and reports on the outcomes for students, schools and communities.

Active Citizenship

In thinking about the role of schools in supporting the development of ‘active citizenship’, we are brought to face ideas of how we recognise and gauge citizenship within our communities. Karen Evans and others (Evans, 1995) have suggested useful distinctions between ‘minimal’ and ‘maximal’ views of citizenship, and commented on the educational implications of this in terms of developing “critical and reflective abilities, and capacities for self-determination and autonomy.” (Evans, 1995: 5)

Similarly, it has been suggested that it is “the array of roles that individuals can play in forming, maintaining and changing their communities” (Owen, 1996) that shapes our citizenship. Research by Verba et al (1995) and in the IEA Study (Torney-Purta, 2001) clearly indicate that opportunities for students to actively participate in school governance and in school-community action, are highly significant in forming active citizens. It has also been asserted elsewhere (Owen, 1996; Wyn, 1995; Holdsworth, 2000) that such approaches recognise that young people are current citizens, rather than ‘citizens in waiting’.

Yet the frequent portrayal of ‘active citizenship’ within schools as merely involvement by students in some form of representative governance (eg SRCs, representation on School Councils), again reflects ‘minimalist’ notions of citizenship. In addition, such forms are usually only available to the few, and frequently reflect and reinforce stereotypical patterns of participation and access.

A variety of other curriculum-based approaches have been documented (see Connect, 1979-2001) which provide opportunities to recognise and engage the active citizenship of young
people in ‘forming, maintaining and changing their communities’. These approaches are united by a commitment to recognising the ‘real roles of value’ (Holdsworth, 2000) of young people.

Since 1999, several schools in Victoria have been developing and documenting such approaches through Student Action Teams. This paper reports on the initial stage of such programs. Further details are available in a substantial evaluation report (Holdsworth et al, 2001).

**Background**

The Student Action Teams Program was set up in Victoria in 1998 as a collaboration between the Victorian Government’s Department of Justice (as part of the Vicsafe Community Safety and Crime Prevention Framework) and the (then) Department of Education. Under this Program, Student Action Teams were established in twenty Victorian secondary schools in 1999, and eleven of these schools continued with their teams as part of the Program in 2000. In 2001-2, 38 primary and secondary schools have been funded within a Middle Schooling framework, to implement a further round of Student Action Teams. In addition, at least one Local Government has funded and supported the development of similar teams within their municipality.

While these teams have worked on a wide variety of topics, there are certain commonalities of approach.

a) In a Student Action Team (SAT), a group of students identify and tackle a school or community issue: they research the issue, make plans and proposals about it, and take action on it. Such initiatives, as part of the formal or informal school curriculum, engage students in purposeful, authentic activities which are valued by the students, which have broader community value and which meet or exceed mandated curriculum goals (Holdsworth, 2000);

b) Student Action Teams are based on the following principles:

- that students can make serious and important decisions about issues that are important to them;
- that students can do important and valuable things: they have skills, expertise and a knowledge of the needs of their community;
- that important action can be undertaken as part of students’ learning in school: community-focused research and action is an appropriate educational approach for schools to adopt.

Community-based learning approaches that build partnerships between schools and the wider community have been documented on several occasions (Cumming, 1997 and 1999). In part, such approaches have drawn interest and support from the move to ‘Full Service Schools’, in which service delivery (particularly for marginalised young people and their families) in education, human and community services is being developed in a holistic and coordinated way (Stokes and Tyler, 1997; McLeod and Stokes, 1999).
Such approaches, however, also draw on a longer tradition of active student participation and of attention to the purposes of learning (Holdsworth, 2000). It has been pointed out that for many young people, ‘deferred outcomes’ of learning (in terms of distant goals of employment, citizenship, or acknowledged community roles) are not sufficient to sustain their motivation and commitment to learning. As young people are held in education and, potentially, in relatively passive roles for longer periods of time, it is important that there are initiatives within schools that create real roles of community value for young people. Such initiatives would, as part of the curriculum, engage students in purposeful, authentic activities which are valued by the students, which have broader community value and which meet or exceed mandated curriculum goals.

These ideas also thread through programs addressing issues of Civics and Citizenship Education (Holdsworth, England, Carson, Stokes and Tyler, 2000) and around the Middle Years of Schooling (ACSA, 1996).

A Student Action Team approach has previously been used around health, drug use, safety, environment or other community topics. Examples can be found in which University or College students form such teams. Fewer documented examples are available of such teams operating within a primary or secondary school setting. Thus, the importance of the current work outlined in this paper is that it says that school students can be responsible for important matters, and can be interested and involved in their community to make a difference.

The examples outlined in this paper draw upon the experience of schools in forming and supporting Student Action Teams around the topic of ‘community safety’ - and this focus was defined by the nature and source of the Program’s funding. However, it is argued that the idea of Student Action Teams has broader applicability. The value of the curriculum approach demonstrated through this Program is that it is adaptable or ‘portable’ elsewhere. The approaches outlined here are essentially curriculum approaches that can be used around any topic.

Similar approaches to building student action around community issues such as community safety have been previously identified in schools in:

- Queensland - Youth Action Teams have been formed within Youth Development Programs (AusYouth, 2001); there is also reference to similar structures called Youth Action Panels, set up within a crime prevention framework in 1995;
- Britain - within a crime prevention framework (Crime Concern, 2000); and
- Victoria - in the Youth Action Program operating at a cluster of schools in the early 1980s (VISE, 1984).

There is enormous value in having some form of ‘external focus’ such as ‘community safety’, ‘health’, ‘drug use’, ‘environment’ or ‘homelessness’ in that this:

- provides the team with rigour in addressing issues;
- assists the team in deciding what is worthwhile to act upon;
- provides the team with other specific points of community linkage;
- provides the Program with internal linkage and consistency.

While ‘community-based action/learning’ has been suggested as such a possible focus, previous program experience indicates a danger that this might be too broad. While the
‘community’ provides an important element of the work of a Student Action Team, to focus solely on this can still leave the need for a uniting focus unresolved. Further, for many schools, there continue to be debates as to the nature of their ‘community’.

The nature of the ‘action’ of a Student Action Teams benefits from an external focus. The community then becomes the location for this focus and for action around it. In some cases, the particular focus is important in creating the nature of the community to which the school links (eg links with Safer Cities and Shires, with LandCare, with Health Centres and so on).

In choosing a theme for a Student Action Teams Program, it is important that it:

- is meaningful to and ‘owned by’ the student team;
- is accessible to community action;
- is appropriate to the age range of students; and
- achieves a balance between the specificity of the focus and the flexibility to adapt to community needs and to students’ perceptions/identification of needs.

**Program Implementation**

The initial aims of the Program in 1998-2000 were to:

- involve secondary school students in school based groups working together with teachers and other professionals to investigate, identify and implement strategies for improving community safety;
- improve and extend leadership opportunities amongst participating students; and
- secure the sustainable implementation of Student Action Teams within the normal resources available to Victorian government secondary schools. (Program documentation)

Initially, over 30 secondary schools responded to an invitation to apply for Program funding, and 20 were selected. An orientation briefing was conducted for administrators and teachers from schools in December, 1998.

**Training**

The Australian Red Cross – Victoria was selected to provide training support for teachers and students. On the first of these training activities, teachers identified as SAT support personnel worked in small groups to discuss and identify key issues that they wanted to have addressed in the program. These included:

- networking and external support
- program operation within schools
- student choice and participation
- curriculum links.

For a two-day student training activity, a team comprising four students and a teacher from each participating school was invited to attend the seminar. Over 100 teachers and students attended.
The program covered the following areas (further details of the program are available directly from the Australian Red Cross - Victoria):

- introduction of participating schools;
- outline of the SAT Program and training;
- introduction of team members and their expectations;
- leadership and values;
- discovering hidden resources;
- project management;
- issues in volunteering;
- school team planning.

The teams were given a copy of the Australian Red Cross Leadership Manual, which was a draft version of the manual for the Red Cross Community Challenge Program. Activities from this manual were included in the two day program and school teams were encouraged to use the manual to conduct their own training activities at school.

**Further Professional Development**

Later in 1999, the Program’s Evaluation Team conducted a teacher professional development activity to assist teachers in sharing information about the various approaches being taken with the implementation of SAT, to outline and discuss some of the school-level documentation requirements and to begin planning for the extension of the Program into 2000.

At the end of each of the two years, at the suggestion of the Evaluation Team and with further funding from the Program, a student and teacher Reporting Day was conducted in Melbourne. Schools were invited to send teams of up to four students and a teacher to this reporting day. The main activities were based around each SAT team preparing a report on their SAT project and achievements, the sharing of these experiences, identifying what students had learnt through their participation in SAT and planning for the continuation of SAT in the schools.

**School Level Implementation**

The approaches to the implementation of the SAT Program at the school level were very diverse. These various approaches can be grouped together in three general approaches:

1. where students were identified and they chose the issue;
2. where the topic was chosen by the school (usually teachers) and interested students identified; and
3. where SAT was incorporated in an existing school program or activity eg the SRC, VYDP or as part of a subject.

The reasons schools gave for choosing particular students or groups of students also varied considerably and responded to which of the above approaches had been adopted. This flexibility was important in enabling the school to shape the Program to suit their local needs and priorities.
In some schools there was an issue that the school and/or the students were already keen to address, prior to the operation of the SAT. In these cases the identification of the issue helped identify the students to be involved. For example in Bright and Kyneton the issue was a skate park facility and in each case there was a group of students that had been active in skateboarding and trying to get a skate park in their community. At Altona, teachers had identified school truancy as an issue they wished the team to investigate, and this, in turn, defined the students who became members of the team.

At other schools, the team was formed from interested or identified students, and they then proceeded to discuss and decide on a topic. For some, the initial training days provided ideas; for others, further discussion continued over protracted periods at school. Some schools took considerable time to decide on an issue, or worked on several smaller topics while clarifying a more major idea.

Issues emerged about the selection of students as participants in the Program, with some schools choosing already active and successful ‘student leaders’, while others chose marginalised students, or those exhibiting ‘non-traditional’ forms of leadership. This issue is explored later in this Working Paper.

Some schools conducted the SAT Program during normal class time as part of their class activities; other schools conducted SAT during students’ time ie lunch time and before and after school; several schools conducted SAT by withdrawing students from their scheduled classes.

**Some Case Stories**

The following are extracts from descriptions of the Student Action Teams at each of the eleven schools that completed two years in the Program. (Full descriptions are contained in the Program’s evaluation report: Holdsworth et al, 2001)

**Altona Secondary College**

The SAT at Altona started its work by researching truancy within the school - why students truanted, what they did and so on. The focus came to be on providing activities for students (so they wouldn’t truant), and on developing a school Student Discipline and Welfare Policy so that students had some definitive guidelines which would be understood by all in the school community.

In 1999, four students were on the SAT; these were from years 9 to 11, and were two males and two females. Even though these students were not all the formal ‘leaders’ in the school, they were chosen by teachers for the team because they were leaders in their own peer groups. At least a couple of the students had already exhibited a significant rate of absenteeism. But all were seen as having leadership qualities - for better or worse in some cases. Teachers were open about these reasons with the students and approached this group with a proposal that they make up the team. Team membership was portrayed positively, and was seen to provide them with importance and direction.

**Banksia Secondary College**
The Student Action Team has organised a range of small actions around themes of community safety and connectedness. These have included preventing vandalism of telephone boxes, working with primary schools about bike labelling, developing a handbook on ‘Teenagers and Safety’ in the City of Banyule, carrying out an investigation into absenteeism, and organising Safety Week activities.

While some of the activities such as Phone Watch - looking after a public telephone - had clear safety connections within their community, others focused more on increasing the awareness of students about safety issues within the school. For example, the team ensured that there were regular Fire Drills, and organised Self Defence classes for Girls. Some of the activities also focused more on notions of ‘social safety’ or belongingness: eg fostering the notion of successful night entertainment functions both for students and the wider community.

Four students were chosen by the SRC Coordinator to be on the initial team. Initially the team was going to consist of year 9 students and these were briefed by the City of Banyule Youth Worker; however these students then pulled out of the original training because of school and sporting commitments and an alternative group of four year 8 students, who had shown interest, was chosen at short notice. The Team has close links with the Student Representative Council: the teacher supporting the team also is the SRC support teacher. So two of the initial team members were on the SRC, and the other two were not.

In the second year the Team consisted of four year 8 students who had shown active interest in the Student Action Team but who had not had any experience with the SRC before. The students in the second year were much more enthusiastic, volunteering their time and eager to take on each new project. The four members approached the SRC Coordinator to join the team. Two have since left the school, but the other remain committed and ready to recruit others to the task, now as part of the SRC.

**Euroa Secondary College**

In its first year of operation, the Student Action team concentrated on promoting education in the community about the Safety House program. In its second year, this focus shifted to a project around the establishment of a drop-in café in Euroa for teenagers to meet in a safe and friendly environment and the development of a project around the Quit program.

In 2000, the SAT were concerned about the level of dangerous behaviour of teenagers looking for excitement on weekend evenings - alcohol abuse, vandalism, fights. They were enthusiastic about setting up a Youth Drop In café/games/chat venue in a safe and friendly environment. When this aim became unachievable after some months, the team decided to pursue the idea of educating the primary school students in a Quit program, as they saw early involvement in smoking as another dangerous activity taken up by Euroa youth.

The Student Action Team was originally selected from year 9 and 10 students who applied in writing. It was hoped that it would be mostly those students who were studying the units of Environmental Studies and Legal Studies who would apply, as it was envisioned that they would be able to work on their SAT project as one of their work requirements for these units. However it eventuated that most of the students interested in SAT were not taking these units, so they used the two periods per week of the Wider/Sport Education unit to get together and work on their project.
In 2000, the invitation to apply for the SAT was, this time, extended primarily to students selecting the Community Studies unit. Unfortunately, there were not enough students wishing to study this unit for it to run, so again the offer was opened to all year 9 and 10 students. Over 20 applied and 10 were accepted for the training with outside consultants. Those who formed the SAT after the training day were 7 girls and 2 boys. As the project to establish a Drop In Café became more frustrating, the numbers dropped to six and this was the final team who continued on to deliver the Quit project.

Heatherhill Secondary College

The original Student Action Team developed as a focal point within a cluster of neighbouring secondary colleges. It conducted similar leadership training approaches with student teams in these colleges. In its first year, the SAT also conducted youth forums in the area in consultation with police and other agencies.

In the subsequent years, drawing upon earlier investigations in the school, the SAT developed projects that addressed the College’s charter priority of “improving health and well-being of the College community”. SAT students continued to work in conjunction with emergency services such as the police and the fire brigade and other community agencies to produce displays and workshops to highlight:

- support services that are available to minority groups (refugees) within their community
- issues of concern within their community (death of two children in a house fire)
- strategies that parents could use to assist them when communicating with their teenage kids.

Karingal Park Secondary College

The focus of the Student Action Team was on increasing the safety of students and others in the light of specific local issues. Initially, in its first year, this work focused around a specific track near the school, where there had been some major incidents, including the murder of Natalie Russell; the team then moved on, in the second year, to build awareness of the dangers of behaviour and alternatives to what students perceive as the appropriate or expected behaviour during ‘muckup’ time.

These issues were aimed at:

- increasing students feeling of safety near the school;
- helping to prevent deaths and/or injuries;
- avoiding thoughtless behaviour that is threatening to the community;
- inspiring young people to seek alternative entertainment;
- offering and educating young people about the resources available to them.

The first issue was to improve the safety of a pathway that is an access route to the school, on which a girl, Natalie Russell, had been recently murdered. Since then students had not felt safe using it.

In the second year, a community safety issue came to the attention of students: the behaviour of students, particularly year 12, during the end-of-school-year period. A student from a
neighbouring college died and two others were seriously injured when they were drink
driving, without a licence, after a year 12 party. It was recognised that this time of year
makes many in the school and wider community feel unsafe, and concerned for their physical
and psychological well-being. In addition, there was concern about student attitudes to and
involvement in drinking, driving, drugs, suicide, and their self-esteem.

The team wanted to make students aware of dangers, and to educate them about their options.
They wanted to alter attitudes for the better.

Both these issues were chosen as part of the considerations of the community safety group
that is part of the College’s Student Leadership Council (SLC).

**Kyneton Secondary College**

The Student Action Team at Kyneton Secondary College worked for two years on the
development of a Skate Park for the area. The student team was engaged in fund-raising and
negotiating to help develop skateboarding facilities in the Kyneton community. This involved
developing links with the local community, drawing up plans, running a skate competition to
raise public awareness, and promoting a more positive image in the community.

This topic was chosen because of boredom in the town; also many local young people skate.
The group argued that having a skate park would allow the community to develop an area for
young people to socialise and participate in active recreation (away from organised clubs).
The process of developing the skate park would also empower young people to contribute
positively to their local area.

A group of students were interested in getting a skate park in Kyneton. There had been
discussion amongst this group of young people for several years. For example, in 1997-1998,
various groups of young people were using the Primary School site for skating and they then
wanted an area of their own.

This issue identified the team.

**Melton Secondary College**

The Student Action Team at Melton Secondary College had a strong and continuing focus on
youth safety in Melton. The team worked closely with the local Safer Cities and Shires
Project to survey students about perceptions of safe and unsafe areas.

This work continued into the Program’s second year, with an emphasis on action around one
particular area that students had identified as being unsafe. The team carried out a site visit to
the main area identified as youth unfriendly, developed a Community Learning Project that
focused on recommendations for improvements to the area, and submitted a report and list of
recommendations to the Shire.

Four students from years 9 and 10 formed the SAT. They were chosen by teachers with
gender balance in mind, and as people who think and ask. It was also decided to have older
students, as it was considered that the language in project and training manuals would have
been too sophisticated for younger students. However, other students were invited to suggest
ways of improving the area once the unsafe area had been identified.
In the second year, a team consisting of six students from year 9 was formed after students were alerted to the project and were invited to participate. They were recommended by their year 8 teachers, and were invited to submit a written application, followed by an interview. The six were chosen largely on the basis of their understanding of what was required to be a team member. These students attended the first student leadership course held at the Alpine School at Dinner Plains, where the project was more clearly defined and further strengthened by the time dedicated to it as a Community Learning Project.

**Ovens Secondary College**

The Student Action Team coordinated a larger group of students on a range of community-based activities which provided them with opportunities to develop skills in leadership, citizenship, communication, organisation and maintaining commitment, and provide opportunities for students to contribute to the local community through links with service agencies and local government.

In the first year, the team organised a ‘Spring Into Health’ Health Issues Expo, for local youth health providers, and which involved year 9 and 10 students from two local secondary colleges. This Expo included guest speakers, drama/theatre studies, stall holders eg YMCA, nutritionist etc, a survey and prizes. A Council youth worker was also involved initially, as he was starting a Junior Council and the SAT was seen to be related to this.

In the second year, the Ovens SAT focused on developing rural pride. This included developing a community mural at the railway station, with various schools each doing a section. Some students also visited the primary school to help out with lunchtime activities. These projects had already been chosen by the school, and students were allocated to whichever work group suited them best. The school argued that increasing students’ knowledge of and involvement with a range of recreational and health services in community provides a powerful boost to their social safety.

**Princes Hill Secondary College**

The Student Action Team at Princes Hill Secondary College has worked around issues of ‘social safety’ or community belongingness. This has included work around inter-generational relationships, where the student team conducted activities at a neighbouring old people’s home to improve the perceptions and image of young people in the local community; around inter-school networking, with both secondary and primary schools in the area; around discussions with the police; and around projects run by students within the school.

These issues were chosen to improve the perception of young people in the community; by establishing improved relationships and image, the experience of community safety will increase.

That attention to ‘social safety’ also means the creation of a greater sense of community within a school, and the enhancement of self-esteem through community involvement or engagement in community action.

**Wanganui Park Secondary College**
Over the two years of its operation, the Student Action Team at Wanganui Park Secondary College explored and acted on several issues. These included action around Reconciliation Week, on Trauma Teddies, and on the image of a particular estate near the school.

The school endeavoured to undertake activities that forged stronger links between the school and its community. The SAT projects were then chosen to require strong links with the community and to give students access to networks outside of the school.

In 2000, the SAT continued to work with the local Community House. The issue, which gained considerable support, was a positive project to improve the image of the area and the reclaiming of the international village which was located near the school.

**Weeroona College**

The Student Action Team at Weeroona College has focused on driver education for young people. In its first year, the team developed a video to advertise a course for skilling young people for driving in adverse country conditions. They participated in a community-based Road Safety campaign called Operation DEFY (Driver Education for Youth) which aimed to help reduce the high road toll of young people. This enabled students to actively participate in planning and decision-making processes within the local community.

The focus issue for Weeroona began with the death of four students in a car accident in Bendigo. This affected most students at the school, and students wanted to follow up on the need for young people to have improved ‘country’ driving skills. This was entirely the students’ initiative.

In its first year, the Student Action Team developed a promotional video for Driver Education for Youth (DEFY). This involved liaison with police, Bendigo City Council, SES, and Prime TV.
Program Achievements and Outcomes

The Student Action Teams Program set out five broad areas of objectives. The evaluation collected information at central and school levels around performance indicators specified under each objective. Further details are included in the evaluation report (Holdsworth et al, 2001).

It is clear from this information that most of these objectives were achieved, though with significant learnings about Program operation. Some brief comments follow.


All 20 schools that were selected and funded under the Program, formed and maintained Student Action Teams in their first year; eleven of these schools formed continuing or new teams in the Program’s second year of implementation; only one further school, in its second year of selection within the Program, failed to form a team - and subsequently withdrew from the Program. The quality of team functioning and of results was highly variable, with a large degree of ‘re-forming’, ‘storming’, ‘frustration’ and ‘searching’ reported by schools. However, all participating schools report (in the stories contained in this paper, and in Program newsletters) substantial results at a community level.

In general, schools responded well to an ad hoc formation of teams. To some extent, due to timelines and processes adopted (see below), they had little choice other than to form ad hoc or responsive teams. They formed small teams to attend the initial training and, in most cases, these teams continued to be the core of their school’s SAT. Students were mainly withdrawn from classes to meet, to plan and to act, or worked during lunch times and other breaks.

Though this created some difficulties in allocation of time for activities (and schools adopted creative solutions to ensuring that this happened) and, in some cases, it meant that plans proceeded slowly, this ad hoc formation of teams also resulted in two positive outcomes:

- a high identification of students with Student Action Teams: because students largely chose to be on the team, or felt honoured to be chosen, many started their involvement with a high commitment;
- the flexibility of the team to work on local issues in a responsive way: the team could suspend activities if appropriate, start again when appropriate, or change directions.

1. Sustainability of Student Action Teams in Victorian schools within the normal resources available to school communities in line with a longer term aim to maximise their implementation in Victorian schools.

While there was strong indication from many schools participating in the second year of the Program that they intended continuing the Program in 2001 and beyond, there was no formalisation of this. However, at a central level, the responsibility for the Student Action Teams Program has, in 2001, been located within the Middle Years of Schooling curriculum programs area of the Department of Education, Employment and Training in a way that maximises opportunities for its integration and sustainability within on-going programs.
2. **High levels of integration of Student Action Teams with the development and implementation of local community safety and crime prevention initiatives, by local government, police and other government agencies.**

In several instances there was close liaison and integration of the activities of Student Action Teams with local community safety and crime prevention initiatives; in other schools this relationship was looser and paralleled community-based initiatives; in many cases the links with formal community safety and crime prevention initiatives were non-existent and schools pursued school-based agendas. Where there was prior awareness of the Safer Cities and Shires program, and where student-based plans coincided with the local priorities, Student Action Teams were able to make a substantial contribution to research and recommendations around local community safety and crime prevention. However, only a very small group of schools was involved in this formal way.

Where teachers were keen to explore these connections, and where there were strong pre-existing relationships with community programs, Councils and community personnel, the integration of SATs with local initiatives developed well.

3. **Personal and educational outcomes for students.**

The achievement of personal and educational outcomes for students involved with Student Action teams is the strongest of the Program’s achievements. It is clear from teacher, student and other comments that those students involved with SATs gained a great deal from their participation. This is especially true where schools did target specific students in need. These gains were noted in areas of:

- Increased knowledge and awareness of community safety issues; and
- Personal development of students including enhanced communication and teamwork skills;

but less so in:

- Enhanced school capacity in responding to the needs of young people at risk of being marginalised.

**Accreditation**

The work of Student Action Team also indicates some models for the accreditation of students within such projects. Of the initial 20 schools, 13 clearly indicated that some form of school-based credit was being provided for students at the end of the first year.

This accreditation included:

- establishing the SAT as a specific subject, elective or unit within the curriculum and providing ‘normal’ subject credit (this requires adequate notice, time to develop ‘subject outlines’ and mapping against CSF II);
establishing SAT work as a ‘negotiated exemption’ for work requirements within existing subjects (this requires a willingness for teachers - often not SAT support teachers - to negotiate such ‘credit’, and to have a ‘work requirements’ approach in place);

• adoption of a ‘portfolio’ assessment system, to which SAT work and outcomes can be added;

• certification specific to SAT (many schools provided students on the teams with some form of ‘extra’ certificate noting their participation; the parity of such certification with other forms of assessment in the school is an issue);

• a reference or similar letter (several schools also reported providing this in terms of leadership issues);

• some communal recognition, such as a plaque or school certificate (many schools mentioned developing such a public statement, usually to be hung in the front office).

These forms of accreditation need also to be distinguished from forms of recognition of the students’ work in SATs - either through presentations at school assemblies, information in newsletters or local media, or access to privileges (lunches, excursions etc). Of equal importance (and this relates clearly to issues of the curriculum placement of SATs), is the issue of recognition of SATs through provision of time to complete activities within the officially recognised and approved processes and structures of the school.

Some schools resisted incorporation of Student Action teams into the curriculum, arguing that the engagement of students in a voluntary activity meant it should be better addressed through ‘ad hoc’ teams. However, issues of accreditation are still appropriate within this structure.

1. Value added outcomes for schools.

Substantial questions remained as to whether the operation of Student Action Teams over a relatively short period had much on-going or broader impact on the schools. Much of the school change literature indicates the need for sustained input of such programs over several years if there is to be a meaningful impact on school practices. Limited indication exists in some schools’ reports that they have included or are planning to include Student Action Teams or similar approaches within their curriculum approaches, principally (as noted earlier) in SOSE areas.

SAT and Curriculum

In looking over what schools in the Program have done, we can identify several options:

• Some schools have operated Student Action Teams within their existing curriculum. For example, it has been an optional unit within a core SOSE and English program, an elective within a block of choices, a VYDP class (ie a specific form of elective), or an activity within a flexible activities/negotiated curriculum block. In these cases a time allocation has often been provided for a teacher as part of a teaching load;

• Some schools have operated Student Action Teams within their existing co-curricular activities. For example, it has been a formal sub-committee of the Student Council, or has been given a status alongside the Student Council, in order to provide other ways to enable participation and leadership. In these cases, there is sometimes a small time or
responsibility allowance for a teacher, usually pre-existing, and often tied to ‘student participation’ or ‘student leadership’;

- Some schools have operated Student Action Teams as an ‘ad hoc’ or special program outside the curriculum. A small team of students has been chosen, who meet flexibly, either in their own time or withdrawn from classes. In these cases, there is often not a formal recognition of teachers’ time unless support is generically linked within another area of responsibility (as above or for student welfare);

- Some schools have operated a mixture of these models, for example, creating a small team outside the formal curriculum, but encouraging and supporting time and credit allocations within subjects (eg as a VCE Unit 1 and 2 Communications project, or within a Health subject, or by providing ‘negotiated exemptions’ or ‘negotiated replacements’ for work requirements - in English, SOSE, Art, Drama, Media) or within an awards scheme, such as the Duke of Edinburgh Scheme.

In many of these cases, the schools have recognised that, after two years, the Student Action Teams Program (and its approaches) are still in an early stage. “Hopefully,” says one school, “it will help influence a whole College culture of leadership and citizenship.”

Program sustainability is linked directly to consideration of the place of Student Action Teams in relation to the formal and informal curriculum of the schools. If such approach are to continue beyond initial funding stages, or outlast the enthusiasms of the initiating teacher, they must have a place on the timetable and within the ‘normal’ operations of the school. This can ensure that students can participate without penalty (missing classes), that teachers can be provided with time to develop and support Teams (through a time allotment), and that resources can be allocated (through school and subject budgetary processes).

What is potentially lost, as both students and teachers pointed out to the evaluation, is the excitement, commitment and flexibility that comes with a group (of students, principally) that volunteers to be involved with a project they identify, in which they believe, and around which they can take meaningful action and achieve worthwhile ends.

Sustainability issues need to address the issue of provision of coordination and support within staffing allocations. The experience of the Program over two years has been that a crucial element is to have the commitment of a few staff members within the school to giving the SAT priority. They have integrated this commitment with similar duties eg support for the SRC, and only in a few cases have received time or financial allowances for these roles.

If the SAT support teacher has a leadership position within the school (eg Curriculum Coordinator, SRC support teacher, Student Welfare Coordinator), it appears more likely that SAT approaches will be sustainable. Alternatively, SAT approaches will be sustainable if they are adopted within the mainstream curriculum approaches of the school - and this issue will be discussed further in the final part of this section of the report.

It is also argued in the evaluation report that, faced with competing pressures within a school for allocation of human and financial resources, sustainability of a Student Action Team approach will also be enhanced by two other factors:

a) the school’s commitment to and adoption of an identified Program focus. That is, schools are more likely to persevere with these approaches, in the face of difficulties and
constraints, if they have made a commitment to be part of a Program for which they get ‘kudos’, publicity and credibility.

b) **the provision of professional development and other support.** Teachers and students involved in Student Action Teams (a relatively new, different and challenging approach in some cases) need encouragement and advice from colleagues and other appropriate personnel to move out of the comfort of conventional practices. Obtaining such support is probably beyond the resources of individual schools, and is a further function of providing a whole Program focus.

**Program Learnings**

The experience in working with these schools over two years, suggests some program learnings:

- A Student Action Team Program is more likely to be successful in achieving its goals if schools clearly identify themselves as part of an initiative. This means commitment to the Program and its objectives, access to training and other Program events, and opportunities to meet and share experiences with other schools within the Program.

- A clear and comprehensive Program Plan for such an initiative should include:
  - requirements for on-going support of schools by trainers or a support team;
  - development of guidelines for school action including a focus on issues of ‘community safety’ and ‘at risk’;
  - plans for training and professional development to ensure schools are supported to achieve objectives;
  - ‘milestones’ for school accountability in terms of activities and commitment of funding.

- Adequate advance notification of Program operation and of a school’s selection is required to enable school-level planning. It is suggested that schools need to know they are part of a Program, and be briefed about requirements, by October of the previous year.

- In general, even where the actual ‘action’ period is short, schools need a full twelve month timeframe to plan, organise, initiate, research and carry out their projects. This also enables Student Action Teams to plan and implement smaller projects within a larger context, and to learn and develop their approaches based on reflection on their work.

- The Program briefing or orientation session should occur well before the implementation phase; project constraints (e.g. a community safety theme) need to be clearly outlined at this stage, and there should be specific discussion around the nature of projects and approaches that would meet community safety themes. Where any funding or sponsoring arrangements mandate the overall Student Action Teams topics and approaches, a similar discussion is essential.

- Initial training for teachers and students within a Student Action Team Program is essential. This training and associated materials should be specific to the operation of
Student Action Teams, rather than generalised ‘leadership’, ‘teamwork’ or ‘community liaison’ training. It is essential to ensure that the initial training clearly covers critical requirements of the Program’s objectives, includes the provision of on-going support for schools as a requirement and expectation, and develops specific training events (for both staff and students) during the Program’s operation, in response to the developing experience and needs of schools.

- The relation of the Program to the overall curriculum of the school must be a considered decision that responds to the situation, needs and possibilities within each school. That decision must be made in full cognizance of issues of sustainability and effective operation and of the commitment and excitement of students and staff. The decision and the structure may also evolve and change over time.

Sustainability

To be sustainable, the experience of the Program to date suggests that:

- the identification and resourcing of appropriate school personnel is vital;
- professional development and training is needed for new and continuing members of staff and of students involved in projects;
- SAT networks need to be developed between schools to encourage sharing, advice and inspiration (for students and teachers);
- schools needs the status and legitimacy for Student Action Team approaches provided by a systemic or Program approach;
- project funding has a symbolic value in assuring schools of central support, as a marker of participation in a definable Program, as an encouragement to take initiatives (“We’d consider re-doing it if funding exists”) and in focusing local publicity;
- while such project funding is sometimes practically useful for activities at a local level, the continued practical operation of Student Action Teams within schools does not depend on funding at this level.

Schools that have set up close relationships with outside agencies or sponsors, will continue drawing on this ‘in kind’ or ‘good will’ support for as long as common and shared value projects exist. However, more pressing as a sustainability issue is the need for someone at the school to coordinate and support the projects, and the central Program professional development and training to support that role.

The lessons from previous schools point to the following factors as crucial:

- Who initially applied for support within the Program is important to continuity. The selection of a staff member also includes a commitment from that person, or from the school on their behalf, to seeing through the project ie not to be planning to be on leave for critical times, or if that is the case, having plans within the school to maintain the project. Continuity of interest is important: mechanisms to ensure that schools can guarantee adherence to their proposals need to be built into the selection process;
- The importance of identification of the ‘right teacher’ to support Student Action Teams has previously been mentioned and is reinforced here. That teacher must be someone with
an understanding of and commitment to SAT processes, and who is comfortable and confident in the job;

- The Program centrally has a responsibility to maintain closer links and communication with the school, both to check and re-check about communication, and also to negotiate requirements. There should not be that sense of distance and lack of understanding where schools feel they are ‘guessing’ what might be required;

- Part of the value of professional development and training activities for teachers and students is to build a sense of understanding of overall Program intentions and the development of shared purpose.

We learn from the schools about the importance of:

- a flexible, innovative and respected person as the Student Action Team support teacher;

- providing the staff member (and hence the Program within the school) with the status and role in the school eg through a Position of Responsibility;

- a significant role for school leaders within or as support for the operation of the Student Action Team;

- building upon initiatives that the school would probably have done anyway, or classroom approaches that were already in operation, and then enhancing that through provision of funding, focus and training;

- building upon existing links between the school and its community, either in the form of community-based projects, or personal contacts.

Conclusion

The experience of this Program in 1999-2000 has shown both that the Student Action Team model is educationally viable, and that it is an approach that exemplifies processes of student engagement with real issues.

The key citizenship aspects of Student Action Teams are that they:

- **challenge** students;

- enable **decisions** by students about what’s important to them;

- **recognise** that students bring understanding, skills and vision to their learning;

- include an acknowledgment that such Teams can **make a difference** within their communities;

- provide **recognition** for such initiatives within the ‘authorised activities’ of a school, and within the ‘authorised approaches’ of the Department.

Student Action Teams are not without their problems and challenges. Some issues about organisation and support have been raised in this paper, and the full evaluation report deals with these more substantially. The largest challenges are, however, to:

- find ways to ensure that such programs can continue within school structures without compromising the sense of excitement and ownership that these Teams have encouraged; and

- build similar approaches into the everyday life of schools.
Appendix:

Schools Involved

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