



## **Brotherhood of St Laurence Homework Centre**

### **Overview**

The Brotherhood of St Laurence Homework Centre was established in 1990 in response to a growing awareness that many students from low-income families in the City of Yarra and surrounding area experience difficulty in their education. Currently situated in the Fitzroy Library, the Homework Centre provides young people undertaking secondary school studies with a supportive environment where they can work and receive individual tuition in all subject areas.

The staff (paid and volunteer) provide both academic and personal support to students and attempt to create an environment that is conducive to learning by building rapport with and between students.

The objective of the Homework Centre to put economically disadvantaged students on a more equal footing with other students is as relevant today as it was at the Centre's inception more than ten years ago.

### **Aims**

#### **To:**

- ❖ *Provide intensive, personalised academic assistance to students with their homework*
  - The Homework Centre can support students before they become disheartened with their studies and slip through the system
- ❖ *Provide students with a learning environment that is complementary to their school one*
- ❖ *Provide students from low-income families with access to free tuition*
  - Students from low-income families are unfairly disadvantaged in their education as others are able to afford private tuition.

## **Our Model**

- ❖ *Details of service:* Brotherhood of St Laurence  
Homework Centre  
Fitzroy Library (Moor St, Fitzroy)  
Monday – Thursday, 4-6pm (during school terms)  
Ph: 9483 2450
- ❖ *Who accesses our service*
  - Majority from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CLD) background (Vietnamese, Chinese, African, South American and others)
  - Majority from low income families (large proportion living in public housing)
  - Many live very close to the service (within a 5 minute walk) although there are quite a few travelling from as far away as Flemington and Thornbury to access the service
  - Students come from around 10 different secondary schools in the surrounding area as well as English language schools such as the one in Collingwood.
- ❖ *Staffing*
  - A paid staff member attends the Centre each night taking care of Sciences and Mathematics tuition from Year 7- Year 12 as well as volunteer co-ordination. The paid staff member is also a Youth Worker for the Brotherhood of St Laurence in Fitzroy.
  - Two to three volunteer tutors attend the service each night specialising in a particular field e.g. English, Maths, Sciences, Business Studies. Volunteers are usually university students or young professionals.
  - The paid tutor also has 4 hours a week of dedicated time to take care of administrative duties such as promotion, data collection, stationery maintenance etc.

## **Key Elements of an Effective Homework Assistance Programme**

With over ten years experience running a successful programme and talking to many other programme co-ordinators, we believe that the following are paramount in the effective provision of a Homework Assistance programme.

- ❖ *More than just homework assistance*
  - The Homework Centre serves as an environment for social engagement with peers and tutors as well as academic assistance. This kind of social engagement gives depth to the teaching relationship between students and tutors.
  - Through the relationships developed between student and tutor, issues that impinge upon a student's educational success (e.g. lack of stable home environment) sometimes arise and are able to be addressed by referral to an appropriate service. This is due to the presence of a youth worker with knowledge of local services.

- Paid tutors have been involved in supporting students outside of Homework Centre operating hours by providing transport to sporting activities, going to school art displays, etc.
- Paid tutors can act as an advocate for students within their school if they require this. This is particularly relevant for students whose parents have limited English language skills and/or limited knowledge of the education system.
- Students are able to discuss their frustrations regarding their studies with someone other than their peers.
- Tutors are from a variety of backgrounds and life-experiences, exposing students to different post-secondary pathways.

❖ *Intensive academic assistance*

- Students receive one-on-one assistance from a tutor with sufficient time given to ensure their learning needs are met.
- Students challenged and supported to try and think problems through and not just hand-fed quick solutions.
- Students determine their own study pace without pressure from tutors. While encouragement to study is given, undue pressure to study can be a deterrent as students have often just come from a long day at school.

❖ *Consistent opening hours and staff availability*

- The Centre is open four days a week enabling students (especially those with poorer time management skills) to walk in on almost any weekday afternoon (Monday – Thursday, 4-6pm) and receive assistance. Students frequently need immediate access to assistance (e.g. the project they forgot about that is due tomorrow can't wait until next week to be sorted out) and the Homework Centre goes a long way towards meeting this need.
- The same paid staff member attends the centre each afternoon allowing for continuity in academic assistance as well as in relationships between tutors and students. In addition, volunteer tutors commit to coming on the same night each week for at least a term and are encouraged to stay with the program for at least a semester. This further enhances the stability of the service and deepens the level of academic support provided. Some volunteers have stayed with the Homework Centre for 3 years or more!

❖ *Resources*

- Students and tutors have access to current school texts and other useful books (e.g. Mathematics texts, ESL texts, dictionaries) in our resource cupboard. We also have stationery, paper and a graphics calculator.
- Some of our students struggle financially, which lead to us starting a Borrowed Items Register that allows students to borrow texts and other items from our resource cupboard
- The library designates three of its computers (with necessary programs and internet access) for use exclusively by our students when the Centre is open. This allows students to work on projects on the computer with assistance from a tutor if necessary.
- Snacks, drinks and access to a tea room gives students the opportunity to take a break when necessary and help them keep motivated with their studies.

❖ *Group outings*

- At the end of school terms the Centre staff often take students on outings to places such as Luna Park for relationship building between students and their

peers and tutors. As well as being a good way to reward students for a hard term's work, these outings further assist tutors in connecting with students.

❖ *Key location*

- The Centre is located in a public library that is highly visible and easily accessible by students. Safety of students returning home at night after the Centre closes is a big concern for parents. Being located close to the Atherton Gardens Public Housing Estate where many of these families reside helps to alleviate this concern. For students who live further away, we are only a short, well lit walk from the nearest tram.
- Being located off school grounds means that the Centre is not directly associated with the school environment which for some is not a completely positive experience.
- The Centre provides students with an appropriate space for study with help on hand if they need it. Many students have commented that they lack an appropriate study space at home.
- Students are able to access additional services such as the library's resources and staff.

❖ *Adapted to the specific needs of the region*

- The Centre has an English tutor present every night to meet the specific needs of the target group in our area. Fitzroy has a high proportion of students from CLD backgrounds and therefore high ESL needs.

❖ *Volunteer Co-ordination*

- Presence of a paid staff member each night allows for continual support of volunteers should issues arise.
- Volunteer tutoring guide, developed by BSL staff, given to all volunteers to provide pointers on tuition techniques and other important issues with in depth assistance provided on the job.
- Opportunities provided for relevant training such as the Refugee Experience training provided by the Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture.
- Meetings between volunteers and paid staff held each school term to provide an opportunity for volunteer feedback, updates on any proposed changes to the service, discussion on possible end of term recreational activities for students, future training options for volunteers, and issues pertaining to specific students that may arise throughout the year.

## **Outcomes**

### **Academic & Social**

Rather than feeling like they just need to get the work done, students are encouraged to take time to understand the problems they are facing and are assisted to do so. This is sometimes not possible in school classes due to the heavy workloads and subsequent high pace of the lesson, as is expressed by many of the Homework Centre students to the tutors.

Homework Centre tutors have assisted students through some tough times. We've been to a funeral for a student's parent and talked to schools about the possible expulsion of one of our students. We've also assisted students who are struggling financially or have domestic issues to access support services such as the Job

Placement Employment and Training (JPET) Programme and the Back to School Programme and provided one-on-one support to students on a variety of personal issues.

In 2004, 10 Year 12 students regularly attended the Homework Centre. Out of this 10, 6 have made contact with Homework Centre staff in 2005, and of these:

- **4** have gone on to study at **University**
- **1** has gone on to study at **TAFE**
- **1** has gone on to **Full Time work** and is undertaking training to become a Store Manager at her workplace

We now send out letters (with a stamped, self-addressed envelope included for return postage) with small surveys to all Year 12 students to find out what they are doing post Year 12. For 2005, 7 out of our 9 consistently attending Year 12 students responded to the survey. Out of these 7 students:

- **3** have gone on to study at **Univeristy**
- **3** have gone on to study at **TAFE**
- **1** has taken a year off to travel overseas

## **What the students say**

Do students need the Homework Centre? What benefits does it have for them? In an attempt to answer some of these questions, the Homework Centre conducted a student survey in 2001. Here are some of their responses (note: students' spelling mistakes have been left in).

***Q: Is it easy for you to study at home without being distracted? Yes/No  
If you answered no, what makes it difficult to study at home?***

***No***

- I don't have a door to my study room and because we have a shop, it is quite noisy
- Just the fact that I'm home and I can do anything I want
- T.V., my little brother and that in my house I don't feel like doing work
- You can be lazy things to do that you rather do
- The noise, can be lazy easy, television, computer Entertainment!!
- Little sisters
- To quiet and boring
- Television, games
- To noisy and I can't really consintrate
- The T.V., internet (chatting)
- My bed – (Very Irresistable!), Television

***Q: Do you have a Homework or Study Centre at your school?  
Yes/No/Don't know  
Do you use it? Yes/No/Sometimes***

***If you have one and you don't use it, why not?***

- Because, on Thursday afternoon in my school a study center which is Math, but my math really good so I don't need to go.
- Because it is open two times a week at lunchtime so I don't have time to go to it. And also because the teachers there only help in MATHS

***Q: Are you happy with the help you get from the regular tutors?***

***Yes/No/Sort of  
(please comment)***

***Yes***

- Because they are very helpful and friendly
- Yes, Rob and John have been very helpful and kind
- They explain the question I don't get very clearly
- They help me very well
- Yes they explain questions well
- It is good service
- Yes I am very happy
- Yes they help me a lot
- It's pretty easy to understand them and they are only talking to you not the whole class
- Always someone to help out
- They are there when I need them but I don't often need them
- Yes, cause I get the help I need
- They good teaching, making me easy to understand, it not do work for me but make me understand. Some of regular (*i.e. personal tutors*) tutors just write the answer and copy it down.

***Q: Are you happy with the help you get from the volunteer tutors?***

***Yes/ No/ Sort of (please comment)***

***Yes***

- They are happy and nice
- I'm not sure because I haven't spoken to them much. But generally speaking, their fine
- The volunteer tutor help me to do the questions I'm happy with that
- They help me very well
- Yes I consider them the same as the regular ones
- They are good as well
- It's pretty easy to understand them and they are only talking to you and not the whole class
- Tutors spend time with students, getting around to everyone
- They are nice
- They are very smart
- If you want help 10 time or more than that you can get that from volunteer tutors by their volunteer
- Yes I am very happy. But sometimes I think some volunteer tutors are better than others in explaining work

***Sort of***

- Not used to them. (shy)

***Q: If the Homework Centre were to finish tomorrow, how would it affect you?***

- a. a lot***
- b. a bit***
- c. wouldn't affect me***

***Please explain briefly your answer to this question:***

***A lot***

- Because I can't improve more and get good marks
- My parents are always too busy for me and plus I have no brothers or sisters to turn to for help
- I wouldn't have anyone to ask question or help me with my subject
- I come to the h.c. to get work and help, if it weren't there, it would be hard for me
- Because sometimes, I don't really understand questions
- I need a lot of help outside of school
- Because I wouldn't know where to go to for help after school
- I wouldn't do to good in my subjects
- Because I wouldn't be able to get help with homework
- Because I don't like talking to my school teachers
- I rely on it to be there when I am in need for help
- Because I get my work done here
- Can't get help
- Without the Homework Centre I would probably face lots of difficulties at school
- No-one can help me to do homework. My family have no time to help.
- Because they help me with nearly all my work!
- Because it's a place where I can concentrate, complete work and get help
- I would die without the HW Centre
- Because, I wasn't born in Australia, and English is not my first language, therefore I need help with English the most
- A lot because this service has helped me so much that my grades have improved enormously.

***Wouldn't affect me***

- I do my work at home then
- If the Homework Centre were finish tomorrow. It wouldn't affect me. Because I can ask my teacher after school. Actually I'm not going there often.
- It's not really a necessity to go because I have a library around the corner from my house
- Because I don't really need help I just come because it's a easy society to study in

□ ***Please write any other suggestions you want to make below***

- It is just so great to get help from tutors. Keep up the good work guys!
- I have nothing to suggest, because it is good enough.
- The Homework Centre has been very generous, and helpful throughout the months I have used it. The teachers have been fantastic, the explanations and

knowledge they have given have been tremendously helpful and the advise and helpful hints have been terrific!

## **Statistics**

- In 2005, **50** students accessed the service; Average of **7.2** students per night.
- In 2004, **66** students accessed the service; Average of **8.2** students per night
- In 2003, **53** students accessed the service; Average of **9.0** students per night
- In 2002, **58** students accessed the service; Average of **10.8** students per night.
- In 2001, **81** students accessed the service; Average of **10.5** students per night.
- In 2000, **24** students accessed the service; Average of **4.4** students per night.

*For the year 2005:*

- Students came from **16 different secondary** schools and **2 different tertiary** institutions
- **94%** of students lived in **Public** or some other form of **government housing**
- **98%** of students came from **Culturally and Linguistically Diverse** backgrounds

## **Networking and Partnerships**

The Homework Centre is working to build on its existing relationship with Yarra Melbourne Regional Libraries Corporation (YMRLC). Librarians already play a role in assisting our students in accessing information and we believe the Homework Centre assists the library in attracting young people to the library. In recognition of this symbiotic relationship between the Centre and the Library, payment of rent for the space was waived completely from the middle of 2004 onwards. Over the years the Centre has worked together with YMRLC and their existing Homework programmes to apply jointly for funding. In 2003 we went into partnership with YMRL in an Expression Of Interest (EOI) application for 6 months funding from DIMIA through their "Living In Harmony" grants. In 2005, a partnership was developed with two other Homework Programs at YMRLC libraries run by Carlton Parkville Youth Services and North and West Melbourne Neighbourhood Centre to investigate sustainable funding options and a more cohesive working relationship.

At a state-wide level, the Homework Centre is an active member of the Homework Help Network. The objectives of the network are to:

- 1) Highlight the benefits of Homework Help
- 2) Promote good practice in Homework Help
- 3) Contribute to the effective sharing and promotion of resources that are being developed within the community on Homework Help
- 4) Support discussion of issues common to ALL Homework Help providers
- 5) Showcase effective models of Homework Help
- 6) Increase awareness of HSG issues at a state government level.



Many organisations are represented in the Network including Foundation House, The Smith Family, Melbourne City Mission, Edmund Rice Centre, School Focused Youth Service, numerous City Councils and Libraries, Schools, Fitzroy Learning Network, YMCA, Department of Human Services Neighbourhood Renewal, Jesuit Social Services and many more.

At a local level, the Homework Centre is an active member of The Fitzroy Homework Support Network which started in June 2006 due to a concern that young people in Fitzroy, especially young people with a refugee background, would not be guaranteed out of school hours education support long term because of irregular funding sources. No government department is responsible for funding out of school hours homework programs. The network is being coordinated through the Belonging in Australia (BIA) project funded by Department for Victorian Communities' Community Support Fund. The BIA project has a broad aim of improving services for families from a refugee or migrant background who are settling in Yarra. The project aims to improve services through increased collaboration between existing agencies in Yarra. The network involves staff from Jesuit Social Services, Brotherhood of St Laurence, City of Yarra, Fitzroy Learning Network, Department of Human Services Neighbourhood Renewal, Sacred Heart Primary, Ecumenical Migration Centre, Atherton Gardens Residents Association, Department of Victorian Communities and Foundation House.

At the beginning of 2006 we established a relationship with GHD professional service company in Melbourne to provide young engineers as volunteer tutors to the program. This relationship will continue to provide a significant number of our volunteer Maths/Science tutors in 2007.

## **Innovation**

Centre staff are encountering increasing numbers of refugee students with large gaps in their education and wish to be able to work more closely with schools to better assist these students. Homework Centre staff are currently exploring avenues through which to pursue this with schools.

Homework Centre staff have also developed a volunteer handbook to give volunteers an idea of some of the academic issues our students face and some tutoring strategies to deal with them as well as some guidelines to working at the Centre in general. In 2006 we have been able to offer Introductory Refugee Experience training provided by Foundation House to our volunteer tutors. Volunteer tutors that attended have commented that this has increased their understanding of the plight of some of the young people we assist at the Homework Centre and some ways for addressing some of the issues we face.

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