

Scheme nips disadvantage in the bud

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Lee Musumeci calls it a process of elimination. As the new principal of Challis Primary School in Perth more than a decade ago, she was struck by the dismal results of children in Year 3 and was determined to improve statistics that showed disadvantaged kids falling further and further behind state averages.

She's still principal at Challis. But making a difference to her students' results now starts from birth. By the time the kids reached Year 3, Musumeci discovered it was often too late to influence behaviour and learning problems.

The reasons were obvious enough. The local community features high unemployment, single parenthood, drug and alcohol addiction, incarceration, domestic violence, illiteracy and social isolation, and inadequate parenting skills. Some children come from refugee or Aboriginal backgrounds; others from homes where welfare dependence and instability are the norm and rules haphazard at best.

The evidence was on show every day – too many kids weren't emotionally or mentally prepared to benefit from school. And this only became more pronounced as they grew older.

"I wanted to do things differently. To try something considered radical at the time. To try to break that pattern," Musumeci says.

She started attracting children into Challis at younger ages. Joe Hockey, take note: this is integral to the statistics in the latest intergenerational report. As Australia considers the cost of multi-generational health and welfare problems, the results suggest it's possible to break an ever-expanding loop of kids going nowhere fast, one school or even pre-school at a time.

Previously a special needs teacher, Musumeci is fond of using small balls to show the rapid increase in the

activity and size of human brains at birth and three years old compared with relatively little difference later. It's to emphasise the importance of those very early years and why it's vital to reach children at risk from the beginning of their lives. Services that did exist were disjointed, usually badly attended and often had long waiting times. So Challis became an integrated hub for the community.

The school now offers new parenting classes to help foster maternal attachment. Nurses visit babies and their mothers at home to see if help is needed. Regular toddler playgroups are held at the school. Once children turn three, they graduate to pre-kindergarten classes. Final-year students in occupational and speech therapy from Curtin University do practical work at Challis. A childcare nurse and therapist are based part time at the school. If children don't turn up, staff drive to their homes to pick them up and, if necessary, dress and feed them first.

"We make sure everyone understands how important it is to come to school every day," Musumeci says. "But we also want to break down the idea that school is a scary place."

The guiding principle is to make the school seem welcoming for parents and children alike – while also teaching them some life skills. It might be as simple as helping new parents read to their kids, persuading them why it's important to visit a speech therapist if a child is having problems, teaching children methodically and calmly how to behave or going on expeditions to the shops to find healthy food.

According to Musumeci, signs of improvement were gradual and anecdotal at first but they started to accumulate. And for the first time in 2012, results for children in the Challis early childhood program moved above

the state average by the time they were in pre-primary.

Given about 800 kids attend Challis Primary – with another 300 born last

year within the school's catchment area – that's a major advance. These are often children of very large families.

Musumeci says there's no simple answer, that many intractable problems still exist in the Challis community and that other schools and not-for-profit groups are also experimenting with how to improve outcomes. The West Australian state government was impressed enough with Challis to announce it would build 16 early childhood centres in the grounds of primary schools.

It's apparent though that new buildings are the easy part. Certainly the facilities at Challis Primary are pretty basic even if what's happening within them is not. What matters is the unrelenting, passionate focus, from the principal down, on overcoming whatever hinders normal development and educational progress, and doing so in a co-ordinated way with teachers, health professionals and parents.

Fortunately, the state department of education didn't try to stop Musumeci's use of facilities well before the traditional age for starting school. Challis is now also funded by the Forrest family's Minderoo Foundation. That goes mainly to paying for staff for various early childhood programs, from playgroups to family support to pre-kindergarten classes. The annual grant of \$340,000 may be sizeable but it's dirt-cheap, given the long-term costs to society of the alternative.

And because Challis is one of the "independent" public schools pioneered in WA, a principal is able to choose the teachers. The kids are also taught reading and writing with an "explicit instruction" system which emphasises goal setting from



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term to term.

Many of the children don't receive typical emotional and discipline cues at home to help them learn how to react so it's important to make all instruction clear and specific. We walk past one class of youngsters being herded off to the library after being gently reminded about the need for quiet and respect. Their faces gleam with excitement.

Think of this as a small story of hope, but a significant one.

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Lee Musumeci