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Breaking Down the Barriers to Education: Matana Foundation for Young People

by Maria Chilcott | June 3, 2015



Karen Loblay, founder and executive officer of Matana Foundation for Young People, is committed to helping disadvantaged students find a sense of belonging at WAYS Secondary. As a funder, she believes in flexibility and the importance of not giving up.



"Our expectations about education are built early in life, and they're tied in with our self-worth. I had a light bulb moment early on, when my son was eight years old. He spoke about going to university and someone asked me how he'd even know about that at his age. But it was an automatic thought, because all his family had been to uni."

Karen Loblay is passionate about helping young people reach their full educational potential. She's so committed to this goal that she made it a mission of [The Matana Foundation](#), a private ancillary fund which she founded in 2003 to address the causes and consequences of youth disadvantage. The word Matana means 'gift' in Hebrew, and Loblay believes that education can be a life-changing gift.

"Education is a way out of poverty, and offers alternatives. Finishing school opens up a world of opportunities."

The Matana Foundation has been supporting WAYS Secondary (formerly POEM high school) in Sydney's east for over six years. Established by Waverley Action for Youth Services (WAYS), the school assists students (aged 13-19 years) who have become disconnected from mainstream education. Students can complete Year 9, 10, and 11, with an emphasis on numeracy, literacy, and computer skills as foundation subjects. This focus helps students transition back to mainstream education or onto other vocational and training options.

"Some kids need an organisation that makes allowances for them," Loblay says. The goal at WAYS Secondary is to re-engage students back into their education while encouraging them to pursue positive life goals. They make it a fun and flexible learning environment that allows the students to feel relaxed and helps them to achieve their own goals."

The school provides a supportive space that helps young people address the barriers to education they may be facing. The high staff-to-student ratios and individual support promotes the student's engagement with his or her education and learning, and also supports important emotional and behavioural development.

"For me, it's not just about equal opportunity, about affirmative action. Many students who come to WAYS Secondary may face other barriers to their education like homelessness, drug or alcohol issues, social isolation and family issues. And for dysfunctional families, they often feel left out of education, and feel that they don't belong.

WAYS Secondary takes a holistic approach, with the school's staff supported by a multi-disciplinary team. "It's not just about teaching," Loblay explains. "They're caring for the students' mental health too, and they connect them to other services they may need. And the kids are there by choice, which is very important, as they're more likely to stay."

Loblay believes strongly in not giving up on the young people who come to the school. As Executive Officer of the Matana Foundation, she takes a holistic approach to assessing the impact the school has on the educational outcomes of the students.

"I don't go so much for evaluation and reporting as a condition of the grant. I'm aware that it takes up valuable work hours for the staff to do that. My perspective on impact is the idea of not giving up.



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"If three out of ten students go through the program that's success. Those three might also be inspirational and a role model for others to keep trying. Sometimes a young person might drop out of the program because they've gone back on drugs or some other problem, but they might come back and try again."

The education has been a two-way experience. Loblay's giving journey has taught her to view success in a different light. "Success is a very relative term. For some of these kids success is learning to read and write. They're often coming from a low starting point. If I have confidence in the organisation then I'm confident that they're doing the best with their money."

"Over the years I've also learnt that we're a very judgemental society, and we've got no understanding of people's journeys and stories.

"I think as a funder you need to form relationships with the organisations you're giving grants to. You also need to be well informed. Educate yourself around the issues you want to support, and make an effort to discover the stories of the people you're trying to help."

The administration of the Matana Foundation is managed by [Australian Philanthropic Services](#), which Loblay says is a valuable source of support and education around grantmaking. "They help me in terms of taking the load off, and looking after everything so I can focus on the grants," she says. "It's great to have a place to go with any questions I have around the foundation."

***Australian Philanthropic Services** is a not-for-profit organisation that inspires philanthropy and provides practical support to help people with their giving. APS sets up and administers private and public ancillary funds and provides grantmaking advice. For more information, visit the [website](#).*

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