An Educational Model That Successfully Re-engages Teenagers
Foreword

Ohana For Youth has been working with young people since the mid-1990s. We have always strived to provide quality services and support for young people and have maintained our commitment to assist young people to achieve personal, academic and career success.

We established Arcadia College as an opportunity for young people who were not thriving in conventional school, to succeed in an environment that supports the unique needs of non-traditional learners. Throughout 2011 we conducted a comprehensive analysis of the outcomes we aimed to achieve for students which found that effective alternative learning can re-engage young people and improve their self-esteem, mental health and attitude towards learning and work.

This report describes the Ohana approach that underpins our work at Arcadia College. It also provides some case studies of young people we have worked with and summarises the findings of an evaluation we conducted in order to demonstrate how we create success for students who have disengaged from conventional schooling, and are ready to try a new approach to complete their education.

I would like to thank all the staff and volunteer mentors at Ohana For Youth, Ruth Knight from Zark Consultancy, and all our government and community partners for helping us plan and deliver Arcadia College.

Andrea Lee
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Arcadia College is an initiative of Ohana For Youth and is governed by an incorporated nonprofit organisation, Ohana Education Inc.

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Executive Summary

Arcadia College is managed by Ohana Education, an initiative of Ohana For Youth. It is a coeducational independent secondary school based on the Gold Coast, South-East Queensland. Arcadia College offers young people aged 12-18 years old who have disengaged from conventional school an innovative and supportive alternative learning environment.

The need for alternative education is well documented and is demonstrated by the large numbers of young people disengaging from conventional schools every year in Queensland. Ohana For Youth knows from many years of experience that disengaged young people have many complex needs and that a range of personal and family risk factors contribute to their disengagement. This complex situation requires an innovative response to help these young people gain a new interest in school and learning, and develop their personal life skills and pro-social attitudes and behaviours.

Arcadia College is successfully tackling disengagement using the unique Ohana approach of prioritising engagement through supportive relationships between peers and adults within the College and the local community. Arcadia College focusses on establishing positive and respectful relationships between adults and students to maximise engagement, emotional well-being and academic achievement. This approach is proving successful because it emphasises academic, therapeutic, and behavioural change, and provides individualised support to help students achieve personal, academic and vocational success so that they can become healthy and successful life-long learners.

Using the Ohana approach, Arcadia College is giving disengaged young people a platform and pathway to achieve personal and academic success.

“...It has changed me and my life and made me a better person and more confident...”
Background

An estimated 16% of teenagers aged 15 to 19 in Australia are identified as not being fully engaged in work or study and one in three teenagers leave school without completing Year 12 (ABS, 2012; Applied Economics, 2002; Wilson, Stemp, & McGinty, 2011). Education and training providers are well aware that disengagement and early school leaving represents a high socioeconomic cost for individuals, families and society. Early school leaving adversely effects gross domestic product (GDP) and labour force participation, and it increases the risk of young people experiencing poverty, homelessness and poor health (Chalker & Stelsel, 2009; Tresidder, Macaskill, Bennett, & Nutbeam, 1997).

Alarmingly, many young people are disengaging from conventional school because of a growing mismatch between the conventional school structure and practices and the social, cultural and linguistic background of some young people. Many students are experiencing social exclusion, poor student-teacher relationships, and consequently poor attachments to school. Young people who are vulnerable to academic failure are not being given the personal support and work-readiness skills they want and need at school. So instead of transitioning well into apprenticeships and work, these young people are experiencing academic frustration and failure, often leading to alienation and despair, problem behaviours and truancy (Gable, Bullock, & Evans, 2006).

Although government policy continues to promote conventional school as the preferred option for school-aged young people, over the past decade both state and federal governments have introduced new alternative educational programs targeting these young people who have disengaged from school. Alternative learning environments are based on the idea that education and learning experiences can be provided in many different ways (Conley, 2002).

Research by Deloitte Access Economics (2012) has identified that alternative learning approaches that successfully re-engage young people can improve equity in the community by enabling young people to attain the economic and social benefits associated with employment, further education and/or a meaningful role in their community. Furthermore, there are other benefits for the individual and community that flow from re-engagement including:
• improved health outcomes and life satisfaction;
• reduced criminal behaviour; and
• breaking the intergenerational cycle of poor participation in education.

The direct and indirect benefits of re-engaging young people are significant, which is why Ohana For Youth has been working for more than 10 years to deliver successful and sustainable alternative education opportunities for all young Queenslanders.

Ohana Education

Ohana Education was established by Ohana For Youth to meet the needs of disengaged young people on the Gold Coast. The organisation was initially founded in the 1990’s to support young people who needed career advice, work preparation and industry experience. In 1998, the organisation’s work was recognised when it won a national School-Industry Partnership Award. The organisation’s reputation and scope continued to increase over the next few years, and in 2010 Ohana For Youth received an Australian Government grant to implement Youth Connections, which provides individualised support for disengaged teenagers.

Between 2010-2012 Ohana For Youth received Queensland Government funding to run a work readiness program for disengaged young people. During those three years Ohana For Youth ran eight programs for 180 participants aged 15-17 years old. An extensive evaluation of the program was conducted to investigate why young people had disengaged, the key outputs and outcomes of the program, and the key success factors of the Ohana approach. The full evaluation report can be obtained from Ohana For Youth.

In 2013 Ohana For Youth founded Ohana Education Inc. and gained accreditation for Arcadia College to operate as an independent school with special assistance status. Arcadia College, in its first years, caters for 80 students.

The Ohana approach

The Ohana Education’s approach to working with young people who are disengaged or non-traditional learners is inspired by the Hawaiian word ‘Ohana’, which refers to a group of people with a common bond that treat and respect each other as family. No one is left behind and members never forget each other. Belonging to the group provides members with support, love, security, respect, teachings, wisdom and understanding. This approach provides the foundations for staff and students to create a strong sense of community and belonging at Arcadia College.

Most conventional schools do not have the safeguards and strategies in place to prevent bullying, learning apathy and disengagement. But the Ohana approach is creating success for teachers and students at Arcadia College because relationships are at the centre of concern. This relationship-based education means that safety, mutual respect, trust, communication, understanding and addressing student needs are just as important as academic outcomes. This focus means that Arcadia College is able to create a compassionate learning community where young people want to be, and want to learn.

Arcadia College aims to achieve a number of outcomes in seven domains:

1. Academic engagement and achievement
2. Attitude towards learning
3. Participation
4. Personal growth
5. Attitude towards self and others
6. Social skills
7. Behaviour

I have learnt a lot in this program e.g. working in a team and being able to express how I felt without being judged
The critical success factors that Ohana Education has established to achieve the outcomes are:

- Small, single sex groups based in a community environment.
- Physical facilities that reflect a high-quality learning environment with informal areas, cooking facilities and information technology integrated to promote a dynamic teaching space.
- Learning focused on a therapeutic, experiential, active and person-centred approach.
- Students with a sense of ownership and control over their environment, their participation, learning and outcomes.
- An emphasis on holistic health and wellbeing being paramount.
- Positive, caring, respectful and trustworthy relationships with team leaders, advisors, mentors and other adults.
- Students feeling encouraged, valued, listened to and respected.
- An ethos of celebrating progress, achievement and success.
- Engaging and working in collaboration with parents and caregivers.
- Working in collaboration with community service providers, mentors and therapists.

Arcadia College has two campuses on the Gold Coast - Southport and Palm Beach - with capacity for a maximum of 40 students at each campus. The campuses bear no resemblance to a conventional school, as the intention is to create a new and different learning environment. Arcadia College staff create an environment that is 'owned' by the students and where they feel a sense of belonging.

Students are primarily referred from local high schools or the Ohana Youth Connections Team on the basis of being disengaged from school. Each young person referred attends an individual interview and if accepted makes the choice voluntarily to attend the College.

Arcadia College has Team Leaders who are qualified trainers and youth workers, Advisors who are registered teachers and volunteers who fulfil the role of tutors and supporters.

Arcadia College provides each student with a personal mentor, a volunteer from the local community who has been carefully recruited, screened and trained by an experienced full-time
volunteer coordinator. Students meet with their mentor one-to-one every week to ensure the student has an additional trustworthy and caring adult to listen, empathise and provide support in talking about goals and aspirations.

Students attending Arcadia College have varying and complex needs that may reflect anger, distrust and challenging behaviours. Therefore, positive and supportive discipline approaches are used to give students responsibility for their attitude and behaviour. There is a lot of flexibility, patience and ‘give and take’ and an emphasis on mutual respect.

To foster a safe, supportive and empowering culture at Arcadia College, students are taught in single sex teams with a maximum of 12 students. This is an important contrast to most conventional schools and provides Arcadia staff with an opportunity to promote positive gender identity and develop teaching practices that are sensitive to the different learning styles of males and females. The team leaders use teaching methods that they know the students enjoy and respond well to and focus on strategies that empower students to develop self-confidence, solid peer relationships and social skills while they are learning.

Legitimate concern for each student’s health and wellbeing is paramount. For this reason, the Team Leaders frequently spend time with students individually, building positive relationships and supporting students in coping with emotional and psychological issues and challenges. To ensure that they provide a holistic and comprehensive support system to students, the Team Leaders also regularly refer students to other community organisations and service providers. These include mental health or counselling services, legal aid, accommodation support and appropriate therapies including drug and alcohol, anger management, equine and art therapies.

The evaluation conducted in 2011 demonstrated that the Ohana approach is achieving positive results and outcomes for disengaged students because it recognises that engagement is considerably more complex than getting a young person to turn up to class or complete an assignment. Engagement involves a young person’s willingness, need, desire and compulsion to participate in, and be successful in, the learning process. Fredericks, Blumenfeld, and Paris (2004) suggest that genuine engagement works at three levels:

a) cognitive (e.g. self-regulation, learning goals, investment in learning);

b) emotional or affective (e.g. interest, belonging, positive attitude about learning); and

c) behavioural (e.g. positive conduct, effort, participation).

All three types of engagement are equally important and reveal a person’s underlying intrinsically and extrinsically motivated beliefs and behaviour (Reeve, Jang, Carrell, Jeon, & Barch, 2004).

To increase cognitive engagement (e.g. self-regulation, learning goals and investment in learning), Arcadia creates an environment where young people think and feel differently about themselves and what they are being asked to do. The curriculum and activities students participate in are designed to change their negative thinking patterns and self-perceptions. The program integrates activities that teach the participants problem-solving skills, social and coping skills, and techniques to develop a rational and optimistic thinking style, all of which are known to be effective at engaging young people on a cognitive and emotional level and improving their mental health (Merry, McDowell, Wild, Bir, & Cunliffe, 2004).

At Arcadia College, students are also encouraged to take ownership of tasks, space, resources and ideas within the group. This strategy assists to motivate the students to feel valued and accountable for the success of the whole group, not just of themselves as individuals. The students also develop personal learning plans, and review those plans regularly to assess how they are progressing towards their goals. This helps students to take

It is an amazing environment and everyone that works here is caring, supportive and understanding
responsibility for their achievements and invest in their own success.

Emotional engagement (e.g. interest, belonging and positive attitude to learning) is considered an extremely important factor in re-engaging young people in the long term. For this reason each student is made to feel a valued member of the group and encouraged to celebrate success at every opportunity, for example when the team leaders know a student has been positive about a challenging task or achieved a personal or group goal. The approach allows the team leaders to provide an individualised approach so that each participant can relate the course curriculum and assignments to their personal career goals, in this way helping to develop intrinsic motivation and emotional engagement.

The team leaders also continually give students opportunities to talk about their feelings and frustrations, and encourage each student to listen to and empathise with others in the group. This approach creates a sense of connectedness and belonging in the group and encourages cultural awareness and respect. The outcomes achieved using this approach suggest that focussing heavily on cognitive and emotional engagement has had a positive effect on the students' behavioural engagement (e.g. positive conduct, effort and participation). Arcadia College improves behavioural engagement by helping students to overcome barriers that stop them from engaging and incorporating activities into the curriculum that actively involve students, families, and the community.

Arcadia College also involves and supports parents to assist them in re-engaging students. This is because parents and caregivers can significantly impact young people’s learning and engagement. Indeed, Henderson and Berla (1994) argue that an accurate predictor of academic achievement is the degree to which families encourage learning; communicate high, achievable expectations to children; and become involved in their children’s education. They cite research that has found that parents need to hold strong consistent values about the importance of education and be willing to help children with schoolwork and communicate successfully with teachers and administrators.

Some of the strategies that Arcadia College uses includes:

- Sending parents a copy of the Engagement Matrix report and a progress report that explains how well their son/daughter is attending and participating.
• Keeping in regular contact with parents via email or phone and providing positive stories, not just concerns.
• Meeting with parents and encouraging them to talk with their son/daughter about their schooling and their achievements.
• Encouraging parents to help their son/daughter take responsibility for their attendance and engagement.
• Providing parents with the contact details and referral to other community supports and programs that can assist the parents and/or their son/daughter.
• Inviting the parents to any special events and celebrations such as end-of-term activities.

Arcadia College believes that these strategies help parents to feel informed and supported. They also help parents to become interested in the program and encourage them to more actively set and communicate high expectations for their son/daughter.

[The facilitators] gave me confidence about school and socially

Our students

The evaluation conducted for Ohana For Youth in 2011 provides an insight into the young people attending Arcadia College.

We know that

• A majority of students are living with one parent, and approximately one third of students are either living with two biological parents or in a step-parent family.
• Students are primarily Australians, including a small number of students identifying as Indigenous or Torres Strait Islander.
• Students are referred to the program with a wide range of complex risk factors affecting their ability or motivation to engage with education. An equal percentage of males and females have been excluded from high school (27%). More than half of the boys have more than one issue involving a history of truancy and low confidence, poor numeracy and literacy, tobacco or drugs use (e.g. marijuana), and/or have a learning disability.
• Females also present with a wide range of complex issues, including low confidence (95%) and have a history of truancy and drug use (80%). More girls than boys have depression, are smoking, offending, self-harming and using hard drugs. More females than males have been bullied and have experienced homelessness.
• Many students have left school because they feel stupid, do not like school work, or feel bored at school.
• Students who do not feel supported to understand and master their school work, commonly have the self-perception that they are stupid and dumb. These young people quickly lose their confidence to keep up with the other students, so would either passively (e.g. taking unexcused absences from class or failing to complete their homework) or actively (e.g. damaging school property or being rebellious towards teachers and classmates) disengage, which always gets them in trouble at school.

• A number of students say that their low achievement at school might have been due to their personal learning style and skills. These young people were required every day to use skills such as listening, concentrating, problem-solving, literacy and numeracy skills. For various reasons they have struggled with these basic skills or the ability to sit in classes for long periods.
• Both male and female students talk extensively about the poor relationships they have had at school. It appears that the lack of connection, rapport or trust has left these young people feeling misunderstood and resistant to seeking or finding support within the school system.
• A large majority of students have a history of being bullied or experiencing conflict within their peer group. The young people who have experienced bullying do not speak about supportive school cultures, or schools’ ability to actively deal with bullying. Generally, they seem to have disengaged to get away from the bullying or the other complex social
problems that led to bullying or conflict within their peer group.

- Some of the students do not appear to be able to maintain social connectedness and belonging at their school. These young people chose truancy and mixing with other social groups, or simply staying at home, to avoid having to make and maintain a social network.

- Some of the students have a range of personal risk factors that have contributed to their disengagement. They include family violence and breakdown, living in foster care, depression and poor mental health, drug use and transiency. These issues significantly affect their general health and wellbeing as well as their ability to do well at school.

We know that many disengaged young people often perceive their school environment as unrewarding, have negative interactions with their teachers, and experience social and academic problems. It appears that when young people are not challenged and supported with their school work, they quickly get frustrated and angry with themselves and their teachers, which leads to disruptive behaviour or simply not going to school at all.

Arcadia College knows that to re-engage young people an alternative school needs to have an impact on multiple levels, including students’ mental health and self-efficacy, their peer relationships, and their ability to master and enjoy learning. The students need significant and supportive relationships with adults who can help them discover their personal strengths and achieve their learning goals.

### Proven success

Ohana For Youth has been offering programs and services for disengaged youth for more than 10 years. During 2011, a formal evaluation was conducted to assess the results and outcomes achieved by delivering a program using the Ohana approach.

The evaluation found:

1. 87% of students completed the program and transitioned to further education, training or work and of the 90 students who completed the program in 2011, most gained one or more qualifications such as Certificate II

2. 100% of the students were either satisfied or extremely satisfied with the program.

3. The students were asked to rate their own behaviour and skills at the completion of the program, and asked to rate whether they felt their behaviour and skills had improved or deteriorated during the program. Overall, the students felt that their personal growth, attitude to learning, participation and academic skills had all vastly improved.

4. Staff used a customised assessment tool to assess each student’s engagement in the program. The results indicated that over the time students attended the program the majority of them (93%) increased their engagement scores. Only two students had the same engagement score and two decreased their engagement score by one point. The results also show that 16 students had a large increase of score, moving them from medium engagement to high engagement and five students moved from low engagement to medium engagement.

5. Engagement was also confirmed by reviewing the attendance rate. Some of the students had attended school very rarely, if at all, during the past few years before they joined Ohana For Youth, so an average attendance rate in 2011 of 80.8% (78% for classroom time and 83.5% when the students were on work experience) indicates a relatively high level of engagement for these young people.

6. 49% of the students had noticeably poor levels of literacy and numeracy when they were enrolled. These poor literacy and numeracy skills were affecting both males (31%) and females (18%) and impacting on their engagement and ability to do well at school. However, when they completed the program all of the students who were reassessed improved their skills in both English and Mathematics with 50% of them moving to a higher level of achievement. Students improved their numeracy by 17.2% and their English by 16.6%, an average of 16.9%.

7. Ohana’s approach supports students to not only to achieve academically but also to improve in the areas of self-efficacy, mental health and wellbeing, and self-esteem. These areas commonly disadvantage disengaged students and prevent them from engaging in learning emotionally, cognitively and behaviourally. An improvement in these areas indicates that these young people now have improved mental health, and a greater ability to manage their emotions, set goals, persist in the face of challenges and barriers, and recover from setbacks.

Case Studies

Melanie (15 years) was referred to Ohana by her Youth Connections Officer. She had been severely bullied at school and consequently disengaged in Year 10. Her self-esteem was so low at this point that she barely left the house and didn’t have any friends.

From the very first day Melanie enjoyed the program. She made friends and developed positive teamwork skills. Her increasing sense of safety and connection within the group motivated her to participate and embrace the new learning environment.

Melanie won the “High Achievement Award” at graduation, acknowledging her increased confidence, positive and caring attitude, desire to learn, gratitude and good work ethic.

After graduation Melanie felt confident enough to reengage back into conventional school to complete her senior schooling. One day she would like to become a youth worker.

John (16 years old) was referred to Ohana when he disengaged from school and was put on probation. John was clearly unmotivated and consistently turned up late or was absent in the first few weeks of the program. The program facilitators worked intensively with both John and his mother given that she was a big influence in his life.

“It helped me grow as a person and helped me learn to respect myself.”
After a few weeks John’s attendance began to improve and he then gained a work experience placement in the construction industry. This appeared to give him some self-confidence, so when he was offered work experience at a local tennis school working alongside a tennis coach he accepted it. This work experience dramatically increased his motivation to engage in the program and do well.

John completed the tennis school work experience and with financial support from Ohana For Youth and The Salvation Army, enrolled in a tennis coaching program that would give him national accreditation to become a qualified tennis coach and make an income from coaching tennis. After graduating John completed his tennis coaching course and immediately gained employment at the tennis school where he is still working. He has given up smoking and is fit and healthy. He now has a very confident, outgoing attitude and is clearly focussed on the future.

Sandy (17 years) referred herself to Ohana because she had left school but wanted to continue learning and working towards a certificate. Some of the factors that led to her disengaging were the serious family issues she was experiencing, which included neglect and domestic violence. These issues had affected her ability to participate in school regularly and complete her homework and assignments.

At Ohana For Youth Sandy felt safe and confident in a positive environment where she gained emotional and practical support and life skills. Sandy soon began to excel and demonstrated that she had the ability to do extremely well academically.

During the program Sandy secured work at Hungry Jacks and was soon promoted to Supervisor which gave her a lot of confidence. After completing the program she moved out of home and into supported accommodation. She then re-enrolled into conventional school to complete her senior schooling and is now also completing a Certificate III in Health Services as she has plans to become a nurse.

Matthew (17 years old) was referred to Ohana by his school because he was regularly fighting and truanting. When Matthew enrolled he immediately engaged well, responding well to the facilitators and the small group environment. He also enjoyed the variety of activities and learning opportunities.

Matthew was keen to learn anger management skills and quickly became focussed on his career.
goals. He gained the self-confidence to begin delivering his résumé to local businesses, looking for work experience which he eventually secured for himself.

The work experience went so well that his employer offered him an apprenticeship. His employer told Ohana staff that he was very impressed with Matthew’s work ethic and attitude.

“Today my mate called me early in the morning to fake a sicky, if I was at school I would have done it in a heartbeat but there’s something about here that makes me want to come. It’s nice to know I’m finally learning to prioritise and pick education over social life.”
References


