

How this student proved a teacher wrong

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Stacey Duddy has turned her life around. *Photo: Wayne Taylor*

STACEY Duddy carries the words of the vice-principal at her old school within her heart: "You'll never amount to anything."

It was nine years ago. Ms Duddy was at a crossroads. She was skipping classes and disrupting those she attended, hanging out with a rough crowd, smoking, fighting and rebelling, at every turn not knowing quite why.

She was in year 9 at Frankston High School, hated attending at all and figured if she made it to year 10 without being expelled, she would quit. She had the vague idea she might become a hairdresser or a nail technician.

Three years later, to the astonishment of her teachers, she graduated from year 12.

Now, aged 23, she has only two units to complete for a degree in psychology at the Swinburne University of Technology. She studies by correspondence and works for a transport company to support herself. Her most satisfying job so far has been teaching autistic children to form words. "My goal is to work in child protection, out in the field, for an organisation like the Department of Human Services," says Ms Duddy.

But how did she turn around her life so remarkably?

She was, she said, given a gift beyond price by a little-known not-for-profit charity called Hands On Learning, which works to keep at-risk students in school. "I learnt the value of self-worth," Ms Duddy says.

In a week when the Prime Minister has declared a multibillion-dollar "crusade" to improve educational standards, Hands On Learning, whose patron is Governor-General Quentin Bryce, hasn't got a mention.

The charity doesn't receive any dedicated government funding, relies on schools to make a couple of teachers available for a day a week and gets most of its income from philanthropic organisations and individuals.

Yet a new study by Deloitte Access Economics has found that in the 13 years Hands On Learning has been operating, it has contributed \$1.6 billion in "workforce outcomes alone" in saving students from dropping out of school and foundering. And that represents only the 3082 students who have taken part in the program.

Of these, 95 per cent finished high school and their post-school unemployment rate was just 2.2 per cent compared with 10.8 per cent for Australians aged 15-24. Last year, Hands On Learning students recorded an 80 per cent reduction in disciplinary detentions compared with their previous year at school.

The Deloitte Access study calculates that 70,000 of the 290,000 15-year-old students in Australia today are likely to drop out before completing high school.

But Hands On Learning operates in only 19 schools, almost all in Victoria, and does not have the money to handle more than 540 students a year. One program started in 2008 at an indigenous college at Bamaga, far north Queensland. By the end of the first term, the college had recorded a 650 per cent increase in attendance, according to the study.

A teacher with 30 years' experience, Russell Kerr, founded Hands On Learning at Frankston High School in 1999 when he led 12 students all but lost to the school system on an expedition into the Warburton Forest. They collected wood and, with the help of an artisan, set about building chairs. They were, in short, learning how to be useful and to understand they could achieve something worthwhile.

And so evolved a program that spotted students at risk, took them out of normal class for one day a week and set them at the task of building all manner of things - huts, fences, seats, tables, walls, and most of all, their sense of self-worth. Each group of students, no more than 10, learnt to get on and help one another.

Something astonishing occurred. Almost all these students, many of them deeply troubled, began looking forward to attending school and their grades improved markedly.

Ms Duddy recalls her pride at rebuilding for an elderly woman a front fence that was destroyed by vandals and, with two younger girls, creating a mosaic for her school's fountain. It's still there.

"I didn't realise it at the time, but I was mentoring these younger girls, learning responsibility," she says. "I re-engaged with school, began attending classes, got new friends, stopped being disruptive and learnt to focus."

And she will never forget, she says, those words: "You will never amount to anything."

She can barely wait to get her hands on the mortarboard and academic gown she will wear to her university graduation ceremony.

The Deloitte Access study was presented to federal Education Minister Peter Garrett this week.

