LEARNING

Hats off to hands on

Building confidence gives learning new meaning, says **Robin Taylor.**

Frankston High School Teacher Russell Kerr at work with students Nick Barbour, Cassi Sadikay and Alex McNeill.

PICTURE: EDDIE JIM

THE octagonal building with its earth walls and hat of crushed green glass would look at home on the film set of *The Lord of the Rings*. But in the grounds of Frankston High School it is in stark contrast to the portable classrooms and standard issue buildings elsewhere on the campus.

The unusual building, which is being constructed by students, could be a symbol for the project that is helping them to develop a positive attitude to school and about themselves.

Since the Hands on Learning project began three years ago, participating students have built bridges, planted trees, constructed fencing at a local primary school and made their own pizza oven.

The project has also become a model for other schools on the Mornington Peninsula. This year, Rosebud and Langwarrin Secondary colleges are both introducing similar schemes to try to engage disaffected students.

Hands on Learning is the brainchild of teacher Russell Kerr, who saw a need to help kids who were "slipping through the cracks". Mr Kerr now co-ordinates the project full time.

"For some students, school may be the only link with the community and the only means by which they can maintain a connection," he says. "Schools need to offer programs to engage these young people to ensure they do not enter a period between school and work where they become disconnected from the wider community.

For some students on the road to expulsion, the scheme may offer a last chance at school, but it is not only students in trouble who can benefit.

Assistant principal Cathy Hogg says the program is suitable for many different students, including those who struggle academically and don't feel confident at school, those who are shy, who have trouble making friends, and others who have leadership potential that hasn't been realised.

"Because of the mixed-age nature of the program, the older students take leadership roles and encourage and support the younger ones. Many of them have never had this opportunity before — here they are just like on a building site, taking on their crew, keeping them working and doing the right thing. It's fabulous for their confidence and socialisation."

Students who take part in Hands on Learning are usually in years 7 to 10. One day a week they will "go to work" instead of attending normal classes. Participants on any given day are from a number of year levels, with skills in a range of areas. Some students attend Hands on Learning for a term, while others may be involved for a year or even longer.

When they begin the program, they are expected to work hard in their normal classes and teachers at the school generally report a positive spin-off in the classroom.

"Anecdotal evidence shows that many of these students demonstrate improved motivation and participation when they return to the traditional classroom," says Mr Kerr.

Such is the camaraderie and enjoyment in the program for some students that often they come back to help after exams have finished or after they have left school.

Mr Kerr says the results are very encouraging, with a decrease in the number of suspensions and premature exits from school among the program's participants.

Much of the program's focus is on building — as well as the art studio and another straw bale building, the students have made furniture, boats, fences and a volleyball court.

Langwarrin and Rosebud Secondary Colleges are both following a similar path. At Langwarrin, the project co-ordinator, Andrew Nicholls, says they will start with about 10 students, who will take part in the program for at least 10 weeks, allowing 60 to 80 students to rotate through it throughout the year.

Results are very encouraging, with a decrease in the number of suspensions and premature exits.

"Initially, students will be chosen who are identified as being 'at risk', for example, those who are failing or who have behaviour problems," he says.

"Hopefully we will see a change in terms of their engagement; some of the problems they are having will become less. We also want them to identify with a mentor, the teacher will have a mentor role."

The students will start with small-scale landscaping and building projects around the school and Mr Nicholls hopes to develop integrated projects with learning areas.

"I really feel there are endless possibilities and many ideas that will be suggested in the future."

At Rosebud, newly appointed co-ordinator Jeff Walsh will start working with two groups of students from years 8 to 10 in the next few weeks.

While they will adapt the Frankston program to suit their location as a "beach school", he is not sure how it will evolve.

Mr Walsh is talking to the local council about possible projects to involve students but in the meantime they will start on small projects around the school, such as building picnic tables, paths, shelters and signposts to teach them skills and develop their confidence.

He wants to take advantage of Rosebud's location and the fact that Westernport Bay has been declared a biosphere to tackle more environmental projects.

Mr Kerr believes one element vital to the project's success "is to do with the nature of the work — often in school kids don't find meaning in what they are doing, they don't see a purpose in it. In this program they can see quite clearly what the purpose is, get engaged in it and get a lot of satisfaction from it".

Frankston High School has financially supported the Hands On Learning Project, which has also received funding from many local businesses and community organisations including the Myer Foundation and the Education Foundation. Rosebud and Langwarrin Secondary Colleges are using funding from the Government's Access to Excellence program to fund a co-ordinator for their programs.