

# The Impact and Effectiveness of Ardoch's Community Volunteers Program in Schools

2010-2011

*Making education a reality*

**Ardoch**  
Youth Foundation



## **Acknowledgements**

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## 1 Executive Summary

*Sometimes our students have had little contact with stable, caring and warm hearted adults. The quality of Ardoch volunteers is outstanding. (Teacher)*

In 2010, over 34,000 hours of community volunteering were contributed to Ardoch's 54 partner schools and early childhood sites. This is equivalent to around 2.5 days of extra 'person power' per school for each week of each term.

Volunteering has been the cornerstone of Ardoch's programs since the organisation's inception in 1988 and anecdotally the program has been seen as highly successful. This report stems from a formal evaluation of Ardoch's Community Volunteers Program that was undertaken in 2010 – 2011 to answer the following questions.:

- *What impacts do Ardoch volunteers have on student learning, wellbeing and school culture?*
- *How effective is Ardoch's delivery of volunteer support to schools? What are the strengths of the program and how can the program be strengthened?*

### Method

Ardoch used a qualitative research methodology where volunteers, teachers and principals were asked for their considered assessment of the trends and changes they see in their work-environment related to volunteer support. Surveys were used to collect data, with over 200 survey respondents across 28 schools and early childhood sites, and there were six additional, in-depth interviews with teachers. Responses were thematically analysed.

### Results

The evidence is in: Ardoch's volunteers make a positive impact on student learning and wellbeing. Over 90% of principals and teachers surveyed identified that volunteers contribute to student outcomes in the following areas:

- Improved self confidence
- Increased work output
- Increased time spent 'on-task'
- Improved literacy
- Improved peer relationships
- Improved numeracy.

The evaluation finds that Ardoch's delivery of volunteer support to schools is effective: Volunteers make the above impacts because Ardoch has a strong quality-controlled selection process including training that cultivates volunteers' potential, and management processes that engage, respect and skill volunteers. Ardoch volunteers are:

- Adept at developing positive relationships
- Reliable
- Skilled and well trained to work with children in education settings

- Carefully matched to the needs of the schools and early childhood centres in which they volunteer.

Recommendations include that Ardoch continues its rigorous processes; that case studies of highly successful volunteers programs in Ardoch partner schools are developed and circulated so that promising approaches and best practices can be shared more widely; and that quantitative methods for measuring impact are investigated and trialed by Ardoch and its partner schools.

Many comments, from volunteers, principals and teachers, are quoted in the body of this report. They offer powerful insights and highlight the well-deserved reputation of Ardoch volunteers for being positive role models who make a real difference to the students they work with, the schools they work in and to their local communities. Please read on.

## 2 Introduction

Ardoch Youth Foundation provides education support to over 50 education sites, including early childhood centres, primary schools and secondary schools, across three states (Victoria, Queensland and Western Australia). In partnership with schools, Ardoch develops and implements practical strategies and programs that increase the capacity of students to be at school, to learn and to succeed. These programs support stronger educational attainment for all children and young people and especially for individuals and communities experiencing disadvantage. Ardoch facilitates and sustains the delivery of programs by engaging businesses and communities to partner with schools.

The delivery of extra human resources to schools, in the form of trained community volunteers, has been a cornerstone Ardoch program since the organisation's 1988 inception. The program has grown from one volunteer supporting a young person with tutoring and mentoring, to over 400 active community volunteers, providing close to 35,000 volunteer hours to students, schools and early childhood centres in 2010. Anecdotally, the program has been seen as highly successful. Historically, Ardoch's partner schools have taken all the volunteers Ardoch offers and then asked for more. Feedback from schools has been notably positive:

*"Ardoch volunteers are absolutely invaluable...It's hard to imagine life here without these Ardoch education angels! They are teacher, helper, friend, parent, listener, motivator, encourager, supporter, mentor, shoulder to cry on.....depending on the need of the child at any given time or place." (School Principal, 2005).*

Ardoch's volunteers indicate the success of the program both by their willingness to continue volunteering and through stories they have told. In 2010, Ardoch's longest-serving volunteer had been involved with the program for 15 years. Volunteers have regularly shared stories of improvements in student learning and behaviour they have observed in their volunteering role.

*"I work with a little girl in the classroom who could not read when I started. I have only been working with her for a little while, but already I can see her improving and becoming more confident." (Ardoch Volunteer, 2007)*

In 2010 the Ardoch Youth Foundation focused on more formally measuring the impact and effectiveness of the Community Volunteers Program. The evaluation's purpose was to measure impact, consider program improvements, highlight successes and share approaches so that high quality volunteers programs can be replicated in other schools and communities; especially in communities where students and families may be experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage and where community volunteers can add richness and resources without enormous monetary cost to the school.

### 3 Project Background - Ardoch's Community Volunteers Program

The Ardoch Community Volunteers Program recruits, screens, trains, places and supports community volunteers in Ardoch partner schools. These volunteers support welfare and learning opportunities for all children, particularly those students who may be experiencing disadvantage, across Ardoch early childhood centres, primary and secondary schools.

Community volunteers undertake a variety of activities including:

- In-class support - providing additional educational/emotional support to students
- Assisting breakfast clubs
- Mentoring
- Additional support in literacy and numeracy programs
- Expanding learning – volunteers bring in specialised skills that may not otherwise be available in schools including sport, visual and performing arts, personal development, chess, mathematics, knitting, sewing
- Lunchtime activities – again, anything from tae-kwon-do, to dance, to colouring and pom-pom making
- Infrastructure projects such as building a vegetable garden, school maintenance etc.

Ardoch is a founding and accredited member of the Australian Council of Child and Youth Organisations. The safety and well being of children and young people is paramount in the projects Ardoch undertakes and to ensure this, volunteers are recruited, checked (police checks and Working With Children), trained and matched to schools according to comprehensive Ardoch-developed guidelines.

## 4 The Evaluation Context

Ardoch Youth Foundation had not formally evaluated its volunteers program until 2010. Ardoch’s evaluation history had seen a strong focus on anecdotes, case-stories and collecting feedback opportunistically from stakeholders, along with collection and reporting of inputs and outputs. Reviewing published research and comparing Ardoch programs to best practice had not been a strong focus. It became clear that Ardoch needed more robust evidence about the effectiveness of its programs and so, at the beginning of 2010, an outcomes-based evaluation framework was developed with contribution from all staff.

Ardoch commenced the evaluation of the Community Volunteers Program with:

- Developing the evaluation hypotheses
- Undertaking a literature review
- Developing the evaluation methodology
- Developing data collection tools

### 4.1 Evaluation Hypotheses

Ardoch Education Support Coordinators were asked to make predictions about the findings of this evaluation in terms of volunteer impact in schools. These predictions helped to shape the methodology and evaluation tools. Ardoch staff were asked the question – “How do Ardoch volunteers contribute and make an impact in schools and early childhood settings?”

**Table 1: Ardoch Education Support Coordinators hypothesise volunteer-related outcomes and contributions in schools and early childhood sites**

<b>Student outcomes</b>	<b>School outcomes</b>	<b>Community Outcomes</b>
Improved learning (especially literacy and numeracy)	Enhanced program delivery – greater opportunity to use small group work or provide one to one support in the classroom	Stronger connection between the school and the community
Increased time staying on-task in the classroom leading to increased work completion	Teachers feel supported	Positive change in school culture – acceptance of diversity and responsiveness to need.
Increased confidence	Teachers better able to cater to individual needs	
Enhanced love for learning	Schools able to offer expanded learning opportunities for students	
Improved school readiness	School capacity to expose students to diversity is increased.	
Increased engagement		
Improved social interaction (eg. fewer lunchtime incidents)		
Broader learning experiences available to the students		
Increased exposure to diversity (e.g. diverse ages, cultures).		

Ardoch Education Support Coordinators have opportunity to observe volunteers in action and also gather direct anecdotal feedback (from teachers, volunteers, children, parents and principals) about the value of Ardoch's volunteers. Education Support Coordinators also undertake formal review meetings with early childhood directors and school leaders on a bi-annual basis. In these forums, principals and early childhood staff consistently indicate they greatly value the work of Ardoch's volunteers. Ardoch's Education Support Coordinators, were unequivocal: volunteers make positive impacts – directly and indirectly – on student learning and wellbeing outcomes.

## **4.2 Literature Review Key Findings – Volunteers in Schools Programs**

Schools all over the world choose to involve volunteers in programs to assist children with academic and social development. Volunteer support in schools varies; it comprises of a range of goals and related activities including reading, tutoring across all learning areas and mentoring children and young people. The volunteers themselves range in age, cultural background, experience and skill.

Volunteer programs in schools offer an opportunity for the community to engage in public education. The programs are seen to have a positive effect on the students, teachers, volunteers and parents, however, there is limited formal evaluation of these programs.

### **4.2.1 Program models in the literature**

This review accessed evaluations of five programs utilising volunteer support in schools. They were:

- A Florida Reading Intervention Program using pre-service teachers as trained volunteers (evaluated 2004)
- The New York Experience Corps (NYEC) Program for Young Readers (evaluated 2010)
- The Rotary Club Reading Program at Bundaberg South State School (evaluated 2009)
- The Sacred Heart Primary School Mentoring Program (evaluated 2007)
- The Big Brothers Big Sisters of America (BBBSA) programs (evaluated 2008)

The goals of the programs differed. The first three programs focused on improving student reading. The final two programs were broader in their focus; these programs aimed to develop volunteer-student mentor relationships. The goals for these broader programs included supporting improvement in the following student outcomes:

- Academic performance
- School behaviour
- School attendance

See Appendix 1 for detail of program models including volunteer demographics, training and reported student outcomes.

### **4.2.2 Identified best practice:**

The literature offers the following success factors:

- Development of volunteer-student relationships - all studies noted that volunteers and students reported that they enjoyed and looked forward to their sessions. The

development of caring, consistent relationships is seen to be paramount to the success of all of the programs

- Volunteer reliability – in four of the five studies, volunteer reliability was reported to be imperative to the success of the outcome
- Volunteer training – high quality volunteer training led to better program implementation, more reliable volunteers and stronger outcomes for students
- Volunteer matching – in two studies, volunteers were matched with students according to personalities and interests and this was reported as a factor in the program's success
- Volunteer supervision/regular feedback – reported that volunteers were more likely to continue or extend their volunteering and were better able to support students when they were well supervised and given regular feedback about their work. Feedback becomes regular when it is part of a documented process and seen as integral to the program.

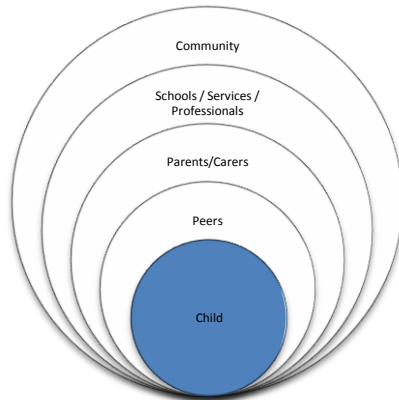
#### **4.2.3 Evaluation volunteer program impacts:**

The overall consensus is that there is limited robust evaluation of volunteers programs in schools. Anecdotal evidence of program success is abundant, however formal evaluation processes and studies are limited, especially within volunteering programs that endeavour to deliver improved social and wellbeing outcomes. With volunteer-delivered reading support programs, the evidence of reading improvement is relatively straightforward to gather; however measurement of the 'extra' or unintended outcomes that occur when students are paired with a tutor for a period of time could be overlooked. Similarly it is difficult to assess if a student has improved self esteem and academic results because of a volunteer program when there are many factors in a complex school environment contributing to such outcomes for each student (Hockey A 2007, 30).

## 4 Methodology

This evaluation was part of Ardoch's outcomes-based evaluation framework. Ardoch staff considered and developed an evaluation framework based on the Ecology of Human Development Model developed by psychologist, Urie Brofenbrenner, published in 1979. The ecological model acknowledges that children develop in relation to their peers, their family and home, school, community and society and that each of these environments and the interactions among them are key to child development.

**Figure 1: Ecological approach to evaluation framework**



The Ardoch model of education support recognises that effective community programs target all layers of the ecological model.

Ardoch's evaluation framework therefore, seeks to measure impacts on the child, their peers, parents and carers, the school and community.

This evaluation was designed to measure program outcomes, measure program efficiencies and identify elements of best practice.

### 4.1 Measuring outcomes of the program

Ardoch used a perceptions-based methodology that elicited stakeholders' own assessment of the trends/changes they see in the environment in which they work or volunteer. Via surveys and interviews, stakeholders were asked questions to identify and measure:

- What impacts do Ardoch volunteers have on student learning, wellbeing and school culture?

### 4.2 Identifying elements of best practice and program efficiencies

Ardoch gathered data about the factors that help to make the program a success in schools and early childhood centres. We were keen to pinpoint the practices and processes that made the program work efficiently and identify any elements that could be improved in order to answer the question:

- How effective is Ardoch's delivery of volunteer support to schools? What are the strengths of the program and how can delivery be strengthened?

### 4.3 Stakeholders participating in the evaluation

Information was gathered via surveys sent to teachers and principals from the 36 Victorian and Queensland schools that agreed to participate in the evaluation. In depth interviews were held with a sample group of primary and secondary teachers and with early childhood directors and teachers from two centres in Melbourne. Ardoch's volunteers were invited to participate in an online survey, with paper based surveys sent to those volunteers without listed email addresses.

#### Survey respondents

Survey respondents were staff and volunteers from Ardoch's partner schools in Melbourne's Inner Urban area, Frankston, Geelong, Sunshine and Brisbane.

<b>Stakeholder group</b>	<b>Number of responses</b>	<b>Response Rate</b> (responses compared to number of surveys sent out)
Volunteers	101	~ 25%
Teachers	100 (87 primary / 13 secondary)	~ 60%
Principals/school based volunteers coordinators	27	~ 75%

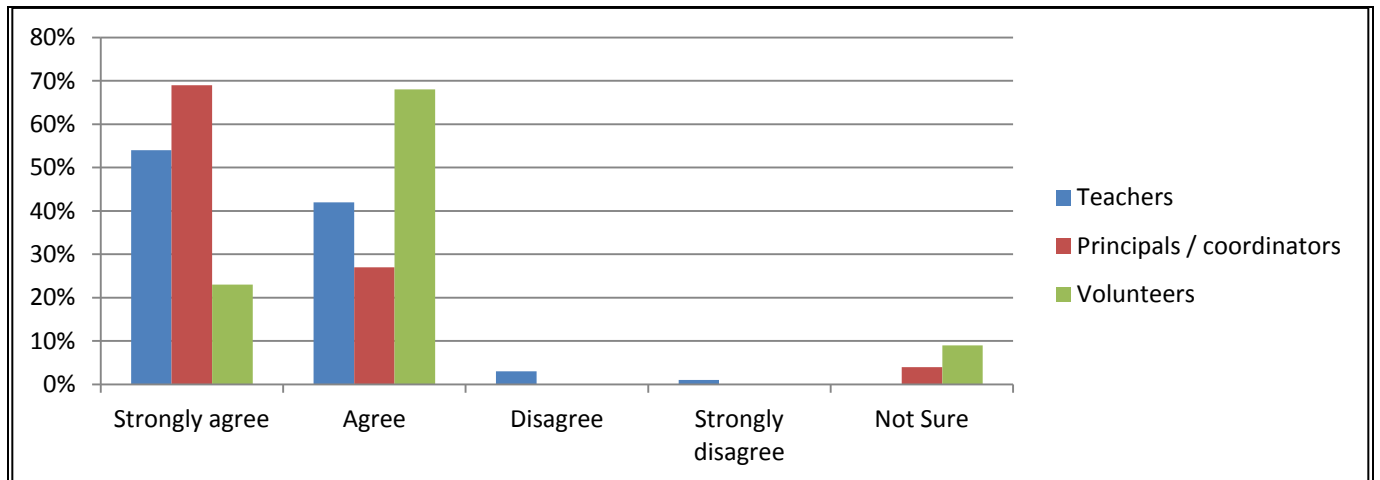
#### In-depth interview respondents

Early Childhood Teachers/ Directors	2
Primary Teachers	3
Secondary Teachers	1
Total	6

## 5 Results

### 5.1 Volunteer impact on student learning and wellbeing outcomes

Figure 2. Stakeholder rating - volunteers positively impact on student outcomes



Note: 228 respondents

There is very strong agreement from stakeholders that Ardoch volunteers make a positive impact on student learning and wellbeing outcomes. Teachers and principals indicated that volunteers contributed to student outcomes in the following areas:

- Improved self confidence
- Increased work output
- Increased time spent 'on-task'
- Improved literacy
- Improved peer relationships
- Improved numeracy.

It is worth noting that, as shown in figure two, 3% of teachers responding to the survey disagreed/strongly disagreed with the statement that volunteers made a positive impact. The concerns of these teachers related to volunteers who had caused some difficulties for the school and teachers. In one case a volunteer was distracting children from their work and, in the second, a volunteer became unable to remember instructions for activities provided by the teacher, due to a medical condition that had recently arisen. In both situations, the Ardoch Volunteers Coordinator worked with the school to ensure the volunteers were provided with feedback and then sensitively supported to take up other avenues for their volunteering. However, the volunteer experience for this school in 2010, was not positive.

Difficulties do occur with volunteers, as they do sometimes with paid employees, but they are rare. As demonstrated on the following page, there were many stories from stakeholders demonstrating that volunteers were making a positive impact:

*Our entire Prep class has had dramatic improvement in oral language that can be attributed to the intervention and targeted program with the Ardoch (volunteer) teacher aides. (Teacher)*

*My Ardoch volunteer, 'S.', discovered that a student who had reading problems and disliked reading, loved reading about animals. So, every week S. would print off information at quite a complex level, about animals for this student. As a result of these efforts, the student's reading level has improved markedly and he is a much more confident reader. (Teacher)*

*... literacy data shows children in Grade 3-6 have improved over a 6 month period. Some students have increased dramatically. The support of trained Ardoch volunteers has enabled teachers to extend or revise concepts with small groups of students. (Principal)*

*They (the volunteers) ... have conversations with the kids – this means that the children can find someone to talk to about issues that may be distressing them. The volunteers support the children with developing emotional intelligence.” (Early Childhood Teacher)*

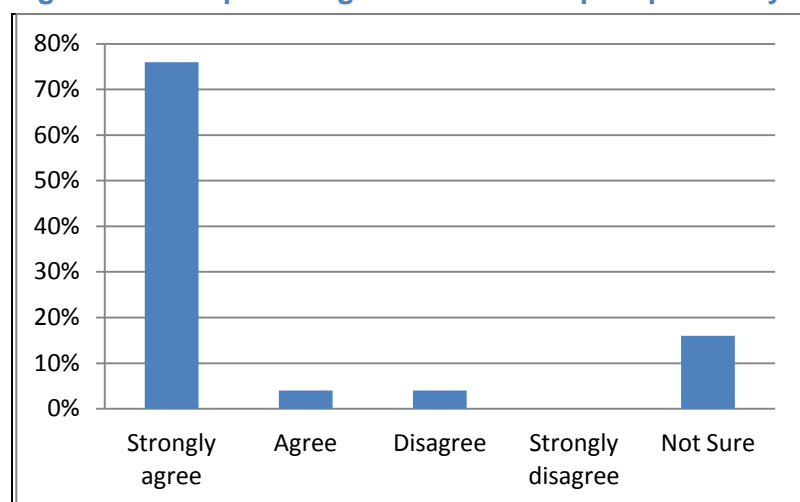
*I know I was making an impact ... (because) my student was showing up to school on the days when I was coming to tutor him. He generally has a very poor attendance at school. (Volunteer)*

*A student who is on an Individual Behaviour Plan and has many suspensions over the 18 months at our school has now developed friendship groups, is able to play with others more co-operatively and demonstrate better sportsmanship skills due to the assistance he has had from one of our male volunteers, his sporting program and one to one assistance. Suspensions have decreased. (Principal)*

## **5.2 Volunteer impact upon school and early childhood staff**

Resoundingly, there is a strong agreement that the support of Ardoch volunteers impacts positively on the teachers themselves as well as on the students. Seventy five percent of principals strongly agree (and another 5% 'agree') that volunteers have a positive impact on staff. Teachers' (including early childhood teachers) and principals' open-ended comments indicate that Ardoch's volunteers add value because they support teaching staff to better meet student needs. Teachers and principals highlighted the importance of volunteer support in being able to provide students with one to one attention. This one to one attention could be provided by the volunteer themselves or by the teacher, using the volunteer to support the classroom generally and freeing the teacher to work intensively with individual students. Ardoch volunteers also facilitated small group work in the classroom, and simply provided an extra pair of eyes, ears and hands to keep students working productively. Teachers reported that they find this extra support enhances their work and feelings of job satisfaction.

**Figure 3. Principal ratings: volunteers impact positively upon school staff**



(note: 26 respondents)

Comments related to volunteer impact on school and early childhood personnel, include:

*Volunteers come in fresh during the day; they can renew the energy in the early childhood centre. They have lots of energy to give to the kids and enable staff to recoup their own energy as well. (Early Childhood Director)*

*Because they can help supervise and support small group work, our volunteers provide teaching staff with the opportunity to have one to one conversations with children and with parents as needed. (Early Childhood Director)*

*It has been great being able to 'team teach' ... with someone who also has a passion for music (a volunteer). It reinforces a positive message to students as no one else on staff teaches music as a subject at our school. (Teacher)*

*Having a volunteer of the calibre of L. has enabled me to get around and work with weaker students at times as well as with more capable students at other times. L. also has been able to work with small groups and keep them on task, enabling me to work with other groups. (Teacher)*

*My volunteers are warm, welcoming and helpful people who help break down the numbers in the class, so the children have another adult who can assist and reaffirm them. I am most appreciative of their help. (Teacher)*

### **5.3 Volunteer program impact on school community outcomes**

During interviews, school and early childhood staff commented that the presence of Ardoch volunteers encourages more community members to offer assistance. It was observed that parents particularly appeared to feel more comfortable in offering support when they see volunteers already being welcomed in the school or early childhood centre. All interviewees also recognised that Ardoch volunteers demonstrate, through their volunteering commitment, that

they value children, young people and education. It was consistently expressed by interviewees that volunteers, by committing their time and energies to children and learning, pass on a powerful message for students, school staff and the community.

Comments illustrating the impact on community from the in-depth interviews and surveys included:

*The strength of Ardoch volunteers at our school is their commitment to the school community and to the students. They all have a great, caring nature, show initiative and believe that they can make a difference. (Principal)*

*I cannot imagine my life without these children and the Ardoch Community. I feel like it describes a part of who I am now and what I care about. Thank you for providing this wonderful opportunity to me and also for all the help and the positivity you are igniting all over the state. (Volunteer)*

*I have loved volunteering every week, I leave the school with a smile on my face because I might have seen a breakthrough in a child's learning, a student might have drawn me a picture, the kids sing out hello and goodbye, basically just feeling like I have impacted positively on the classrooms I work in and the students that I work with. (Volunteer)*

Several secondary school staff reported that community barriers and stereotypes were being partially 'broken down' as a result of volunteers working with adolescents.

*Volunteers break the generation gap, they model social skills – our kids are not particularly good at talking to outsiders.' (Secondary school teacher)*

*It is great for our kids to have as many positive adult role models as possible. It is especially good for them to interact with older people who are not 'anti-adolescent'. (Principal)*

Volunteers themselves are impacted by the program. In open ended responses, volunteers indicated that the connection to students, teachers and schools were important to them and provided a sense of purpose and satisfaction. Volunteers cited personal growth benefits including a broader awareness of community and a deepening understanding and appreciation of the efforts of schools and of individual teachers. A number of volunteers (close to 30% of respondents) indicated that they enjoyed 'giving back' to the community and were energised by spending time in schools with young people.

#### **5.4 Identifying elements of best practice – program strengths and challenges**

From the data gathered, it is evident that Ardoch's Community Volunteers Program makes a positive impact on student learning and wellbeing, on school and early childhood staff, the schools and centres themselves and on the volunteers as members of the broader community. This section of the report identifies practices and processes that contribute to the program's success and opportunities for improvement.

As summarised in section 3.2, the literature shows that the development of caring, consistent volunteer-student relationships is vital for the success of a volunteers program in schools. Other factors listed by the literature in successful school volunteering include:

- Quality volunteer training
- Matching volunteers carefully with students and/or tasks
- Providing volunteers with supervision and regular feedback.

Principals, teachers and volunteers were asked to comment on factors that help to make Ardoch's Community Volunteers Program a success. Thematic bundling of their comments indicate that Ardoch's Community Volunteers Program is consistent with best practice school volunteers program identified in the literature. Comments also provided insight about the challenges involved in making the best use of volunteer support, and program improvements that could be made.

#### 5.4.1 Developing Positive Relationships

The qualitative data gathered indicated that Ardoch volunteers are very good at developing strong positive relationships with students. School teachers and principals agree that Ardoch volunteers are adept at developing relationships.

Teachers also rated volunteers as role models for students, with 90% of survey respondents indicating that volunteers were good role models.

Comments included:

*The three volunteers who work with me in the reading program have made a huge impact. Their patience with kids who can be verbally abusive, their willingness to keep going and the positive feedback they give to the students, is invaluable. In their time here, they have also honed their skills in the reading program and provide very constructive input. (Teacher)*

*Often our students have had little contact with stable, caring and warm hearted adults. The quality of Ardoch volunteers has been outstanding. (Teacher)*

*Our [Ardoch] volunteers are reliable, caring, stable and tolerant adults who make themselves available to form significant relationships with vulnerable, at risk teenagers, to help make a difference in their lives. (Teacher)*

*There have been so many highlights! Just the children's enthusiasm and excitement for learning or working with our volunteer! (Teacher)*

*We appreciate the volunteers' work; many of our students are "at risk" and come from dysfunctional homes. The volunteers we have bring compassion, patience and a listening ear, which can positively influence the children. (Principal)*

Volunteers nominated positive relationships as being vital in their volunteering – with relationships with students as the most important volunteering 'benefit', followed by relationships with school staff and feelings of connection to the school community. Through the survey,

volunteers shared highlights of their roles and the majority of comments emphasised the importance of relationships:

*As a volunteer, my highlight was:*

*Meeting the prep class I was helping with for the first time. They were all so excited and enthusiastic to have a new person in the classroom and it made me feel very welcomed and excited about starting my volunteering experience. (Volunteer)*

*Every day, as I left the school, the children would be at recess. They would all wave and shout goodbye to me. It meant that I left wanting to come back. (Volunteer)*

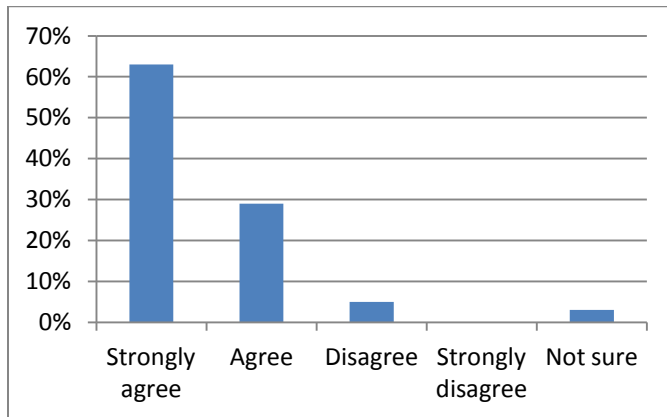
*Feeling so welcomed by the staff and accepted immediately as part of the school. (Volunteer)*

*Being given tickets to the school production and being absolutely amazed at what the bigger kids (I work with preps) can achieve. (Volunteer)*

#### 5.4.2 Volunteer reliability

There was over 90% agreement from teachers and principals that Ardoch volunteers were reliable.

Figure 4: Teacher ratings: Ardoch volunteers attend reliably



(Note: 60 respondents)

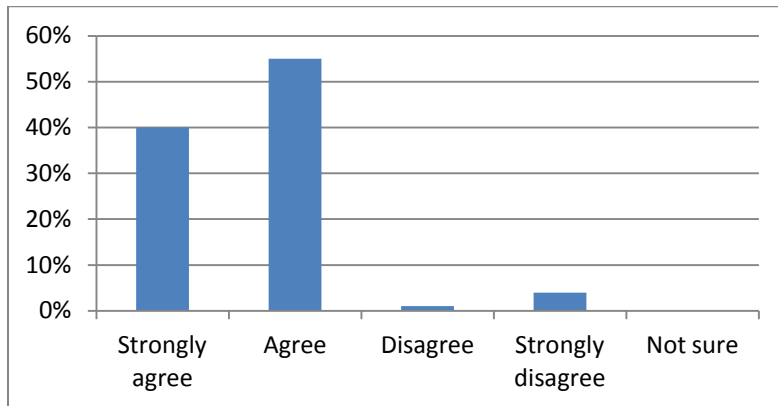
*There is very regular attendance and I am able to confidently give volunteers many varied activities eg; Literacy activities or classroom management tasks. (Teacher)*

*M. was punctual and reliable at all times and always conducted herself in a professional manner. (Teacher)*

### 5.4.3 Volunteer skills and training

There was 95% agreement from teachers that Ardoch volunteers demonstrated appropriate skills and training.

Figure 5: Teacher Ratings: Volunteers have appropriate skills and training



*H. is very kind, patient and has a great understanding of the needs of my children both academically and emotionally. She can lead the children through all the activities of their literacy and assist them when they need help during their computer activity. (Teacher)*

*Certainly, I have appreciated getting to know volunteers in my class and their backgrounds, then trying to use their expertise in the classroom; eg. High-school maths and poetry, law, debating. (Teacher)*

Survey responses convey volunteers' satisfaction with Ardoch's volunteers training and also provide suggestions for improvement. A significant number of open-ended responses affirmed that the training was helpful to volunteers, with respondents using descriptors including: 'interactive', 'relevant', 'enjoyable', 'included', 'valuable', 'thorough' and 'inspiring'.

*Introductory training was informative in every way. The Ardoch coordinator presented the training in a professional manner leaving me feeling informed, validated, included and with a renewed appreciation for the students' needs. (Volunteer)*

Approximately 25% of respondents suggested that the training could be improved by including more practical approaches for working with children and young people who struggle or who don't want to engage in the learning. Samples of these responses include:

*While the introductory training was very good in a very general way, I can still feel very inadequate particularly when working with a student who does not want to engage. (Volunteer)*

*I tend to work with the kids who engage with me or ask for help - I guess I don't know how to respond to the ones that just shrug. (Volunteer)*

While Ardoch arranges workshops at regular intervals for volunteers, a number of volunteers indicated that a further training session, scheduled for new volunteers after they start within a school, would be very helpful.

#### **5.4.4 Volunteer matching**

The literature review revealed that careful matching of volunteers to their role and to the student/s with whom they are working, strengthens the positive impact of a volunteer program on student learning and increases volunteer retention.

A specific question about matching volunteers and their roles was not included in our surveys, however responses from teachers, principals and volunteers about the highlights of Ardoch's Volunteers Program, indicate that schools and Ardoch make efforts to match volunteers carefully.

*The important thing about making the most of volunteers is to get to know them – what motivates them, what will satisfy them, where can they be best used. (Teacher)*

*The program is successful because Ardoch initially works out which volunteers will be able to offer support at the school – our school is not everyone's piece of cake. The volunteers are selected carefully... however, they can still be unprepared for what they see. The kids here are full on – in your face. The volunteers spend the first few sessions observing – after a few weeks, the kids' attitudes shift – they begin to accept the new volunteers. One to one sessions can begin after that. (Teacher)*

#### **5.4.5 Induction, supervision and feedback**

In the literature, induction and supervision processes and regular feedback for volunteers were also markers of a successful volunteers program. It was also notable that volunteer programs with integrated supervision/feedback processes were able to identify the specific student outcomes arising from the program more readily.

There were positive observations from school staff and Ardoch volunteers about induction, supervision and feedback processes:

*Maintaining an Ardoch program within the school requires a commitment by the school to allocate human resources to ensure volunteers are well placed and there is continued regular contact. (Principal)*

*Initially I had to invest time in directing the volunteer but this paid off later... (Teacher)*

*The teachers have welcomed me and shown appreciation so many times in the 3 weeks I have been at the school. One teacher said 'I hope you are coming again. I need you!' (Volunteer)*

*I am quite pleased with the way the Ardoch volunteer program is being run, and how they value us as volunteers. Also, Ardoch staff are very approachable and always ready to lend support (as in PD programs they hold from time to time). It also matters that staff at the school are friendly and pleasant to deal with. (Volunteer)*

While there were positive comments, there were also comments that indicated that investing time in these start-up and ongoing communication processes can be challenging for schools and for their volunteers. Ardoch's Volunteers Coordinators invest time in working with school and early childhood staff to develop and strengthen school-based induction, supervision and feedback for volunteers, however the feedback indicates there are opportunities for further support and program improvement for some schools:

*We need more time to assist in matching volunteers and needs and then to induct and manage them. (Principal)*

*I would appreciate some feedback, which would help me to make a better contribution. (Volunteer)*

*I acknowledge that teachers' time is pretty fully occupied ... and I am sure that if I was more diligent in seeking feedback, teachers would give it. (Volunteer)*

*My issue is the lack of time to prepare the volunteers and prepare for the volunteers. (Teacher)*

#### **5.4.6 Stakeholder satisfaction with the program**

Finally, stakeholders were asked to rate their satisfaction with Ardoch's Community Volunteers Program. Stakeholder satisfaction with the program is high, with 96% of volunteers indicating they are satisfied or very satisfied and 95% of principals and teachers indicating they will seek to continue Ardoch volunteers programs in the future.

Overall the results of the stakeholder surveys and interviews demonstrate that Ardoch's Community Volunteers Program in schools is viewed positively by stakeholders in terms of its impact on student wellbeing and learning, and in terms of its efficiency.

## 6 Discussion

This section of the report provides analysis and commentary of the results in relation to the two evaluation questions and makes recommendations. The questions guiding this evaluation were:

- *What impacts do Ardoch volunteers have on student learning, wellbeing and school culture?*
- *How effective is Ardoch's delivery of volunteer support to schools? What are the strengths of the program and how can delivery be strengthened?*

### 6.1 What impacts do Ardoch volunteers have on student learning, wellbeing and school culture?

From the results described in detail in chapter 5, the hypothesis that volunteers impact positively on student learning and wellbeing outcomes is strongly supported. There is overwhelming agreement related to the positive impacts of volunteers (over 90% of all stakeholders surveyed), and strong agreement particularly from principals and teachers. School staff (teachers and principals) report that volunteers increased students' 'on task' time and work quality – meaning that students focus their attention on their work for longer periods and complete work of a higher quality when there is assistance from Ardoch volunteers.

There was also strong agreement from teachers and principals that volunteers impacted positively on student literacy outcomes.

Teachers and principals reported that volunteers impacted on outcomes by:

- working one to one with targeted students
- working with small groups
- supporting classes more generally and freeing teachers to spend more time with individual students and small groups.

Volunteers themselves responded positively regarding their own impact on student outcomes, but were more moderate in their responses – mostly 'agreeing' that they had made an impact rather than 'strongly agreeing'. This difference in stakeholder response is not surprising and could be linked to a number of factors including the fact that volunteers are unable to see what happens in the classroom when they are not there and are reliant on teacher feedback to gauge their impact. Feedback can be difficult to obtain in a busy classroom environment, as was described in section 5.4.5. The difference in perception could also be linked to modesty – people tend to be more moderate in ratings of themselves, their own skills and their impacts.

As noted in the results section, three school-based respondents (out of a total of 127) indicated that volunteers made no impact or had a negative impact on student outcomes. Throughout the survey these respondents described volunteers who had distracted their students and had taken up a lot of teacher time. It is important to note that the relevant Ardoch Volunteers and Education Support Coordinators had supported the school and volunteers with managing these issues over the year; however the experience of the volunteers program in 2010 for this school was still negative. It was beyond the scope of this study, however it would be helpful to further

clarify the factors that led to the program being unsuccessful for this school and the volunteers involved and use the information to inform future programs.

With regards to volunteer impact on school staff, it is evident that principals and teachers see volunteer support as very helpful in meeting student need. In their comments, teachers and principals linked volunteer support to improvement in feelings of professional satisfaction and appreciation of connection with the community.

Finally, each volunteer is a member of their school community and of the broader community. By making a commitment to volunteering in a school, volunteers impact on students, staff and the wider school community and they themselves are impacted. Thematic analysis of interview and survey responses showed that volunteers in schools build connections, make links across generations and, at times, also across cultural divides.

The data collected indicates that Ardoch's Community Volunteers Program is making positive impacts on student learning and wellbeing, on staff and on communities, across early childhood centres, primary and secondary schools. Stakeholder satisfaction with the program is high.

## **6.2 How effective is Ardoch's delivery of volunteer support to schools? What are the strengths of the program and how can delivery be strengthened?**

Ardoch manages and supports over 400 community volunteers across more than 50 schools and early childhood centres. Volunteers are selected, screened, trained and deployed from Ardoch's local education support centres in Brisbane, Frankston, Geelong, St Kilda and Sunshine. Selecting, screening and training this workforce, and ensuring volunteers follow child safety practices, are matched to school needs and make positive impacts on student learning and wellbeing has seen Ardoch implement and continually review sound processes to ensure program quality.

Ardoch's role is to facilitate the volunteers program so that schools and early childhood sites can maximise its benefits. It would appear from the results reported in section 5.4 that Ardoch's processes are working very well.

Ardoch volunteers make a positive impact, develop positive relationships with students, and are reliable, positive role models because the Ardoch Community Volunteers Program deliberately incorporates the following quality controlled elements consistently across all Ardoch Education Support Centres:

- Careful selection processes
- Quality volunteer training
- Matching volunteers carefully with schools, supporting schools to match volunteers with specific roles and/or students
- Supporting schools and early childhood centres to develop connections and strong school/site based processes with volunteers
- Provision of supervision and regular feedback.

While there are great strengths, there is opportunity also to strengthen these processes; acknowledging that processes in schools vary because the schools are individual dynamic environments and the volunteers themselves are diverse.

Given this diversity, it is important that schools, Ardoch and Ardoch's volunteers are united by aligned goals and principles, with all stakeholders working together to ensure every child and young person, particularly those who may be experiencing disadvantage, is given the physical, emotional, social and academic support they need in order to engage with school and achieve success.

### 6.2.1 Connections are key

A strong theme linked to the program's success was the personal connections that develop between the program's key stakeholders. The data showed a link between overall stakeholder satisfaction and connection between volunteers and students, for example:

- Ardoch's volunteers consistently described their pleasure in getting to know the children and young people, of being able to help, of feeling welcomed by students and having fun with them;
- Teachers and principals described individual and groups of students who look forward to volunteers attending, students who seek out volunteers and who have shown social, emotional and curriculum improvements directly related to volunteer support; and
- Teachers, again and again, described the relationships of care and trust that develop between the volunteers and students, and recognised that volunteers can provide (or free-up teachers to provide) valuable one to one attention and emotional support for students within these busy school and early childhood environments.

Connections are also developed between school / early childhood staff and volunteers. Teachers and principals expressed their personal appreciation of the support and energies of the community volunteers. Teachers described their own learning that developed from working with volunteers in their school, classroom or early childhood centre. Teachers recognised that volunteers enabled them to see the students they work with, with new eyes. They described diversity and positive role modelling brought into the school through community volunteers.

The volunteers also often reported strong connections with individual teachers, and enjoyment of a school with welcoming staff. Significantly, volunteers who felt connected to the school in multiple ways (for example; good communication with a particular teacher plus invitations to school events, sharing of school newsletters) indicated strong satisfaction with their volunteering role. Many volunteers also described seeing schools and teachers with new eyes and greater appreciation for the work of teachers.

Connections are also made between volunteers, Ardoch and the schools. While these connections were not explored in detail in this study, there were multiple responses related to the responsiveness of Ardoch's program coordinators and the importance of links between Ardoch and the community volunteers. Volunteers indicated that they appreciated Ardoch's

newsletters, updates and phone calls, and they especially enjoyed connecting with Ardoch and with each other via professional workshops organised by Ardoch each term. A number of school and early childhood staff reported that they appreciated the efforts made by the Ardoch staff to get to know their school or centre, their students' needs and then to place volunteers who were a good match.

From this study it is evident that connections are critical for a successful volunteers program in schools and early childhood centres. The literature and Ardoch's experience shows that strong relationships and connections are made possible by high quality, well trained, positive and reliable volunteers. Strong connections are also made by schools and early childhood centres who invest time in making community volunteers welcome, providing induction for volunteers, supervision and feedback for their work.

From the data collected, Ardoch's Community Volunteers program is operating well in terms of providing reliable and trained, well-matched volunteers. With Ardoch's partnership support, schools and early childhood centres are enhancing their capacity to manage their volunteers effectively, so as to maximise the positive impact on student, staff and community wellbeing and learning.

### **6.2.2 Improvements**

Program improvements can always be made, and of the challenges noted in this study, the major themes from both the schools' staff and volunteers were of needing 'more time,' 'more training,' and 'stronger communication' (see section 5.4.5). A small number of teachers and principals, reported that they needed more time to induct, manage and connect with volunteers, and some of the volunteers themselves noted they would benefit from more training, support and feedback about their work. It would be worthwhile to investigate the experiences of particular schools, centres and their volunteers in more detail, particularly those who appear to make very effective use of their volunteers, and share their processes and activities between schools and centres more broadly. Importantly, Ardoch can also provide support in terms of further training.

### **6.3 Next steps**

The findings of this evaluation add to the body of knowledge about the impact of volunteers in schools. There are, however, opportunities for gathering more detailed knowledge that would be valuable for fully understanding the benefits of Ardoch's Community Volunteers program. Gathering student feedback about the impact of the volunteers program will add strength to future findings. It is planned that Ardoch will integrate student opinion into its regular feedback collection processes in the near future. Similarly, the voice of parents is missing from this evaluation and it is planned that parents will also be invited to contribute to regular data gathering in the future.

A great opportunity arising from this evaluation is the sharing of strong practice in terms of maximising volunteer impact in schools. Schools identified as having strong volunteers programs will be invited to share their stories and the processes they have developed and implemented along with the successes and challenges related to the volunteers program.

## 7 Recommendations

1. That Ardoch maintains its rigorous volunteer recruitment, selection, training and matching processes;
2. That Ardoch and schools / early childhood centres work together to gather student and parent feedback about the impacts of volunteers;
3. That quantitative methods for measuring impact are investigated, trailed and included as part of Ardoch's regular evaluation cycle, to provide further evidence of links between volunteer support and educational attainment;
4. That an independent evaluation of Ardoch's Community Volunteers Program is commissioned to further strengthen the evidence base of the program, with a view to gaining support from government for this model to be rolled out into schools, especially those in communities experiencing disadvantage;
5. That case studies of successful volunteers programs in schools are developed and disseminated so that promising approaches and best practices can be shared between all schools.

## 8 Conclusion

Ardoch's review of *The Impact and Effectiveness of Ardoch's Community Volunteers Program in Schools* shows that Ardoch's volunteers make a positive impact on student learning and wellbeing within schools and early childhood centres and also impact positively upon school staff and the broader community. It also shows that Ardoch's strong volunteer selection, training and support processes enable the program to operate effectively, ensuring school and early childhood staff and volunteers are satisfied with the program.

The study shows that Ardoch volunteers make a positive impact because they build relationships with students and staff, they are reliable, trained and matched to their roles. They make a positive impact because schools and early childhood centres, in partnership with Ardoch, invest time in inducting and welcoming volunteers and in providing feedback.

The findings of this internal evaluation are mirrored by findings from an evaluation by the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER), carried out in early 2011, of Ardoch's Western Linking Communities and Schools (WLinCS) Project.

ACER found that the

*"quality of the [Ardoch] volunteers was identified as critical to the success of the WLINCS project. The recruitment, screening and training of these volunteers was seen as a significant feature of Ardoch's contribution to the project. Schools felt that the provision of quality volunteers is not something they could expeditiously arrange. School acknowledged that the loss of Ardoch volunteers, if Ardoch were no longer involved in the project, would have a direct impact on children. The high quality of the volunteer training was repeatedly stressed."* (p.15,

[http://www.ardoch.asn.au/assets/167/files/ACER%20Ardoch%20Final%20report%2017\\_6\\_11.pdf](http://www.ardoch.asn.au/assets/167/files/ACER%20Ardoch%20Final%20report%2017_6_11.pdf) )

With systemic resourcing, more communities and schools with identified need for support, could benefit from Ardoch's Community Volunteers Program model; enhancing learning opportunities, educational attainment and wellbeing for students. It is hoped that this evaluation will add to the body of knowledge about the impact of volunteers in education settings, and that more schools and early childhood centres are encouraged to consider the use of reliable, trained volunteers to add richness and resources and strengthen student and community connections.

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