

Making education a reality



Ardoch Youth Foundation

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Literacy Buddies™

**Enhancing student engagement and literacy through
corporate volunteering**

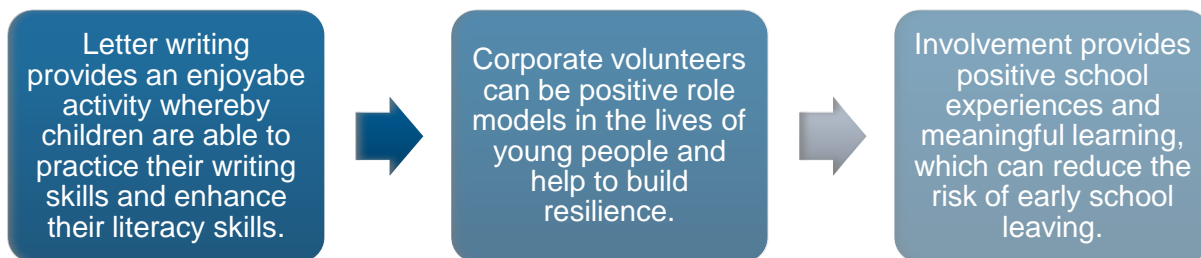
2011

Background

Literacy Buddies™ is an initiative of the Ardoch Youth Foundation.

Ardoch's Literacy Buddies™ is a letter exchange program facilitated between a classroom of students (Little Buddies) and a group of corporate volunteers (Big Buddies). Participants exchange approximately eight handwritten letters over the course of a school year, with the Big and Little Buddies also meeting around mid-year and end of the year.

In becoming a 'Big Buddy', a corporate volunteer can enrich the life and further the education of a child. Volunteers influence their 'Little Buddies' in many ways, and the process of exchanging letters and forming 'penpal friendships' is enjoyable for both parties. Literacy Buddies™ assists student learning and wellbeing in a number of ways:



Literacy Buddies™: Survey feedback

Ardoch facilitated 39 Literacy Buddies™ programs throughout 2010 with close to 900 primary and secondary school students exchanging letters with 900 corporate volunteers. In November 2010, all corporate 'Big Buddies' were invited to provide feedback about their experiences and thoughts about Literacy Buddies™ through an online survey.

The survey gathered 188 responses from Big Buddies (corporate volunteers) with 65% being first-time participants in the program. A sample group of seven teachers also responded to a survey about impact of the program in their classroom.

Literacy Buddies™: Impact on students

The corporate volunteers were able to observe student learning and improvements in letters they received as part of the program.

- 93% of corporate volunteers felt that they had supported a young person's learning and/or personal development
- 6% were unsure if they had contributed, 1% felt they had made no impact.

In the open-ended responses, corporate volunteers highlighted positive changes they had noted in their little buddies, particularly:

- Improved literacy skills
- Improved confidence in social interactions
- Expanding awareness of the wider world.

'I certainly watched my little buddy develop stronger letter writing skills and use her creativity. It was clear to me that my letters were important to her, and that she enjoyed receiving them and sharing them with her family and friends.'

(Corporate volunteer)

Literacy Buddies™: Impact on students (cont.)

The sample group of teachers identified specific outcomes for students that were linked to the Literacy Buddies™ program:

Outcomes	Improved literacy skills	Improved work quality	Increased work output	Improved connection to school	Greater awareness of work pathways
Teachers identify Literacy Buddies™ positively impacts on these outcomes	7/7	7/7	7/7	6/7	5/7

In an open response question, teachers were asked to nominate the most significant benefit of the Literacy Buddies™ program for students. Teachers' responses included:

The program delivers literacy benefits. It provides opportunities for students to:

- *Engage in powerful learning that comes from writing for real life purpose*
- *Converse with and write to an adult – improving written and spoken English.*

The program delivers social benefits. It provides opportunities for students to:

- *Have one-to-one time with an adult outside of their family*
- *Write and talk about things happening to them and have someone who is really interested in discussing it with them.*

The program delivers self-esteem, confidence and personal growth benefits. It provides opportunities for:

- *Each student being made to feel special*
- *Students expressing their creativity through writing letters to their Big Buddies*
- *Excitement, joy and fun when visiting the Big Buddies' workplace – a very positive experience in students' lives*
- *Students to showcase their learning and ability to someone new.*

The program delivers expansion of world view benefits. It provides opportunities for:

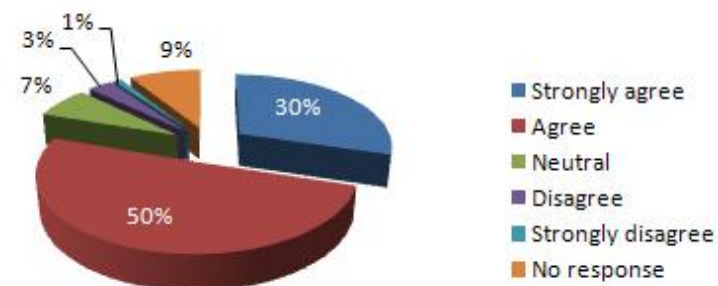
- *Insight into the lifestyle of a person outside of [the students'] own immediate social network*
- *Being exposed to a workplace – giving students ideas about their own career paths.*

Literacy Buddies™: Impact on corporate volunteers and the workplace

Corporate volunteers (Big Buddies) were asked to identify outcomes for themselves or their organisation from a list provided in the survey.

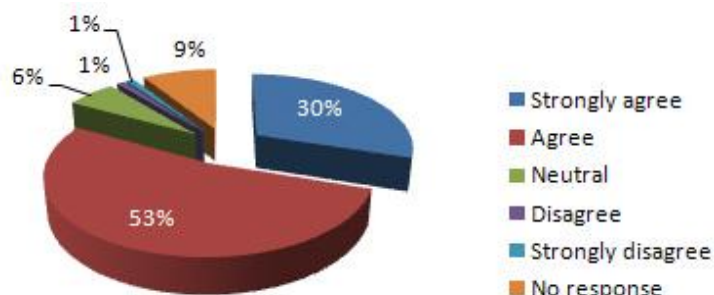
81% of surveyed corporate employees reported better understanding of issues in the wider community

Literacy Buddies™ supports increased understanding of issues in the wider community:



83% of volunteers reported a greater connection to the community as a result of the program

Survey response – Literacy Buddies™ supports stronger connection to the wider community:



Corporate volunteers reported that the program also provided them with a stronger connection to their workplace.

54% of surveyed corporate employee indicated they now have stronger connections to their workplace

60% of volunteers feel stronger work satisfaction as a result of this program

*‘As well as the connection to the program it is a nice point of contact with work colleagues to discuss the enjoyment of this initiative.’
 (Corporate volunteer)*

Corporate learnings from the Literacy Buddies™ program

Corporate volunteers reported on their learnings about young people and communities. These included::

- Understanding of difficulties faced by others
- Understanding that little things ('simply writing a letter') can make a big difference to others
- Opportunity to see things from a new perspective
- Importance of connection - adults connecting to kids and kids connecting to adults
- Appreciation for the efforts of schools and teachers.

'I learned I can actively participate in the community (ie get off the couch and away from the TV and computers) and can touch a young life through regular interaction and demonstrating caring and interest in another's life. It helped me grow in self confidence and in the sense of camaraderie with my colleagues. It showed I can make a "difference" in the space of a few letter writing sessions..... It taught me to care more for my own children and what is going on in their lives and in their minds. And it showed me how a little can go a long way and I will leave with very fond memories of my little buddy...' (Corporate volunteer)

'Until I participated in the Literacy Buddies™ program, I was unaware of the size of the disparity between the educational experience (and associated outcomes) across Melbourne's suburbs. There is no more than a rough 15kms that separates the suburb where I live (prosperous inner East) and the school I volunteer at in Melbourne's West, but it might as well be the distance between Earth and Neptune in terms of educational outcomes. It's one thing to read about it, and another to actually see it up front and personal...' (Corporate volunteer)

Final comments

The Literacy Buddies™ program has had significant appeal for schools, for Corporate organisations and their employees.

The number of Literacy Buddies™ programs facilitated by Ardoch has grown from 22 in 2009 to close to 50 in 2011, with over 2000 Big and Little Buddies now participating in the program.

This review was undertaken to understand the benefits of the Literacy Buddies™ program from a teacher's and also from a corporate volunteer's point of view. The findings are that the program adds great value to student learning and wellbeing. Further, Literacy Buddies™ adds value to the corporate workplace, with Big Buddies reporting stronger community awareness and a sense of personal development and growth through participation in the program.

We look forward to adding to the evidence base by gathering further school and student feedback about the program in the future.

'I think the whole concept is excellent and at this stage cannot think of what could be done to enhance the experience. The communication lines between Ardoch, the school and the corporate organisation worked exceedingly well.' (Teacher)

'Great program. What I value about this is my workplace and Ardoch providing the opportunity - and making it as easy as possible to participate. I feel that the first step is the hardest both in terms of logistics and commitment in contributing back to the community...so the benefit I see in this is that its organised for me and I just have to participate. I don't have to find my own way and do my own due diligence on an organisation. It also has a defined beginning and end so my commitment is quantified.' (Corporate volunteer)