

## EAT DIRT INCEPTION

How did this come about?

As mentioned in the introduction, the concept for the Eat Dirt Program emerged partly from contemplation on pursuing the priorities outlined in the Gonski report. It has also been shaped by the project manager's schooling and subsequent career.

As a high school teacher fresh out of uni, I was dropped into a school in the middle of Fairfield and despite the fact that I had studied special education, I was completely gobsmacked that a number of students could not read. So my lessons as an English as a Second Language teacher to a year 8 class – on functional grammar – were not met with much enthusiasm.

I soon learnt that we really needed to go back to the basics, so I developed a reading program that could be delivered by the older students. There was no possible way I could teach reading one-on-one to 15 students.

I soon learnt that the Dip Ed I had acquired, had done little to prepare me for the classroom, so it wasn't long before I threw the script out the window and began to teach using project-based learning. I wanted to focus on the strengths of the students, not highlight their weaknesses.

I lasted four years as I couldn't handle the fact that regardless of what a student could or couldn't do, they were elevated to the next grade. Usually destined to fail, feel disenfranchised and then invariably, misbehave.

I then became a ranger in Sydney Harbour and unlike many rangers I focussed my attention on community engagement and worked closely with the local schools on a range of environmental education initiatives. One of my career highlights was the farewell speech by the two school captains. The captains spoke about the most enjoyable parts of their schooling – making penguin nesting boxes and installing them at North Head was in the top 5. They liked doing things, that made a difference and had meaning.

I looked after some fairly degraded bushland as a ranger and would always seek ways of dealing with the weeds. We ran a successful corporate engagement program, that served two purposes, one – weed removal and two - it provided us with funding to support not for profits such as Tribal Warrior and Settlement Services International. I would often question, why it is that we had students locked up for four hours a day when they could be out, learning by doing, and contributing to the community. Not to mention the mental health benefits of being in nature.

After 20 years as a ranger and securing a job with Landcare NSW, I left Sydney and headed to Bellingen. The former CEO developed a partnership with Gotcha4Life and Surf Life Saving NSW and I applied for a grant to bring the community into school and the school into the community. I was successful and then COVID struck.

We finally managed to get into Bellingen High and this is where the case study begins....



