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**Providing Hope – The Uniqueness of Discovering Choices**

2021 Short-Term E-Exchange Program – Research Report **

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As part of the International [E-Exchange Program](https://education.nsw.gov.au/about-us/careers-at-education/scholarships-and-programs/international-teacher-exchange/short-term-e-exchange-program), a virtual exchange was completed between New South Wales and overseas counterparts. This exchange provided an opportunity for short-term one-on-one partnerships between educators with similar interests or fields. This action research report on the shared focus area was completed following the 6-week program.

# Introduction

There are currently around 320 000 students enrolled in mainstream secondary public schools in NSW (NSW public school, February census enrolment data). There are 320 000 individuals going through the system, each with their own personal learning needs and abilities. Education, however, tends to be of a one-size-fits-all disposition, which can unfortunately fail some students, preventing them from reaching their full potential which in some cases means not completing high school. The Years 7 to 12 retention rate in mainstream high schools was 83.6% for Australia (Australian Bureau of statistics 2020), which demonstrates that a significant 16.4% of students drop out of mainstream schools.

I teach Mathematics at St Ives High School, a mainstream secondary school in NSW with a population of around 1200 students. Every year we have around 10 to 15 students who drop out of our school due to various reasons such as academic failure, disengagement, mental illness etc. Most of these students move on to the work force and in most cases never complete high school.

This report is a study of how the Calgary Board of education combats the similar problem in their province through an outreach program called Discovering Choices. My exchange partner Goodluck Nwaerondu teaches Mathematics at Discovering Choices, an outreach program for students who have dropped out of mainstream school run by the Calgary Board of education.

# Focus of the Study: The Significance of Discovering Choices.

Discovering Choices is the Calgary Board of Education's Outreach High School. It is a full-time school that provides education for students who have dropped out of mainstream schools. The school is catered for students aged 15 to 20 and the grades offered are years 10, 11 and 12.

The students who come here are those, who for many reasons have not been able to complete the requirements for their high school diploma at a mainstream school. At Discovering Choices, they are provided with flexible hours and individual programs depending on their life circumstances.

All programs are personalised and students work one on one with teachers. Learning takes place within a welcoming, caring, respectful and safe environment.

Discovering Choices was started by one teacher with four students; the goal of the school was to “provide hope” to a population that might otherwise not graduate from high school. Currently there are four sites of Discovering Choices school in Calgary with an enrolment ranging from 300 to 400 students in each of the school sites.

The school is also supported by many community organisations that provide free lunches, bus passes and tickets, childminding, work experience opportunities and counselling for psychological, behavioural and social support.

# Signficant Learnings

The success rate at Discovering Choices High School is remarkeably high, with more than 85% of the students enrolled in the school completing their high school diploma. The reason for the extroadinary success rate of this program is because relationships are valued among staff and students and learning takes place within a respectful and caring environment. All learning is personalised and self-directed offering multiple paths to completing the high school courses and high school diploma.

My exchange partner has worked at this school for the last 16 years and his dedication and commitment to his students is so obvious in all my conversations with him. There are no behaviour problems as all students work individually with staff members who care for them and are keen to see them succeed.

# Conclusion

There are many lessons for us in New South Wales to be learnt through this E-exchange program.

1. All my Google searches for a similar outreach program in NSW came back with nil results.
2. As a classroom teacher, I want to make “the vision” of Discovering Choices my mission in my classroom. I plan to adopt these five key points from the Vision Statement of Discovering Choices, in my everyday practise.
* Learning takes place best within a nurturing and trusting environment that fosters rapport among teachers and students
* All individuals have an inherent value and are worthy of our unconditional positive regard
* All individuals are capable of lifelong learning.
* All individuals are entitled to quality learning experiences.
* All learners are unique and in diversity is strength

# Acknowledgements

1. Discovering Choices website: <https://school.cbe.ab.ca/school/discoveringchoices/Pages/default.aspx>
2. Australian Bureau of Statisitics : <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/education/schools/latest-release#:~:text=Key%20statistics,-there%20were%204%2C006%2C974&text=teachers%20made%20up%2068.1%25%20of,13.5%20students%20to%20one%20teacher>.
3. Department of Education, NSW: NSW public school February census enrolment data