

# Business link helps students

Emily Plesse

ACHIEVING improvements in students' confidence levels and academic performance is the driving force behind not-for-profit group Australian Business and Community Network, which recently appointed a manager for Western Australia and officially launched its program last week.

The national organisation was established in early 2005 as a forum for business leaders, students and educators to collaborate on projects of mutual benefit, and to improve outcomes for primary and secondary school students.

Operations started in WA last year, with 15 schools and 150 corporate participants expected to be involved in 2007.

The ABCN runs six programs nationally, consisting of one-on-one mentoring, a reading recovery program for primary school students, an arts access program, partnerships between educational professionals and business leaders, work experience for students, and short-term volunteer projects for company employees.

In 2006, the mentoring program alone achieved a 60 per cent reduction in the number of student detentions at participating schools, while the number of students planning to leave at the end of year 10 fell by 75 per cent.

ABCN WA program manager Alison Whitelaw, who was appointed to the position last November, said the partnership between chief executives and school principals was mutually beneficial.

"These people both experience similar challenges but diverse environments," she said.

Ms Whitelaw, who has experience in community program delivery, said business leaders stood to benefit as much as the schools they were partnered with, through their contributions to the community.



**POSITIVE PARTNERS:** ABCN WA program manager Alison Whitelaw says partnerships between businesses and schools can improve outcomes for students. *Photo: Jemma Howard*

"It gives them a greater understanding of the issues facing schools and broadens their perspective and understanding of the wider community," she said. "For the students, it improves their self-esteem and confidence, and they see a range of different careers."

Minter Ellison finance partner John Poulsen said he was attracted to the ABCN because it complemented the youth focus of the firm, and had a dramatic effect on the participating students.

"There are so many fantastic and privileged schools in WA, but then there are all these under-funded government schools battling hard to do the right thing, and they need more support," he said.

Mr Poulsen is part of the ABCN 'Partners in Learning' program,

whereby chief executives are partnered with school principals to share leadership goals and challenges.

He has been paired with Warnbro Community High School principal Sydney Parke, who manages a campus of nearly 2,000 students and staff members.

The two met in January and are developing a program targeted at the top seven students of the 'Principal's 22' - an elite group of students who demonstrate significant potential.

Mr Poulsen said his own schooling experience had inspired him to become involved.

"I finished up my [student] career at a government school and I had a fantastic teacher who inspired me and gave me the confidence to know I could do anything or be anything,"

he told *WA Business News*.

Mr Poulsen said he felt that business had a responsibility to give back to the community, especially in the context of WA's booming economy.

The ABCN has forecast the number of schools involved in the WA program to reach 30 by 2009, matched by 600 corporate participants.

Currently, 28 schools and more than 4,600 students participate in ABCN programs nationally.

The ABCN was formed to deliver business skills and resources to the community, through the vehicle of education.

It aims to address the economic costs associated with students leaving school early, improve literacy and numeracy skills and help to ease future skills shortages.