



north

teachers' pets

Remember when you were at school and you couldn't wait to get there early? How about choosing to stay back to get more work done? No, us neither. But the kids at Mark Oliphant College are bucking the trend.

WORDS SKY HARRISON
PHOTOS RUSSELL MILLARD



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SHARE

The school day finished half an hour ago, but you wouldn't know it by the dozen or so kids spread around the table at Mark Oliphant College – otherwise known as MOC – in Munno Para. They're huddled over their drawings, commenting on each other's work, asking the teachers questions. They're all here voluntarily and not one of them is in a hurry to go home.

"It's like that in the mornings, too. They get here 10 minutes before everything starts, waiting at the door to come in, even the kids who used to be latecomers," MOC's Colette Bos says. "The teachers love it, too. It's a beautiful way to start and end the day."

Why the enthusiasm? The kids are taking part in a trial for Australia's first Children's University, working towards their very own mortar-board-and-gown graduation ceremony in the hallowed grounds of Adelaide University's Bonython Hall. Many of them are the first in their families to get a taste of further education, and developing a hunger for learning is exactly what this program is about.

"The aim is to fuel students' love of learning, providing the scaffolding for children, especially in disadvantaged areas, to develop self-efficacy and confidence and build aspirations," director, Children's University Australia, Kiri Hagenus says. "It's important that the activities are based on the children's interests; it's about children exploring and discovering new ideas, concepts and experiences."

With this in mind, subjects range from conversational French, chess and print-making to visits to art galleries, glee club and cookbook making. Today, they're designing labels for the orange marmalade – or MOCmalade – they made recently with the Virginia Friendship Group for the Playford Alive Local Heroes awards.

In the UK, the Children's University started out as a Saturday morning club and today is held right across the UK and is spreading internationally. It's based on the idea of acknowledging children's learning from activities they take part in outside of the classroom, be it through clubs, sports or other activities. When they

sign up, each child receives a passport to learning, where their activities are recorded. After 30 hours, they graduate to a bronze certificate; at 60, a silver; at 90, a gold. Diplomas and degrees await after that.

Here, the Children's University is run by Adelaide University, which teamed up with the College to trial it. MOC principal Lynne Symons and deputy Graham Ferguson even visited the UK to see it in action.

"The Children's University is particularly important for children without a history of further study in their family. The more young people are engaged and extended, the better the future will be for everyone, and this program is a good way to do that," Lynne says.

"The great thing is, it's driven by the kids. They come up with activities for us to run. They're developing leadership skills, it's improved their independence and confidence and they're wanting more."

The program started in the October school holidays, with about 30 year five and six students taking part in excursions to cultural institutions such as the Art Gallery of SA, Migration Museum, Festival Theatre and even the University of Adelaide itself, where uni students gave lectures to the kids.

The students proudly reel off activities they've taken part in and point out how many hours they've already achieved, showing off their passports. Almost all of the kids taking part in the trial were on track to graduating at the first ceremony on 25 November.

Next year, the program will be offered to children aged 7 to 14, and a passport to volunteering is being developed so senior students can assist with the program and earn recognition for their efforts. The hope is many more schools throughout SA will get on board.

"We want it to be embraced by all of SA," Kiri says. "It's very inclusive, we want all schools to be involved, and the community as well. It's wonderful how it engages kids. They drive it, they see themselves as leaders."

At the MOCmalade class, I ask who thinks they will go to university when they finish school. There isn't a child here who doesn't put up their hand. ♦