Not too cool for school

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Cool.org founder Jason Kimberley is all too aware of the issues teachers face in the classroom. That's why his organisation is focused on creating content based around current, real-world issues, while meeting curriculum requirements, he says: "We always keep the teacher at the heart of everything we do. I loved school, and I have always been very curious and passionate about education."

Environmental issues, sustainability, social and economic responsibility are matters close to his heart. A man who also understands the importance of school librarians, Mr Kimberley sent copies of the books he has written – one about Australia and one about his Antarctic adventures – to every school librarian in Victoria. This heralded the birth of Cool.org

Since launching in 2008, some 175,000 educators have signed up for the Cool.org (formerly Cool Australia) resources. The organisation is committed to fostering the life skills of the next generation, with a focus on helping students understand the importance of developing resilience, building purpose and a sense of responsibility, and incorporating risk-taking into their lives.

Its central aim is to ensure students "are well-informed about societal issues without instilling fear, but instead fostering a sense of empowerment and optimism," Mr Kimberley explains.

"When we started, we were an environmental organisation, all about sustainability in the classroom when that first hit the curriculum. Moving on, after chats with AEU members, we set about expanding."

For the past three years, Cool.org has been focused on resources for those in their early years of teaching – "all those things you didn't know or weren't taught at uni."

This has resulted in the creation of a "Teaching survival guide" for teachers in their first three years on the job, comprising

45-minute courses designed to build confidence in the classroom. Topics include: beginning to include First Nations perspectives in your classroom; building social and emotional skills in secondary students; understanding ADHD; and how to manage behaviour in the heat of the moment.

“We’ve done a lot of focus groups and asked: where are the gaps? We employ a team of in-house staff, and we also have a team of contractors: practising teachers who are experts in their field who do this in their – can you believe it? – spare time, with first-hand experience of what is required,” Mr Kimberley said.

Among its partners, Cool.org counts Planet Ark, the War on Waste, VISY, Earth Hour, AFLW and Reconciliation Australia. They have managed to maintain philanthropic funding, but Mr Kimberley – who grew up within the entrepreneurial Just Jeans family – is well aware of the need for reliable, ongoing sources of financial support to reach their goals.

Last year, Cool.org expanded beyond its main content. The new Cool+ service, which includes slideshow presentations, requires a subscription costing $11.99 per month. Cool+ slides include animal population evolution strategies; persuasive language in advertisements; and using evidence to strengthen writing.

The site’s other content remains free and includes more than 2,000 lesson plans for kindergarten to Year 10, along with two-hour professional learning courses for teachers, including how to teach sustainability with hope, strategies for dealing with aggressive and violent behaviours, and teaching consent to children. Given the importance of these issues, Mr Kimberley would love to see governments mandate Cool.org curriculum, subsidised by state education departments. Now, that would be a cool move.

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Thanks to a partnership between the AEU and Cool.org, first year teachers who are SSTUWA members can access a free one-year subscription to Cool+ resources, valued at $144. To claim the free subscription, visit cool.org/aeu-cool and follow the sign-up process. At the end of the 12-month mark, users will be reverted back to the free account level, at which point, when a member tries to access a Cool+ resource they will be prompted to pay. This benefit is available for first year teachers only.

By Louise Swinn

Authorised by Sally Dennis, General Secretary, The State School Teachers' Union of W.A.
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