As Peer Support Australia celebrates its 30th anniversary, Andrea Cornish investigates the impact this pioneering Northern Beaches organisation has had on school kids.

Avalon Public School’s Year 6 student Layne Cook knows exactly how her teachers feel sometimes. Layne, a Peer Support leader, is in charge of organising a group of 10 students and guiding them through a set of activities. She patiently works with the students in her Peer Support group, who range in age from Kindergarten to Year 5.

“It can be challenging when the kids aren’t concentrating and you have to keep repeating instructions,” she admits. But she adds that she has fun being in charge and it has taught her how to be an effective leader.

It is week seven of the eight-week program and Layne exudes the confidence of a seasoned mentor. The students in her group also show a sense of camaraderie as they work through the session’s challenges. Year 4 student Annabel Bates says the...
The Peer Support program has not only been a resounding success at Avalon Public School, but it has been successfully implemented across 1,400 primary and secondary schools throughout Australia.

Its origins stem from the early ‘70s, when a student from a Northern Beaches high school died as a result of a drug overdose. Elizabeth Campbell, a health educator, was called upon to develop a program to help students deal with death and drug-related issues. “When Ms Campbell went to the school, she found the kids knew more about what was happening with the boy than the adults did,” explains Sharon Austin, general manager of Peer Support Australia.

Ms Campbell soon acknowledged that people of all ages are influenced by and learn from their peers. As a result, she developed a program based on this simple premise.

While Ms Campbell passed away in 2010, she left a legacy that has positively impacted hundreds of thousands of young people throughout the country.

Today, Peer Support Australia, which operates from its Brookvale office, facilitates more than 500,000 students a year through the program. The Peer Support program is one of the first of its kind to develop a positive approach to addressing social issues in primary and secondary schools. The program empowers young people to lead their younger peers to create a caring and safe environment.

The initiative provides a hands on learning experience that encourages school kids to work through a structured curriculum together. The modules allow them to develop skills, attitudes and strategies, with the aim of improving mental wellbeing. It also helps develop key skills in assertiveness, decision making, problem solving and leadership.

So how does it work? In primary schools, Year 6 students are invited to take part in a two-day leadership program. The
training includes activities and discussions to help them develop a variety of skills, including relationship building, communication, and empathy, among other things. After the training, the Year 6 students then lead structured activities with groups of eight to 10 students from Kindergarten to Year 5. The modules focus on themes, including resilience, values and anti-bullying.

According to Ms Austin, creating small groups with students of all ages helps them build relationships with kids they would normally not interact with.

“Really strong relationships start to develop between the students. You start to see older kids playing with the younger ones, and in turn the schoolyard becomes a safer, friendlier place – especially for the younger students,” Ms Austin explains.

She also says kids who might be seen as ‘challenging’, can make the best peer leaders.

“Given the opportunity, some of these kids really rise to the challenge and the response from within their group is amazing. It also gives those students in particular a little more empathy for their teachers.”

In secondary schools, Year 10 students take part in a two-day leadership training program. These leaders are then grouped with eight to 10 students from Year 7.

Ms Austin says the focus for the secondary school program is really to support the transition of Year 7 students.

And while it initially started out as a drug prevention program, it is now more focused on mental health.

“It not only teaches students how to make good life decisions, but it also gives them the skills to recognise what the consequences of those decisions may be,” Ms Austin adds.

For more information on Peer Support Australia, phone 9905 3499 or visit peersupport.edu.au.