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Helping centre is barely hanging on

By **Kylie Stevens**

IF ONE of Australia's major banks can see sense in keeping a successful behavioural-change management centre open, why can't the state government?

It's a question needing an answer says Margaret Bell, co-founder of Mount Druitt Learning Ground.

She's yet to hear from Premier Mike Baird since the *Star* broke the story about its desperate fight to avoid closure almost six months ago.

The St George Foundation will visit Bidwill this week to present a \$25,000 grant after Learning Ground came to its attention when recently featured on ABC's *Lateline*.

It will go to a project for ages 10 to 13 at risk of disengagement with school which starts next term.

"We're very grateful because

otherwise we wouldn't be able to remain open for much longer," Ms Bell said.

"I have one paid employee and I sent my last email to that person on Wednesday at 1am. We've been inundated with calls to enrol following the recent media attention so now we can take some of them on.

"We realise this grant won't be ongoing. We'll continue to apply for trusts and grants but we need core funding from the government to keep us sustainable."

Almost 200 troubled youth have returned to the classroom in the last five years because of the success of Learning Ground.

"The foundation has funded this program because it has a proven ability to really help local families, with school principals in the area reporting how children

who attend Learning Ground return to school as

much better students," said St George Foundation head Leona Fell.

Ms Bell wrote another letter to Mr Baird last week to request an urgent appointment ahead of

the upcoming state budget. "Please fund an organisation that get kids back to school and closes the gap — something all levels of government claim they're all about," she said. "We can't remain open unless the government comes to the party."



Glimmer of hope: Funding cuts have meant project co-ordinator Debbie Higgison-Bradley is Learning Ground's sole paid employee. She works full-time on a part-time salary.

Picture: Gary Warrick