

# AN EDUCATION FOR EVERYONE

Blakehurst High School

## INNOVATION SNAPSHOT

### SUMMARY

- 70% per cent of students are from non-English speaking backgrounds and they flourish in a school that places priority on quality teaching and learning and positive relationships.
- No student moves into the senior school without a well mapped out pathway.

### DRIVERS

- The driver is the basic philosophy of an education for everyone: the staff want to keep students at school, not drive them away.
- The local community includes a large proportion of people from a non-English speaking background who are supportive of education and the school's approach.

### FEATURES

- All students benefit from a comprehensive system of student support including individual learning plans. Monitoring mechanisms effectively identify any students at risk.
- Professional learning includes the use of action learning to maintain a continual cycle of reflection on and improvement of professional practice.

### SUCCESS FACTORS

- A culture of getting students ready for real life supports the continuing successful learning of 15-19 year olds.
- That culture is underpinned by teacher professional learning and leadership and parent and community engagement in the school.

### BENEFITS

- Students demonstrate high levels of engagement with the school and satisfaction with learning.
- Parents convey similar levels of satisfaction with the high expectations staff have of the students.

### RELEVANCE TO NEW SCHOOL LEAVING AGE

- The staff act on their belief that students will only stay at school and engage in learning when that learning is relevant, processes and relationships are supportive, and students can see a purpose for all that they do.
- The high student retention rates show that this philosophy and the approaches are achievable.

### Context for the innovation

Blakehurst High School (BHS) is a comprehensive co-educational secondary school located in the Sydney Region. It has approximately 1,100 students drawn from over ten local primary schools. 70% per cent of students are from non-English speaking backgrounds and from over 50 different language backgrounds. The school's community is diverse with at least 40% of students from relatively low socio-economic backgrounds.

The school is known for its harmonious internal community and its focus on quality teaching and learning. Positive relationships between student/student, staff/student, staff/staff and school/families are the basis for all activities.

### 'Maximising' curriculum

The staff believe that the breadth of curriculum is important as students require enough flexibility to make choices on the basis of their interests and talents. The school attempts to ensure that courses with small candidatures are supported in order to ensure a broad curriculum. As part of that broad curriculum, school based VET and TVET meet the needs of over 50% of all senior students.

Trained senior student mentors are used to assist junior students at risk and peer support training is provided for Year 9/10 students for supporting Year 7 students.

In the BHS SLAM (Senior Learning And Management) study and learning skills program, teachers convey high expectations to students and maintain a focus on quality teaching and personal mentoring of students deemed at risk of not succeeding in Years 11 and 12.

### Student support

Training is provided for all teachers in the areas of Choice Theory and Restorative Justice techniques, which emphasise that responsibility lies with students and relationships are ideally developed based on mutual respect and power with rather than power over.

Students are given leadership roles, for instance as peer mentors and mediators, and individual learning plans exist for students receiving funding support and those students in Years 10-12 deemed to be at risk of not completing Year 12 whether or not they are funded. These plans include individual goals, allocation of responsibilities and timelines for action. Selected students may be engaged in the senior years in a school transition to employment program which may include weekly work experience and school designed 'real life' learning programs as well as HSC courses.

An example of one of the many programs of support for junior students is called Learning on Track, an intensive four-week program for students whose NAPLAN results indicate the need for literacy and numeracy interventions. Another program is Chinchin, a one-on-one reading program targeted at 13-15 year olds (Year 7 and Year 8) achieving in the low bands of NAPLAN. And Reading Repairer is a one-on-one reading program targeted at 15 -17 year olds in Year 9 and Year 10 who achieve in the low bands of NAPLAN.

### Professional learning

The school has formed several "Teacher Leaders" groups over the past four years which take an action learning approach including collaborative peer support. These mainly young teachers then engage in project-based studies which benefit all staff and of course ultimately student learning.

The major school evaluation for 2009 was teaching and learning with an emphasis on the importance of professional development of staff. In 2009 all teachers were members of teaching teams which analysed practice, supported change and engaged in professional dialogue.

A Professional Learning Schedule each year is designed by the professional learning team directly from staff evaluation of previous learning and the school's targets. It details the topics for staff learning workshops which take place at staff meeting time every fortnight after school.

### School structures

The trialling of a changed timetable for senior students, involving an early start and early finish, and allowing better access to TAFE, employment, sport, study and other commitments, was introduced in 2005 and continues to be rated highly by students.

The school has a Homework Centre two afternoons per week and over 30% of the school attended during 2005- 2009. The centre is administered by the Business Services students as part of their learning. Students attending regularly rate the centre highly and over 90% report that their engagement with learning has improved since using the Centre.

Student Services Network documentation in 2009 indicates that the learning support team is the key structure to support students at risk. The Student Services Network flowchart clearly identifies a separation between student welfare and student discipline. Discipline is the domain of the head teachers.

Roles and responsibilities are explicitly documented for year advisers, mentors, supervisors, junior and senior welfare co-ordinators. Roles are also explained in the Student Information Booklet.

### Best practice

The Senior Student Support Program (SSSP) is designed to monitor and support the progress of students in the senior school. It includes a student contract for improvement, interviews, mentoring and consultation with parents and is coordinated by the deputy principal learning/curriculum.

The students not completing HSC 'do not just drop out,' but continue with training and are assisted by the school's careers and transition programs. They have a range of options in the school setting.

# success story

Blakehurst High School has developed a culture which engages its students, values student success and accepts that success is a relative concept. This requires a critical mass of those staff members who 'care for kids', demonstrate their belief in their students and have the flexibility of thought to design or source courses of study which deliver on the expectations of success for individual students.

Student K's parent said of teacher Mrs X: "Mrs X is willing to give any child a go; she sees the good in the kids".



The school designs individual transition plans for all students at risk, with a focus on retaining and retraining, and partnerships are formed with TAFE and private colleges, for instance to allow students to complete pre-apprenticeship courses.

The school designed roles of junior and senior coordinators work with other members of the learning support team to monitor and support these students in transition. The roles have executive team period allowances and each coordinator is a member of the executive team although they do not have executive salary. The fact that these roles are created and supported are an indicator of the importance placed on support structures and allowing no student to 'fall through the net'.

#### Achieving goals of the new school leaving age project

'Aiming higher'. Planning for the future is part of any student's education and students need to set and have clear expectations of which direction they will take. The BHS Transition program involves students, family and external partnerships working together in the planning process to assist transition and prepare students for adult life.

The transition plans depends on the individual student's needs and interests. The plans help students with everything from work to further education and/or training. A student can get help to progress to university, TAFE or work. Transition plans also assist students to become successful members of the community.

'Supporting strongly'. The learning support team is a whole-school planning and support mechanism. Its purpose is to address the learning needs of students through the co-ordination, development, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of educational programs.

A prime function of the learning support team is to ensure that the needs of students in the school are being met through vocational learning and career development, as well through pastoral care and youth development. The learning support team acts as a filter to ensure each child referred receives the support they most need. Referrals are made by classroom teachers, head teachers and parents.

'Strengthening connections'. The school's website provides the Blakehurst community with up-to-date information. The school uses the Moodle learning management system to provide 24/7 access to resources and support for all its students.

Parents and community are welcomed into the school through a range of programs and this strengthens connections to the workplace and life after school.

#### Benefits for students

Benefits for students of the BHS approach include the following: retention rates are increased; student options are increased; students experience different settings and develop work appropriate skills; students are able to choose the best pathway, for example, to university, TAFE or work; students are given the opportunity to learn about their skills and strengths; and students feel successful and respected so they can go on to form meaningful relationships with each other and value staying at school.

The BHS transition process allows parents, teachers and external agencies to work together to make possible the above opportunities.

#### Sustainable benefits

To ensure such benefits are sustainable, BHS promotes a supportive culture that includes a strong emphasis on professional learning of staff committed to quality teaching and learning, a whole school commitment to student well-being, a focus on the middle school years, a strong emphasis on technology and a team-based approach by the staff.

The leadership sets the tone for the school and lays out the school's expectations of its students. Leaders model the importance of quality relationships. They also focus on quality teaching and the importance of making a difference in students' lives. And leaders ensure that leadership is devolved and self-sustaining



# Interview with Judith Thompson (JT), Principal and Maria Atwell (MA), Head Teacher, Teaching and Learning

## **What are some key drivers of innovation within the school?**

*JT: Within the school the driver is our basic philosophy of an education for everyone: we want to keep students here, not drive them away. Our demographics are such that we have a large non-English speaking background component and our parents are by and large pretty supportive of education.*

*MA: The culture is the driving force. We have a culture here of wanting to retain the students and we're training them and getting them ready for real life. That culture is very much embedded and everyone shares that passion. It's no one person; it's teamwork.*

*JT: I don't think any innovation on its own can ever effect the sort of change that you want. It's not one innovation; many innovations add up to a culture of expectation.*

*We've gone from a culture where, in my first years here, the teachers and head teachers at executive level would say "Why is this kid at school? We ought to get rid of him." The culture was that the HSC was only for academic achievers. But people like Maria and myself and a whole core group of staff believe that kids should have six years of schooling.*

*MA: We work closely with external organisations. We work with TAFE of course and a private training company so if a child is interested in, say, doing panel beating Mrs Thompson allows them to go out of the school for the five or six weeks to do the course and come back. And the outcomes from that course are considered within their assessment.*

*JT: The parents certainly support education. And that might not always be the case in lower socio-economic areas. They have the belief that all students deserve to be at school for six years.*

## **How do you maximise the curriculum or use school structures or professional learning to inform your innovation?**

*JT: The school structures maximise curriculum. But I think professional learning is the key. That is what has changed culture. We have an effective professional learning team with plans that are fully evaluated each semester.*

## **What are some examples of best practice professional approaches used by the staff?**

*JT: Our transition program for kids at risk is an example of best practice.*

*Our emphasis has been keeping the quality teaching framework to the fore and getting teachers into other teacher's classrooms. It's an open classroom approach. For some years now a lot of our Tuesday afternoon staff workshops have been on differentiating the curriculum.*

*I didn't want people to get the idea that if you stick a program in like our school traineeships and employment program in the senior school for example, it works on its own. Nothing works unless you've got a culture supporting all of that. And it starts in Year 7, not Year 11 or 12.*

*The number one key thing that employers look for is interpersonal skills. If you can't develop those you won't succeed. It's the relationships that kids develop with each other within the school, that staff develop with each other, that develop those skills. No innovation is going to work unless you've got that trust and respect among the staff.*

## **How do the goals of the new school leaving age project fit with your approach, for example, high expectations?**

*JT: High expectations are a cultural thing. I interview every Year 10 student and their parents at this time of the year, and that's as much about relationship building as it is about checking their subjects and all of that work. That comes at the end of a very long and well-structured Year 10 subject selection process.*

*What I found when I began here 13 years ago was that, if you want to look at worst practice, the kids were given out sheets. They ticked the boxes, the sheets came back and that was it. And I found in that first year that I was here that close to 40% of the kids had no concept of what the HSC meant, no idea why they were here, and there was no value placed on it by them or their parents. So one of the things I decided was that I would interview every Year 10 kid and their parents.*

*But now people like Maria and the learning support team and her support staff have a really strongly structured subject selection process that begins in July and ends in November. So, there are no kids going into the senior school who don't have a well mapped out pathway. And few of them leave: we'll have about half a dozen going off to do apprenticeships next year, out of 200. And they've had that pathway designed with them and for them, with the support of our transition program and their parents and our careers people.*

***What management of innovation is required to ensure success?***

*JT: A strong executive. All the teachers but particularly the executive are encouraged to spend a lot of time reflecting and evaluating. Evaluation is critical: we don't do anything without evaluating it.*

*Also, encouraging a density of leadership across the school is critical for managing anything, because all of this activity involves just about every member of staff at one time or another.*

***What are some of the other benefits of your approach?***

*JT: The major benefit is that we've got kids here, particularly in Years 10-12, who are engaged and who see the relevance of their learning. And I can't think of anybody who ever leaves the school without some support for their next step. The focus in the junior years is of course getting all students to the point at which they see the relevance of their learning, feel supported and ultimately engage with their senior studies.*

***Are these benefits sustainable?***

*JT: I could walk away from here and Maria as well as a significant core group of staff, both executive and non executive, could confidently continue the work. The processes and structures as well as beliefs and values have been put in place so that teams evolve. Developing teams keeps things sustainable. And if one person does go, the team is still there functioning and continually training and bringing other people on board. That team focus makes the work sustainable.*

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