

HIGH EXPECTATIONS, EXPANDING HORIZONS

Burwood Girls High School

INNOVATION SNAPSHOT

• SUMMARY

- At Burwood Girls High School high expectations of all students are clearly articulated: all students are encouraged to maximise their learning in a variety of ways. The expectation at all Year levels is that students come here to do their best.
- In return, the school has in place a strong support system and provides students with a wide range of study options and pathways.

• DRIVERS

- Staff and parents believe that girls need to achieve an HSC to maximise their chances of success in life and proceed to further education.

• SUCCESS FACTORS

- Burwood Girls 'High Expectations and Expanding Horizons' approach involves the provision of a flexible curriculum based on student need, career directions and interests.
- The approach also includes extensive support for students as they transition from Year 10 into senior studies.

• BENEFITS

- The retention rate of students to the end of Year 12 is high and each year the students achieve excellent results in the HSC. This success creates more options for them, in the longer term.

• RELEVANCE TO NEW SCHOOL LEAVING AGE

- The students' strong support from and connection with the school and the school's focus on learning and high expectations have resulted in the majority of students staying on to complete Years 11 and 12.

Context for innovation

The local community of Burwood Girls High School is diverse in terms of ethnicity, culture and socio-economic mix and has high expectations of the school.

Established in 1929, the school has a tradition of excellence and innovation. The school clearly states that all girls are expected to learn as much as they can. This learning culture has been developed over a long period of time and is articulated through the purpose statement. That statement is widely displayed and is the rationale for all learning programs.

The purpose statement clarifies that Burwood Girls High School wants all students to respect the rights of others and recognise individual differences and take responsibility for their learning. All students are encouraged to maximise their learning in a number of ways: exploring different ways of learning; thinking, questioning and reflecting; believing they can learn; setting higher standards; working cooperatively in groups; and developing effective problem solving, communication and decision making skills.

'Maximising' curriculum

The school has a mixed ability ethos and proudly articulates this at parent information sessions for students wishing to enrol. The only streaming that occurs is in Mathematics from Year 8 to 12. All other classes have a full range of student abilities and students support each others' learning in the classroom and challenge each other to do their best.

Case

Burwood Girls 'High Expectations and Expanding Horizons' approach involves the provision of a flexible curriculum based on student need, career directions and individual interests, for the specific student cohort, as they transition from Year 10 into senior studies.

Students have a free choice for subject selection. Rather than establish a set of lines based on knowledge and experience of previous subject choices, the school opens up the process to student selections and gives them a voice. Students are given a subject selection booklet called 'Options' with the full range of subjects and courses that teachers have the ability to offer.

In modelling flexibility, the school maintains some courses with small numbers of students. Smaller subjects are able to be offered due to reduced face-to-face time with the teacher and a commitment by the school to keep the curriculum as broad as possible. The school supports a breadth of languages: in 2009 it enrolled students in nine language courses for the HSC.

New courses are introduced periodically. For instance, Japanese Beginners was introduced in Stage 6 in 2007 as a large number of students were seeking enrolment in this course at Open High School. Dance was introduced in Stage 6 as a result of the interest and enthusiasm of students in Stage 5 elective Dance and the refurbishment of facilities.

Student support

Burwood Girls 'High Expectations and Expanding Horizons' approach has focussed on providing support for students as they transition from Year 10 into senior studies. Year 10 Interviews are combined with case management and careers counselling. Prior to submission of subject choices, every Year 10 student is interviewed by a member of the team, consisting of principal, deputy principals, HT welfare, year advisers, careers adviser and school counsellor. Then a case manager is identified to meet the specific needs of students.

Youth Pathways counselling helps build student resilience. A Youth Consultant with the Youth Pathways program has established a strong link with the school over the past two years and counsels a targeted group of at risk students in Years 9-12.

Best practice

The school has the expectation that students will continue with their education until Year 12. Students are not encouraged to leave after Year 10 - no matter how challenging their junior years may have been. Instead, the school recognises ongoing student achievement in many different ways and encourages all students to achieve their best.

Achieving goals of the new school leaving age

'Aiming higher'. The school sets high and clear expectations for 15-19 year olds and supports that with student recognition and awards at events such as assemblies, presentation days and other ceremonies.

The school offers a Gifted and Talented program for students in Years 7 and 8 each year. This early intervention program develops research skills and independent learning skills and has increased the self-esteem and confidence of these students as learners.

'Supporting strongly'. Students are strongly supported in making course and career choices by teachers skilled in understanding options and counselling skills. The careers adviser is a key member of learning support team. Parents are also actively involved in the process.

'Strengthening connections'. The school fosters cohesion within year groups and places a high value on excellent student/teacher relationships.

The students generally have a very strong connection with the school. Students celebrate the 'old girls' who like to visit and reminisce about their own school days. As a single-sex school the staff focus the attention of students on the strength of women, celebrate the successes of women in the community and look to strong female role models for inspiration.



success story

Benefits for the student and school community

In addition to other benefits noted above, the retention rate of students to the end of Year 12 is high and each year the students achieve excellent results in the HSC. Parents support these achievements and the school's approach that underpins them.

Sustainable benefits

Burwood Girls HS has implemented systems for ongoing monitoring and review of student progress. For instance, teachers of Year 11 and 12 are asked to identify students who should be placed on Senior Review in Week 5 of each term. The deputy principals then follow-up with student/ parent meetings, an agreed improvement plan is negotiated and there is a review of progress by the end of the term.

One of the Year 12 students graduated recently with a huge smile on her face and a big sigh of relief from her teachers. The sigh of relief was not because teachers were pleased to see her go; on the contrary, it was because the student had managed to get her HSC above all odds.

The student had enrolled in Year 7 after having experienced disrupted schooling and periods of time in refugee camps. Her parents were educated but forced to find employment in unskilled areas. The student found it difficult to adjust to expectations at home and school and displayed many risk-taking behaviours. Behaviour management strategies were put into place from

Years 7-10, but when she reached Year 11 the school placed the onus on her to determine her destiny.

The school provided support at this key transition stage in the form of funded learning support, assistance with study skills, regular monitoring and parent meetings and appointment of a teacher mentor.

The interventions were a success. She achieved her HSC and is now ready to embark on the next stage of her life. She is a young woman with much more confidence and self-esteem than the girl who arrived in 2004 full of anger and disillusionment.



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How can your best practice assist in the achievement of the goals of the new school leaving age project?

The only kids that I see are falling by the wayside are those that say "I hate school, I want to get out". In the past we might have said, "Okay, we have an exit plan", as we have always developed an exit plan for the students, for example, by bridging the gap so they can go to TAFE or allowing them to do some work experience for a while. But I think we're going to have to formalise things a little bit more in the future. I'm talking about the really at-risk students. It's going to be very hard raising the bar for them, as you can't do anything until you help sort out their personal issues.

What management of the innovation is required to ensure success?

If I go back to and ask how will we be able to assist those students that I feel will be difficult, I use an outside agency, Work Solutions, which is funded by the government. Their person comes in and talks to the girls about how they put together a CV and how you could apply for a job, and she has been very effective with some of our more difficult students. I think I will have to use these outside agencies more often to assist some of our students so they can go into some alternative form of training. These external providers are fulfilling a very important service.

What is a favourite highlight from your story about your innovation?

I'm just so delighted that our girls seem to love coming here and with the numbers who come back and say "Oh, we're so sad that we left school". They haven't forgotten about their school and they're keen to visit and they wave at you in the street afterwards and run up and tell you what they're doing. Teachers love that continuing contact with students.

How has the innovation resulted in benefits for the student and or the school community?

Well obviously, students benefit from coming here because they feel they have achieved success and they feel that their work is meaningful, that their learning's been meaningful and it's a springboard to something else later on.

I think staff feel happy in the sense that they've been able to fulfil a role that they think is important, which is assisting students to achieve their maximum possible potential.

How are you or your staff ensuring the benefits for the students are sustainable?

I think we work well as a team; the team work's evident here. The staff work together extremely well and if there's a student at risk then immediately that student is supported by the welfare team that looks at ways to ensure that there's going to be success. That team work means that the staff are always very positive and they don't bear a grudge if the student is recalcitrant and falls off the rails. The staff say to the student "give it another shot; try".

What are the main factors that have brought about success?

The staff are positive and they're willing to work together. They are trusting of each other and believe that working well as a team is important, as is maintaining the ethos of 'learn as much as you can'. To all be on the same page has been very much part of our mission statement for the last seven years and we thrive on our success.

Recently a science head teacher entered our Year 9 girls into a science competition on astronomy. I said to him that I didn't think our kids knew much about astronomy but he said they were going to have a go. Well, we won the competition. I mean it's about that: it's about being willing to take risks and, with student learning too, that brings dividends.

Our general belief in the school is that the longer you're at school, the greater success you might have in life. You get somewhere with an education. Parents might say it, but we also say it: everyone here at the school feels that you have to work hard to get somewhere.