

Alice Springs High School – Incorporating values into teaching programmes across key learning areas

Objective

To restructure the Year 10 programme at Alice Springs High School to improve attendance and retention choices for students, and make the school a place where students and staff feel comfortable, supported and encouraged to reach their potential. Embedded in this programme are the underlying principles of building and nurturing real relationships, mutual respect, tolerance, acceptance and teamwork.

School profile

Alice Springs High School (ASHS) is one of two public junior secondary high schools in Alice Springs. It caters for students from Years 7–10 and has a small post-compulsory unit. It has a student population of approximately 450 students, 45 per cent of whom are identified as Indigenous. The school has a very transient staff and student population with many of the students from low socioeconomic and single-parent families. Many of the staff at the school are committed to improving the relationships with parents and students as well as student outcomes.

The project itself came from the need to better cater for the needs of students and hence improve the attendance and retention of students in Year 10. Traditionally, students in Year 10 at ASHS have lost interest in their studies and many have failed to complete the year. Staff in the Year 10 area realised a need to totally restructure the year to give students more control, flexibility and choice over their course of study to better suit their needs. This incorporated the teaching and modelling of self-esteem, confidence, stress management, teamwork, cooperation and respect in order to provide an environment for the students that encouraged attendance, full participation and success.

The school structure is one based on sub-schools, with a Foundations sub-school (Year 7) a Middle School sub-school (Years 8 and 9) and a Senior sub-school (Year 10 and Future Directions). Each sub-school is given a considerable amount of autonomy and decision-making ability, and staff are encouraged to try new projects to improve attendance, retention and student outcomes at ASHS.

Although values education is encouraged within the school, it is generally adopted spasmodically. The school is a pilot school for the teaching of MindMatters but, due to staff turnover, it has not taken off so well in the Middle School. All staff at the school have been in-serviced in the Real Justice programme and this is being adopted as our behaviour management policy. In previous years, staff have attempted to implement Pastoral Care classes but because no structured programme existed students and staff did not value this time. However, ongoing programmes, such as Peer Skills, are run at the school successfully and are supported by staff and students.

Definitions and assumptions

The whole restructuring of the Year 10 programme is underpinned by values education. The Year 10 staff acknowledged that it is impossible to teach values education as a stand-alone subject; instead, it needs to be incorporated into the whole approach to schooling. The classroom environment, the team approach by the staff, the Pastoral Care program, the individual programming, the choices given to students and the flexibility of the year are all part of the values approach and project that we have adopted at ASHS.

It was assumed that although many adults see adolescents as having little or no values, the Year 10 staff acknowledged that the students do have very strong values and that it is our responsibility to provide an alternative/non traditional environment where these values are modelled and respected. These values included trust, mateship, mutual respect when appropriate, individuality, acceptance and compassion.

Project

The Year 10 staff recognised that the cohort of students entering Year 10 in 2003 were a disinclined group. They suffered from a high turnover of teachers (many had had five Maths teachers for the year), inconsistency, lack of self-esteem and an attendance of less than 70 per cent for the year. They saw little or no value in education and many were not achieving to their potential. As a result, the need to better cater for the students in order to reverse their negative attitudes was of utmost importance. The key aims were to improve the attendance and retention of students by providing an alternative programme giving students' greater choice and freedom in how and what they learn. The aim was to maintain an attendance above 90 per cent and as close to 100 per cent as possible, given the nature of a transient population.

Activities and methods

Year 10 staff presented a proposal to rearrange the senior school in a way that we felt would better cater for all of the students in our care. We had in the previous years made small changes to the more traditional approach to schooling within our sub-school. It had meant that we all gave up some of the traditional Maths, English, Science and Soc Ed (MESS) time to carry out what we called electives. These electives were subjects that were based on these four core topics.

We proposed to bring the cohort of Year 10s together in what we called a MESS Hall. To create the MESS Hall we required a wall to be knocked down so we would have the physical venue to run the program. The proposal was passed by the School Council as well as management.

Students were surveyed regarding subjects and electives that they would wish to do.

As a result, staff offered electives including:

- Construction
- Music
- Guitar
- Girls' Health
- Forensic Science
- Sport Studies (all boys)
- Hills and Maps
- Catastrophic Events
- Solar Car Challenge
- Stage One Maths
- Drama
- Art
- Cooking and Craft
- Childcare
- Hospitality
- Automotive
- Welding

Students were then required to choose three of these subjects and the timetable was produced around them. This was a huge task, a major part of which was the willingness of staff to give up their release time and be in class every lesson of every day. If teachers are not teaching an elective, they are required to be in the MESS Hall assisting students with their Maths, English, Science and Social Education. In addition, all students are required to attend a Pastoral Care session once a week. These sessions focused on the key values

of stress management, teamwork, making positive choices, meeting with counsellors and career education advisers, and team-building activities, primarily using the MindMatters resource kit.

The activities and resources are very student friendly and are easily adapted for our Indigenous students. Various resources from other kits were also used.

An informal parent night/BBQ was held to explain to parents the non-traditional set-up and the aims of the year, including the values education component. Over 80 per cent of our parents attended, which was remarkable considering the perceived lack of parental support that the school struggles with.

Furthermore, the whole school staff was in-serviced on the concept of the structure of Year 10. We had total support from our parents, School Council, the management of the school and the Curriculum Committee.

Evaluation

The data collected was based on attendance and retention, as well as personal responses by the Year 10 students, who were surveyed on their thoughts about the new set-up.

- This year our Year 10 attendance has been 96 per cent since February. This is a 30 per cent increase on previous years.
- We have retained all our students this year and have gained six who were at other schools in Alice Springs.

Student responses

Ninety-eight per cent of students prefer the new set-up of Year 10 at ASHS. Comments in weekly Pastoral Care journals include:

- "We get so much more help this year compared to any other year."
- "I am finally having a choice in subjects."
- "It's heaps good being all together."
- "The Pastoral Care activities are fun and you learn a lot."
- "I like the team activities that we do, they're fun."
- "We get heaps of help with our work."
- "The teachers are more friendly."
- "The stress stuff was good."
- "It's good that we work in groups and help each other."
- "We can work at our own pace."
- "It's good only having a few teachers because you get to know them better."
- "We have more freedom."

- “I work with people I never had before.”
- “It will help us when we go to uni.”

The one student who responded negatively to the new set-up stated:

- “I prefer being in normal classes like last year.”

It is interesting to note, however, that this student, who is Indigenous, had an attendance last year of 63 per cent and has not missed a day this year, achieving well in all subjects.

Pastoral Care lessons are held every Wednesday afternoon and students are in groups of no more than 15. One week these classes had to be cancelled due to a whole school assembly. The students were very upset, asking if they could miss assembly. This surprised all staff considerably.

Staff are particularly impressed with the programme and have decided to continue and promote this set-up as a way to improve retention and attendance and create a learning environment which reduces bullying, teasing and harassment through a team approach and more individual choice.

We have had two phone interviews with other schools in the Territory keen to adopt a similar approach, and the management team of Nightcliff High School in Darwin have recently visited and observed the Year 10 programme at ASHS to look at implementing a similar set-up. The Principal commented on the way the students were working in teams and groups in a calm quiet way without a staff member standing over them!

The concept of a student-centred approach is now being adopted across the entire school. This is the result of the success of Year 10. While the majority of staff are keen to implement the idea, it has resulted in several staff consulting the union about having no release time.

Parents are positive. Several parents were keen to discuss further how the new set-up developed. A very positive response came from a parent whose son had recently transferred to ASHS from the local Catholic school. The mother said that last year, when the son was in Year 9, it was a struggle to get him to go to school and his reports were disappointing. She said that he now loves school and she has to encourage him to stay in bed until a reasonable hour in the mornings as he is so happy and excited about going to school. (Amazing for a Year 10 student!) She put this down to his being given relative freedom about subject choices and the new team set-up.

Community engagement

There was a variety of community involvement. This included:

- ABC radio interview with leading teachers about how we are tackling the teaching of values in Year 10 at ASHS
- Careers counsellors who visited on Wednesday afternoons to speak to the students about career choices and life pathways
- Visit to the Career Expo to assist students with subject choices and provide options for the future
- Twice-weekly visits by a Registered Nurse who worked with small groups looking at health issues
- Visits by a dietician to speak to students about healthy lifestyles
- Police visits regarding youth issues
- A workshop for Year 10 staff on how to incorporate Loss and Grief into our Pastoral Care program by the Northern Territory MindMatters project officer
- Weekly gym sessions for Girls' Health to promote teamwork and fitness
- CAT's team leader assisting staff with Pastoral Care activities involving making decisions, positive choices and stress management.

Students and staff thoroughly enjoyed working with these people and it enhanced our ability to implement values education in the curriculum.

Reflections and future developments

The Year 10 staff are very pleased with how the students are working as a group and the outcomes that they are achieving. As a result, the project is now running indefinitely and Year 10 will remain as is, including the weekly Pastoral Care sessions. All Year 10 staff are fully supportive of the project and are totally committed to the teamwork approach. Students have also shown a considerable amount of tolerance, respect and support for their peers and this has been a result of the new arrangements.

The Principal has expressed a desire that the whole school adopts the approach to better cater for the student population and to make Pastoral Care lessons more meaningful.

While the staff do see the obvious benefits, several have been unhappy at the prospect of no release time and have since contacted the union. The staff have set aside time to begin to develop the project to incorporate Years 8 and 9.

The Year 10 staff have committed themselves to assist with the Years 8 and 9 staff to help begin the process. We believe that the whole school ethos will change and will become one where tolerance, respect, individuality, team building and a positive self-esteem will be the underlying principles of the school, effectively overcoming many of the behavioural issues the school now faces.

When forming the Pastoral Care groups, students were given total control over forming into four groups. Initially this was successful; however, it quickly became apparent that one group was completely dysfunctional due to the personalities involved and it was not working as a cohesive group. Small changes occurred and now one of the groups consists of only eight students, who are following a more structured format. These students did not cope with the freedom they were given. Major improvements in cooperation and teamwork have been noticed recently.

Finally, while the initial planning and preparation was enormous, with all Year 10 staff giving up at least a week of their holidays to be at school to plan the term, the benefits were enormous. Also the School Council did have some initial concerns regarding the 'perceived' freedom of the students and this was overcome by inviting all to a 'Meet the Teacher Night' where they saw first-hand the set-up and how it functioned.

ASHS is currently a pilot school for MindMatters and Real Justice, and has been involved in implementing a new curriculum and designing a new reporting system that better reflects outcome-based learning. This is all on top of normal class duties and responsibilities. While the Year 10 staff acknowledge it has been hard work, with all preparation now completed after hours, all concede that it is worth it.