



Woodville Primary – connecting with the community

Creating a supportive environment for learning and teaching

Principal of Woodville Primary School (2001-07), Kaye Johnson, knows that many of her 450 children understand what tough times are. She also knows that with the right mix of committed staff, parent support and targeted programs, the school can be the ideal environment to positively change the lives of children and their families.

The 128-year-old school is located in the western suburbs of Adelaide, eight kilometres from the centre of the city, and is surrounded by established residential areas, light industry and the Queen Elizabeth Hospital, a major local employer. Since 1953, the school has also incorporated The Woodville Centre for Hearing Impaired Children. Deaf and hearing-impaired children are fully integrated across classes and have access to the general curriculum and special support as needed.

The national anthem is performed by the whole school in Auslan – the language of the deaf community of Australia - and the school proudly boasts a signing choir that performs at school assemblies, South Australia's School Music Festivals and at events in Adelaide during Deafness Awareness Week.

The local community promotes a rich diversity with students from Aboriginal, Afghani, Polish, Greek, Italian, Indian, Vietnamese and African cultures. One third of the students come from non-English-speaking backgrounds. Some transience occurs within the school population with some students coming from the domestic violence units located nearby. "The Domestic Violence Unit offers safe housing for women and children in very difficult circumstances. The school provides security and a purpose for these children – a respite from having to deal with difficult issues at home," Kaye said.

The school's four values of respect, mutual trust, social cohesion and fairness underpin its key focus of learning and teaching in a safe and supportive environment. These values are further promoted through the R-7 Groups School Action Teams which provide students with opportunities to develop skills that allow them to have a say in their learning and allow the development of strong partnerships between staff, students and each other.

Teaching positive life skills

Kaye and some of the staff were increasingly concerned by the challenges faced by several children. "The staff genuinely care about the children and their wellbeing. We noticed that a number of the kids who have very complex living circumstances weren't managing. Whether it's about getting enough food, or getting up and getting organised for the day – our kids were not dealing with life in positive ways. Some of them hadn't been taught how to do many basic things and we could see that they were spiralling downwards in a way that wasn't productive," Kaye said.

For seven years, the school had been doing "bits and pieces" of work looking at resilience, anti-bullying and increasing resources to enable students to be more engaged with their learning. When Kaye heard about KidsMatter, she saw the program as being an ideal fit for the school.

"We were very keen to deal with prevention – we wanted to teach the kids some special life skills that would enable them to deal with things positively. We wanted to address this as a way of preventing mental illness later in life. We wanted to talk up the importance of learning positive life skills. We were aware of MindMatters which was a mental health program implemented in secondary schools, and we tried to adapt parts of it, but we felt it didn't hit the mark for primary schools. When we heard about KidsMatter, we thought it offered a wonderful opportunity to bring all the bits together in a coordinated way," Kaye said.

Woodville Primary School had already instigated a number of programs in 2006 that will now be integrated into and complemented by KidsMatter. "One of our school values is social cohesion and to increase this across the school, students organise and lead lunchtime activities for each other. The activities may include a disco or Woodville Idol, for example.

“We also have Kids Connect groups where all the kids across all the ages and classes are divided into new groups. Our premise is that if you get to know people, you will get to understand them, and if you get to understand them, you won’t be scared of them or be tempted to harass them. Building connections across the school has been successful. An example of this is when one of our reception classes and a first year class got up and sang at assembly – the rest of the school looked at them with so much love. It was lovely. It has really increased a sense of belonging across the school,” Kaye said.

KidsMatter has added value to our school community

Kaye believes KidsMatter has extended and brought together under the one umbrella all the work being done at the school around wellbeing, empowerment and engagement. “KidsMatter has really added value to our school community – we have developed a shared language and understanding across the school,” Kaye added.

Each year, the school has a kids’ conference where the students are divided into small groups with a theme and a focus. This year the conference was called “KidsMatter: So have fun and work together.”

Recognising that one of the key protective factors for mental health is having a sense of belonging, last year the school ran a “Connecting with Community” project. The project aimed to increase the children’s understanding of belonging; that they belonged to the school and the school belonged to the wider community. The groups chose a community organisation and formed a relationship with it. It was an ideal opportunity for the kids to come up with creative ideas around connection, Kaye said. “One group learnt all about the Animal Welfare League and got a guest speaker to come along and bring a dog. Another group made scones for a nursing home and took them over for afternoon tea.”

South Australian KidsMatter Project Officer, Lana Jankoviak, has been a vital link to the school’s implementation of KidsMatter and said working with Woodville is extremely fulfilling. “Woodville Primary has been engaging, enthusiastic and proactive from the onset. They have been willing to integrate what they have already been developing and working on into the KidsMatter framework. They have always ensured that they have maintained the integrity of the KidsMatter initiative whilst working within the context of their own school community,” Lana said.

Kids’ mental health is schools’ business

Participating in a pilot program carries responsibilities and expectations from all parties concerned. Kaye said the school is mindful of this and is committed to sharing its learning. “Being a pilot school is a great privilege and opportunity, but it also means timelines are required to be met in order to provide feedback. Unfortunately, this doesn’t allow us to be as reflective as we would normally like with a program of this importance and size. We would ideally like to have some professional development, reflect on it, put bits into practice, talk about it and then refine it.”

While this reflective process is an integral part of KidsMatter implementation, the need to start work on all four components can feel a bit daunting. Some key discoveries for the school so far, according to Kaye, are that because KidsMatter is so big and so important, schools need to go slowly to do it well. She suggests that once schools make the commitment to implement the program, they put all their energy into it. “You need a whole-of-staff commitment. You need people who are genuinely caring about kids’ wellbeing and their learning. You need everyone from the student support officers through to the grounds person to have a genuine belief that kids’ mental health is schools’ business,” Kaye added.



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