



Strengthening a community from the inside out

A school in need

In 2006, Cairns West State School hit a real low spot.

“There had been a big change-over of staff, teachers were feeling stressed and tired, the kids were generally unsettled, and there were several aggressive behavioural incidences that teachers were beginning to get worried about,” Guidance Officer Linda Shannon explained.

Low staff morale and a lack of energy meant that going that extra mile to engage the community seemed daunting. Teachers were beginning to forget why they had wanted to be teachers in the first place. “There were so many issues that were obviously socially and emotionally based – we just knew we had to find something to help us. We were basically open to anything that would assist us in addressing those issues,” Linda added.

With a school community from various socio-economic backgrounds, many of the 500-plus children live in areas of high public housing. A large percentage comes from families which speak a first language other than English. Depending on the time of the year, the school estimates that 65-75% of students are from local Indigenous families and the Torres Strait Islands. Other cultural groups represented include families from Papua New Guinea, the Cook Islands, newly-arrived African refugees and local non-Indigenous families.

Thinking outside the box

The KidsMatter philosophy instantly appealed to the school. Becoming a KidsMatter school in 2007 provided Cairns West with a framework which has reinvigorated the school and enabled it to address many areas of key concern. “KidsMatter brought us hope that things were going to get better. It has really helped us to understand how essential social and emotional learning is to the mental health and wellbeing of children. We cannot ignore that social and emotional learning has to be core business for us now,” Head of Curriculum, Matt Thompson said.

Many of the families face daily challenges associated with poor or transient living conditions, poverty and low levels of education. Many of the students have fluctuating hearing levels due to recurrent ear infections. The school is also mindful that circumstances at home can sometimes impact on a child’s behaviour at school and on their social wellbeing. Implementing KidsMatter has enabled the school to explore many of these concerns more deeply and work closer with the community to look at more creative solutions. “The social and emotional learning component has enabled us to acknowledge the issues in these areas and work out what we can do about them. We have tried to empower teachers to see that anything is possible. We say ‘Come to us with an idea and we will see what we can do – think outside the box! This is a unique school and we are encouraging teachers to think differently about solutions,” Matt said.

The school’s implementation of KidsMatter has been aided and complemented by the appointment of a new Principal, Michael Hansen, who has strong experience working with Indigenous communities. His inclusive ‘parallel’ style of management has continued the improvements made in staff morale and programs which partner with the local community.

Bringing culture and community into the classroom

Today, the school’s programs and activities are a reflection of a new-found confidence and a staff working hard to engage and welcome the parent community. The school recognises that the school can be a daunting place for many parents. This can be due to the parents’ own school experiences as well as cultural and language differences. “We are making an extra effort to welcome parents and carers into the school. These actions have come directly out of our planning processes for KidsMatter Components 1 and 2. We now understand the importance of little things like meeting and greeting people when they come to the school,” Matt said.

A big breakfast for parents and children is now held on the first Friday of every term. A recent breakfast held to promote KidsMatter saw nearly 200 parents attend. A KidsMatter morning tea was also held for mums. Regular information on parenting is now included in the school newsletter.

Community Participation Officer Annie Wolf has also played a critical role in forging new relationships between parents and the school. For instance, the school had not held a fete for eight years; last year it took the leap and, led by Annie, organised a Spring Fair that was a fantastic community success. The school also celebrated and recognised Mabo Day with colourful cultural displays and activities that included parents who sang songs and others who showed how to strip and weave coconut fibre. "It was a wonderful day – it showed us that we can actually celebrate who we are and that who we are is really good!" Annie said.

In the future, the school plans to look at the Parents as First Teachers program – a community responsive program which looks to the community to find out what they think they need to support their families. Annie said that through this program the school will reinforce how important the role of a parent is in the life of a child and the difference a parent can make. Feedback suggests that Cairns West's acknowledgement of the value of their parent community is having an effect. The most recent school opinion survey reported that 100% of parents who responded said that they felt welcome at the school.

There is also plenty of action around increasing the children's social and emotional learning. The You Can Do It program, which was already utilised by the school, has been revitalised with the five keys creatively displayed around the school and regularly reinforced.

The school has also adopted innovative behaviour management and support strategies which includes the Talk Sense to Yourself program and the recruitment of a behaviour management teacher aide and a chaplain. The Talk Sense to Yourself program is an intensive program that provides students with an array of strategies to help them when they find themselves in a negative or dangerous situation. The program is an enormous success largely due to the fact that it is implemented by a much-loved community elder, Jackie Backhouse. "Jackie is a Torres Strait Islander grandmother who has a lot of family connections with the kids. If we think someone needs some extra support or nurturing, we take them to her. She gives them a real hug! She is one of the extra support services we have for kids with special issues. She spreads good news throughout the community and she also feels valued as many people go to her for comfort and advice," said Matt.

The school also employs case conferencing to help address any concerns that they may have with a child. An informal meeting is called between the parents, Guidance Officer Linda and a representative from the Flexible Learning Centre, and then strategies are thrashed out together in an informal "yarn" like way – a process the parents are very comfortable with. A referral process for early intervention has also been developed; teachers now feel more confident with their skills and ability to identify students who may need some extra support.

KidsMatter is embedded in our school

KidsMatter has provided the school with the framework it desperately needed. It is now so embedded in the business of the school that a recent triennial review identified KidsMatter as one of four key areas to be developed alongside literacy, language and maths. "There is such a better feeling in the school now. Teachers are more understanding of the kids' needs. But I think the biggest change has been the relationship between the teachers and the children – there is a genuine belief that we can make a difference in these children's lives and that is very powerful," Matt said.



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