Lethbridge Primary School - Bridge-building with KidsMatter

Context
News of the success of the KidsMatter Primary pilot across Australian schools was one reason for introducing the initiative at Lethbridge. The Principal believed that: *it sat comfortably with values about education that focus on the importance of building a safe learning environment for students.*

Maree Walker took up the role of Principal in January 2008 as plans for rebuilding and relocating Lethbridge Primary School, established in 1874, commenced.

When the school reopened on a new site in November 2010, the learning environment included open classroom spaces designed for flexible, collaborative approaches to teaching and learning.

The spaces were bright and inviting; however, students and parents expressed concern about the open spaces inside and unfinished play spaces outside.

They were not comfortable with this unfamiliar environment and the major change this represented for them. There was a sense of loss and disconnection.

Acknowledging and facing challenges
After eight months in the new school, there was an urgent need to acknowledge the reality of what students and parents felt about their new school.

Starting with KidsMatter
The KidsMatter framework became the foundation for a period of renewal. Maree formed the Action Team with a teacher and two School Council parent members. The two parents were released from their employment to attend training for one day. The training provided the Team with time to review what had happened and articulate what they wanted for the children and families within the school and the rural community of Lethbridge. The Team could focus on what was important to promote and celebrate about the

“... We knew we had to focus on the wellbeing and the welfare of students, families and staff. It seemed the perfect time to acknowledge and face the challenges of the first three terms in our new school, and rebuild and re-energise staff. This was an opportunity for shared reflection, professional learning and re-engaging with the community.”

Maree Walker, Principal

“... I was really impressed by the rich body of research available and the credibility of the materials provided in the training. It meant that we could feel confident about introducing KidsMatter with its focus on mental health and wellbeing. The two parent representatives understood the wellbeing language because they had been a part of the training, and we could then use this language consistently across the school.”

Maree Walker, Principal
school culture.

**Taking steps with Component 1**

After Component 1 training, the Action Team planned to introduce KidsMatter in 2012.

At that stage it was critical to put energy into a positive school community, and as Maree said: *we had to do something differently from what we had been doing.* The question asked at the training, *‘who don’t we see at school?’* motivated the staff to find different ways to connect to families.

**Linking the school to the community**

The Action Team coordinated a Wellbeing Expo in March 2012. The two parent representatives invited a wide representation of community groups. There was a generous response from agencies and sporting groups. The local Shire grant of $500.00 paid for the hire of the Barwon Health Street Surfer Bus which provided activities such as video games for youth.

Community groups including karate, swimming, cricket, bowls, football, fitness and yoga were represented. Families learned about the range of services in the local area. KidsMatter badges and wristbands were distributed widely, and the promotion of mental health featured at the Expo. Tea and coffee was available and children, parents, staff and community groups mingled and relaxed in the open space learning street.

> ... When we came to look at Component 2, there was a strong sense that we were ready for it. We had the experience of sharing a common language about student and community wellbeing, and we already had a social emotional learning program, PATHS(R) (Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies) program. However, the training provided the mechanism for understanding decisions and processes about promoting mental health at our school.

Maree Walker, Principal

**Creating new traditions**

The school identified new traditions for involving the community and bringing families into the learning spaces. Parents attend an end of term assembly that celebrates students’ achievements followed by open classrooms before dismissal.

A mid-term breakfast is hosted by the school in the multi-purpose room, and parents and pre-schoolers are encouraged to stay for breakfast.

An idea that was trialled has been ‘ICT for parents’ hosted in the last hour of school on Friday afternoon. Some parents have participated in ‘brag book’ afternoons working alongside students with scrapbooking projects.

Others are involved in the Junior Solar Boat Challenge and continue to assist students with practical tasks and transport after five years of successful involvement.

A large white conference table provides a comfortable meeting place for conversations between children and teachers, children and parents and children and children.

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**Lethbridge Primary School**

**Victoria**

- Is in a rural township 75 kms south west of Melbourne, 32 kms from Geelong
- Was established in 1874
- Has the motto Lethbridge Primary School: Community of Learners
- Has an enrolment of 101 students
- Participates in Victorian Junior Solar Boat Challenges (2008-2012) and has competed nationally: 2008 (Hobart), 2010 (Fremantle) and 2011 (Hobart).

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