Cherrybrook Public School - making belonging visible

KidsMatter on the Internet

When teachers at Cherrybrook Public School expressed concerns about the increasing number of students experiencing anxiety, Beth Chant, a teacher at the school, found her way to the KidsMatter website and has been passionate about the initiative ever since.

She quickly realised that it was consistent with the school’s approach to building a positive learning environment for each student. She saw it would also support the work already being done by the school’s Learning Support team. With Beth’s initiative and drive, the school began its journey with KidsMatter in 2011.

Addressing issues for students

KidsMatter Primary has raised awareness amongst staff about the connections between mental health and learning for students in the classroom. It has provided a wider perspective of the issues that students experience which are addressed by the Learning Support Team.

The focus of this team is to provide support for students to enable them to achieve success in their learning. The Learning Support Team meets once a week and considers the type of assistance which could be provided to make it possible for individual students to learn with confidence.

First steps with KidsMatter

Staff at Cherrybrook participated in two one-hour sessions on the pupil-free days at the end of Term 4 in 2011, and completed Component 1 at the beginning of 2012. Learning about perspectives on emotional health and wellbeing sparked a strong interest among staff.

They were very interested in the statistics about mental health, and there was a strong focus on how to build a sense of belonging in the school. Staff found the information and strategies very useful – and even ‘inspiring’ in terms of how to assist students in the classroom. Some staff members described the feeling of being empowered when they understood how mental health affects student behaviour and their capacity to learn.

Belonging in the community

Through Component 1 activities, the staff developed their understanding of how students could feel more connected in the school community. They became more familiar with the vocabulary of wellbeing and ideas about ‘protective factors’. As Dianne Basso, Acting Coordinator of KidsMatter, acknowledged, they realised that children who feel that they belong, would feel more connected to the life of the school and

Children who feel they belong at school are happier and more relaxed. A student’s sense of belonging at school is a protective factor for good mental health.

-Dianne Basso, Acting Coordinator, KidsMatter Primary
what they do as students. Research resources on the KidsMatter website illustrate that a sense of belonging and connection at school are key protective factors for children to promote mental health and wellbeing, as well as academic achievement.

The school was particularly interested in the research that shows that students who experience a sense of belonging and connectedness to school are more resilient and less likely to develop mental health problems.

A strategy for building community
The Action Team planned a simple strategy to build a sense of community in Component 1 activities for staff at the beginning of the school year in 2012. Teachers discussed with students at each year level, ideas about the uniqueness of every person, differences between individuals and how to belong in groups. A linked string of paper doll figures was given to each class. Every child enjoyed the opportunity to be creative and used bright colours to decorate an image of themselves. When classes finished their dolls, figures were joined as one continuous string of images and fixed around the walls of the school hall.

Every time people go into the hall they are reminded that Cherrybrook Public School is a community made up of individuals.

As teachers, we want the best for our students at Cherrybrook. We do not want to leave any stone unturned in our goal to assist every student to feel that they belong in our school and support every student in their learning.

Dianne Basso, Acting Coordinator, KidsMatter Primary

Take it all on board!
As a school with a relatively new commitment to KidsMatter Primary, Cherrybrook teachers have some advice for other schools beginning the implementation processes.

They say it is a ‘great initiative’, and it is important to take the time to introduce staff to the components slowly.

They think schools should take it all on board, and encourage staff to really understand the different aspects of the KidsMatter framework before moving onto the next component.

Leaving no stone unturned
The school is taking initiatives to support the wellbeing of students in new and different ways. The newsletter will have a regular feature, KidsMatter at Cherrybrook. A Physical Education program highlights resilience in students, and the Parents and Citizens’ Committee has been introduced to KidsMatter Primary.

Cherrybrook Public School:
New South Wales
- Is 27 kms north west of the Sydney CBD
- Has an enrolment of 700 students
- Is celebrating 40 years of schooling in 2012
- Promotes its vision: To prepare our students for the whole of life