Balwyn High School

Balwyn High School negotiated review is an excellent example of a process that results in a significant enhancement of the improvement agenda. Strengths included:

- Expert critical friends with a high level of objectivity, well suited to the review purpose
- Extensive use of data including school based data sets, community consultation and classroom observations all focussed on the review purpose
- The clarity of the review report findings that link data analysis to specific aspects and actions for improvement.

School context

Balwyn High School, a large secondary school east of Melbourne, is recognised for the strong learning outcomes of its low SFO student cohort.

Review focus

The purpose was three fold: to recognise the excellent aspects of the school; to develop a shared view of effective practice in teaching and wellbeing; to meet the needs of the many able students. Methodology was built around focus group meetings with the full range of stakeholders. The process culminated in a rigorous interrogation of all data at an evaluation and planning day.

Highlights of the review process

- Widespread community ownership at the data gathering stage with selective use of expertise to formulate recommendations: an appropriate use of personnel in such a large school.
- The work of the critical friends who injected a level of challenge into their work with the school.
- A dynamic, robust and genuine review process that delivered some strong messages about core teaching and learning practice and very specific recommendations to promote improvement.
Negotiated School Review Report

Prepared for

BALWYN HIGH SCHOOL
EASTERN METROPOLITAN REGION
School Workforce Reform and School Improvement Division
Department of Education & Early Childhood Development
2009

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- Date of this Report (final version) 6 October 2009
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1.0 Executive Summary

This report contains findings and recommendations to supplement the Balwyn High School Self-Evaluation and to assist with the development of Balwyn’s next Strategic Plan. The findings and recommendations are based on both an analysis of existing data and information acquired during meetings with selected members of the Balwyn High School community. Overall, the findings are fairly consistent with those of the Balwyn Self-Assessment, however, some areas of concern were identified and a number of recommendations are made with a view to addressing these concerns.

2.0 Aim/Purpose

The purpose of this report is to provide information to supplement the 2006-2009 Self-Evaluation undertaken by Balwyn High School (BHS). By combining our expertise in student learning and well-being we undertook an evaluation of existing data and integrated this with information gathered from meeting with key members of the BHS community. The overall aim of the process was to provide feedback to BHS that will help guide their directions for the development of a new strategic plan.

3.0 Methodology

The approach that we adopted in our role as critical friends was twofold. Firstly, we undertook an extensive review of the available data from the last four years. This included MYRAD data for Year 7, 8 and 9 students; the Attitudes to Schooling Survey, Staff Opinion Survey and Parent Opinion Survey; Negotiated Review feedback from students, parents and staff; teacher judgements against VELS; Years 7 and 9 NAPLAN results; Apparent and Real Retention rates; Exit Destination data; Core School Performance Indicators; and ENTER scores distribution. We also reviewed the 2006-2009 Annual Reports to the School Community; the 2008 School Level Report; the 2006-2009 School Strategic Plan; and the 2006-2009 School Self-Evaluation. Secondly, we spent a full day in the school meeting with a range of staff and students as well as touring the school, observing classroom practice and visiting key areas of the school including the Xplore and Music Centres. The meetings involved discussions with a selection of students from each Year level; staff from a range of disciplines at each Year level; the Student Services Team; and representatives from Xplore, ‘High Resolves’ and the Tutorial Program. This report presents a summary of our integrated findings from the data analysis and the anecdotal information gathered from our meetings.

4.0 Findings

“A school teaches in three ways: By what it teaches, by how it teaches and by the kind of place it is.” (BHS 2008 Annual Report to the School Community)
Balwyn High School is a high achieving school, which is blessed with so many opportunities. It is a good school and is well placed on its journey to becoming a great school! Overall, our findings are fairly consistent with those of the Balwyn Self-Assessment. In particular, our investigation supports the success and importance of the Xplore program, the recognition of the need for greater consistency in teacher practice and the need to focus on better preparing students in Year 10 for the VCE years. In addition, we acknowledge that the majority of the data related to BHS is exceptional and that the majority of the targets set in the 2006-2009 Strategic Plan were met. Below are our findings based on both the examination of the existing data and our interpretation of the information gathered from meeting with various members of the Balwyn High School community.

1. The Balwyn High School review aims to meet the needs of the significant numbers of highly able students in the school. “Academic rigour remains an ongoing priority”. This appears to be quite effective at some Year levels but not others, with some inconsistencies across all Year levels:

a. One teacher’s comments: “There is a need to look at the catering for Gifted and Talented. We need to lift everyone up. The task determines the performance and that it is the responsibility of all teachers to liaise with other teachers.”

b. Other teachers’ comments:

- “Allow for individual differences and differentiation in learning.”
- “Need for consistent final assessment of students but it is a lottery to make it consistent in a large faculty and dealing with talented students.”
- “Balwyn has an amazing cohort of staff, but equally there are a lot of staff who could do with PD classes within the school.”

c. The Tutorial program is a great concept, but many students said that a lot of staff used this time to do extra ‘subject’ work. As such, the program lacks cohesion and a clear purpose. Thus, there is a need for a structured Student Wellbeing and Personal Development curriculum for staff, which they can implement during Tutorial times. To what extent could the Student Services Team be utilised to assist with the development and support of this curriculum?

d. Overall, students were extremely positive in their comments regarding BHS and what constitutes a good school e.g. Xplore was consistently seen as one of the best experiences they have had.

e. However, there was some discussion across the Year levels that centred on what constituted good teaching and learning, and in turn, affected academic rigour e.g:

- Repetition in work between Year levels;
- Teachers not liaising with each other across Year levels;
• Some teachers were regarded as passionate and interacted and engaged with students, other teachers were reported as being “dodgy- those who write and write and don’t teach”.

f. Are the Year 10 extension offerings limited to doing VCE Units 1 & 2 in Year 10? Is this really extension or dragging out VCE for 3 years?

g. Students will rise to the level of expectation placed upon them: BHS has a high proportion of academically able students and needs to raise the bar in terms of its teaching and learning strategies. This discussion also needs to include the students seeking alternative pathways such as VET/VCAL. The school cannot be all things to all students and trying to do so stretches resources and skills, which adversely can affect all students.

2. The BHS review also aims to maximise student outcomes by developing programs that enhance student engagement and wellbeing. How can the school balance this aim against the first one? What is being done for the ‘middling’ students for whom the potential impact of ‘value add’ is probably greater than for the highly able?

a. The Years 7 & 8 Curriculum Review has made some inroads into integrating the curriculum and increasing the engagement of students. There was agreement that more needed to be done in this area, especially with more liaising between Year 7 and Year 8 staff e.g:

• A united approach between English and Maths teachers is beginning;
• The need of the school to network with local primary schools;
• Need to rethink our professional development strategy.

b. It was also noted that the vision for the Middle School should include a coherent/consistent journey for students to follow, so that:

• Throughout the day curriculum makes sense;
• Throughout the year students feel they are progressing;
• Need to reinvigorate the program and get staff to see things from the students’ perspectives;
• It’s a big school and there is a need to work out programs/systems to assist staff to cater for individual student needs

c. The Year 8 Curriculum Task Force also mentioned the High Resolves Initiative, to help Year 8 students develop a sense of self and purpose. Whilst they were positive about the program there was a feeling that that some students should be in an extension program, but missed out on the opportunity as there was no consistent structure in place for this to happen.
d. The Year 9 Xplore program was, by far, the most successful program in the school. Students from Years 9-12 all commented on how positive they felt about Xplore. Discussion was raised however, that the concepts/philosophies/mindset of Xplore did not carry over to their other subjects and existed in isolation to the rest of their schooling at BHS:

- The Years 10-12 students who completed Xplore in their Year 9 studies, mentioned that the Xplore concept would be useful for students in the senior school.

- How could Xplore connect to or flow on towards Year 10 experiences?

e. On the other hand, the sense of lack of consistency and development between Year levels was also mentioned by Year 11 students:

- Lack of preparation for realities of Year 11 eg: students struggle with heavy workload for first few months.

- The jump to Year 11 is seen as a major problem by students.

2. The school’s self-assessment report states that “there is a recognition that we need to reach agreement on what constitutes powerful learning in every classroom.” Our discussions with the students from the various Year levels clearly indicated that for them, a good classroom and hence, good learning outcomes, were the product of having a “terrific teacher”. What makes a terrific teacher? “Teachers who actually work with the class; actually care and make sure you understand; some teachers explain things clearly; those who help each student with difficulties; those who provide students with extension work” (Year 8 students)

   a. Inconsistencies in Year 12 results also indicate that there needs to be a review of teaching and learning strategies, not just at Year 12, but working from the bottom up. School improvement needs to start at Year 7.

   b. Teachers teach students first and subjects second!

   c. Retention rates will also improve with greater engagement of students in the middle years and greater opportunities for able and gifted students.

5.0 Conclusions and recommendations

BHS is in a prime position to build on the existing teaching and learning, and welfare structures. There is a strong sense of pride throughout the school, along with a solid foundation in terms of policies and practices, upon which to move forward – both staff and students acknowledge, however, that there are better and improved ways of doing things. We were very impressed with the calibre of students we met on the Review Day. They were articulate and well-rounded individuals who represented the school with dignity and pride. In all respects, these students embodied the very essence of what BHS is all about. It is obvious that there has been a
significant cultural change at BHS in the last few years and we support the ongoing efforts of the school to focus on promoting a culture of continuous improvement. We believe that a united and flexible Executive Team, with the ‘big picture’ in mind, is important in achieving this goal. In addition, maximising the Balwyn workforce through continued staff development is critical - particularly in the areas of teacher practice, engagement and building positive relationships.

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<th>RECOMMENDATION</th>
<th>STRATEGY</th>
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| INTEGRATED MIDDLE SCHOOL: YEARS 7-9 Vertical Curriculum and Welfare structure | 1. Key staff as tutors and teachers.  
2. Limit the number of staff who teach in the Middle School.  
3. More PD of staff required, in terms of being tutors and developing the expertise required in teaching middle school students.  
4. Development of an integrated curriculum which enables sound teaching and learning concepts (such as in Xplore) to be carried across subject areas – for students to make sense of what they are learning.  
5. Development of staff interaction in planning and delivery of curriculum. The School Self-Evaluation document p13 dot point 2 would tend to indicate possible staff resentment. “Enhancing the Xplore Program by facilitating teacher commitment and connectedness to the program and developing more responsibility to the classroom teachers for the programs in Xplore.”  
6. Development of individual learning programs, rather than just ‘extension’ and having students do more chapters of the text book. | 2-3 Year plan |
| INTEGRATED SENIOR SCHOOL: YEARS 10-12 Vertical welfare structure | 1. Incorporate a more rigorous Year 10 program, with introduction of more VCE units for study (ideally a significant number take more than one pair of units at this level).  
2. This enables more students at Year 11 to take one or more Unit 3/4 sequences, thus giving most students the opportunity to access the maximum allowable 6 subjects to contribute to their ENTER.  
3. Also more students would have room in their course for an enhancement subject, which some students are already undertaking – a distinct advantage to their course. | 3 Year plan |
ENTER.

4. By increasing ENTERs through these means the academic credentials of the school are increased, thus allowing students/parents to feel comfortable in staying at their "local" school rather than seeking out other opportunities such as the Selective Schools.

5. Increased implementation of these processes in the Senior School can provide good modelling for students in the Middle School, thus boosting academic aims.

6. To address any issues with VCE Unit 3/4 performance, the school could look at performance of each class against predictors such as GAT scores and state wide performance.

7. Teachers of Units 3/4 could be asked at the beginning of the year to evaluate their class performance in the previous year and suggest strategies they would undertake both within their class and across their subject area to assist students to improve their performance.

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<th>HEADSTART PROGRAM (HSP)</th>
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<td>Senior School - for students entering years 10-12.</td>
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| 1. | Introduce the new year’s academic program in the last 3-4 weeks at end of school year. |
| 2. | Students physically and nominally, move into their new Year levels and begin work. |
| 3. | Distinct advantage for students in no time wastage at the start of the new academic year after they return from holidays. |
| 4. | Begin structured work that will lay foundations for following year. Very successful method of providing a value-add for students and raising the bar in terms of expectations and outcomes. |
| 5. | This will take a few years to become part of the psyche of the school, and its success will depend on the commitment of staff. Issues: extra energy and preparation required by staff, rather than down-time at end of the year. |

- 4 Year plan
- Build on the newly introduced Orientation program, that will commence for students entering Year 10 this year.