Case Study – Dallas Primary School & Kindergarten

Background

Dallas Primary School & Kindergarten is located in Melbourne’s northern metropolitan region. The school provides an early childhood to year 6 setting. This includes playgroups, 3 and 4 year old kindergarten. The kindergarten is one of the first in Victoria to be established and managed by the School Council.

Situation

The majority of students at the school (80%) are from language backgrounds other than English (LBOTE). Many of their parents have had poor experiences of education or have little or no experience of formal schooling.

The school staff recognised the importance of addressing these issues as well as the social, academic, health and emotional needs of their students to improve student learning outcomes. In particular, the school wanted to instil the philosophy: “No matter what age or nationality you are, everyone has the right and the opportunity to learn and not feel isolated in their community”.

What did you do?

Stemming from the school principal’s involvement in the Best Start program in 2004, the school was innovative in the establishment of the Dallas Community Hub. The Hub acts as the link and bridge between the community and the school and is the cornerstone of family engagement at the school.

The goal of the Hub is to empower community members and provide them with information, services and training. The Hub provides a place for families where they and their children can feel safe. The Hub provides extensive early years support and has recently begun to offer adult education courses. The aim is to create lifelong learners in both families and students at the school.

The Hub creates a platform for community groups to deliver services to school students and their families. For example, a speech pathologist is employed by the school two days a week for the early years students. Services including access to Allied health professionals are also available through the Hub, as well as programs such as ‘Smiles for Miles’.

Other features of the Hub include:

- Strong links to early childhood services (onsite and externally). A key focus since its inception has been the understanding that the early years are crucial and that support, if provided prior to school entry, will have long-term positive benefit to children and their families
- a community coordinator who is employed two days a week, mainly for outreach
- a community hub manager who is employed full time to run the Hub
- an early years manager who is employed part-time to facilitate coordination of pre-school learning and development and transition to school)

Apart from the Hub, the school has a number of programs designed to improve student learning outcomes, including peer mediation programs, student leaderships, performing arts programs, multi-literacy projects and outdoor sport and education programs.
Finally, teachers assist in after school programs and work with the families to utilise those programs. This is seen as part of building a relationship of trust between school staff and families.

Results
The project has been successfully integrated into the community. Many complementary services have now been put together to create a holistic approach to family wellbeing and student learning. A strong focus on the early years has also meant that issues can be addressed earlier on and do not compound as the child gets older and enters school.

As a result of the Community Hub, families are far more aware of school governance, although they are still “a little bit nervous” about joining the school council. They are now much more likely to participate in school activities, such as filling in parent/family surveys.

The school continues to expand and prioritise its family engagement strategies to ensure they become fully inclusive. One example of this is the development of active parents clubs at the school for families from LBOTE (predominantly Turkish and Arabic). Fathers are also encouraged to join school activities such as attending swimming or cooking classes, or participating in the running of the school’s Community Market.

The school community has learnt to work together and to identify what works best for their school and students. They have realised through experience that when families raise their learning expectations of themselves, families develop higher aspirations for their children’s learning as well. A long process of opening the school up to families has been instrumental in convincing families that “it’s ok to come to school”. From small beginnings, strong relationships have been forged between the school and families.