Case Study – Sunshine Primary School

Background
Sunshine Primary School is a small urban primary school with 280 students and a growing number of enrolments. Sunshine Primary School has a high percentage of students who speak English as their second language and a large proportion of families receiving the Education Maintenance Allowance. The school has many students from a variety of Language Background Other Than English (LBOTE) communities.

Situation
Sunshine Primary School started with the belief that ‘it takes a village to raise a child’, however their community was disjointed and not orientated around children and their learning. There were a few pockets of parent support based around traditional activities of parent volunteer support such as parents’ club, listening to reading and working bees.

A lot of the feedback to the school was negative and was usually based on rumours. While this dominant, negative view was held by a few, it was the only message being heard or reinforced. There was a need for all family groups to be given a voice and to be able to be a part of their children’s learning. The school wanted to ‘open up the doors’ and develop effective, transparent and appropriate channels of communication and to build trust amongst staff and families so that they could work together to solve issues as they arose.

Sunshine Primary School also wanted to create a more positive view of the school among families and address family issues of concern. The hardest groups for the school to effectively connect to and engage with were the LBOTE communities where the traditional means of communicating – such as letters and phone calls - clearly weren’t working.

There was also a need for the children and their families to see themselves as an important part of a wider community and for families to believe they were able to effectively work towards improving the learning for their children.

What did you do?
The school’s major aim was to widen the input from all families so that they could see themselves as important partners in educating their children. The school looked at developing many different ways of connecting with families. The initial concern was to stop the negative belief that it was just a few families that wanted to participate: that ‘no other families want to help’, or that ‘parents who don’t come into the school don’t care about their child’s learning’. The school approached this in a number of ways.

Firstly, the school worked with agencies in the broader community to provide support in the forging of links with other community groups and agencies. For example, a multicultural aid who spoke three different Asian languages was employed. More family and teacher forums and lunches were held. These initiatives helped to create better links with LBOTE families and other communities.

There was a lack of connection across the school between the different cultural groups, mainly due to an ignorance of each other’s culture, so the school worked with the Migrant Resource Centre to run a Sudanese women’s group. The group undertook English lessons, cooking and craft and shared their music, food and dance with the school classes.

The school also worked with The Smith Family to run parenting forums and provide computers for every child, and on Communities for Children projects. MacKillop Family Services ran a multicultural playgroup and the school joined with Ardoch to bring volunteers into the classroom and to link their students with corporations to be literary buddies. Links were also made with the local university which runs a ‘kinda kinda’ program.
The teachers and students also ran ‘hands on’ family nights around science and maths and families were invited to come along and participate.

Importantly, Sunshine Primary School started to celebrate everything to do with life: food, family and fun. This enabled the community to make links through social and learning activities. For instance, during Chinese/Vietnamese New Year celebrations the school forged links with the local temple and were able to obtain its very own dragons which the children named. The school now celebrates Easter, Christmas, Autumn Festival and Ramadan. Students and families learn together and enjoy each other’s traditions.

Finally, Sunshine Primary School took steps to address the negative perceptions undermining the school that some families had no matter how many positive things were initiated by the school. So, to encourage more family feedback and to garner feedback from a broader group of families, the school leadership team decided to provide more opportunities for input through developing family forums and spot surveys. A consultant supported them in running forums where questions were asked such as: What is a positive about the school? If you could change one thing what would it be? Are there any rumours you would like addressed?

This initiative provided a break-through for both families and staff. It facilitated change to a more positive dialogue for all parties to then be able to discuss concerns and worries. Another idea to gain new perspectives was to ask staff, students and families to take five photos of the things they liked and then five of what they didn’t like. These were grouped and put up on display at the school picnic. Families then ‘hot dotted’ the most important issue to deal with first. The easiest one to fix first was the oval and the school was able to put before and after photos in the newsletter.

The other major issue was the canteen and lack of healthy food. This was used as an opportunity to develop a working party of teachers and families, chaired by and reporting to School Council which produced an outstanding healthy menu, and a whole school policy on healthy eating.

The School Council continues to run focus groups and working parties as different needs arise. They have found that different families join in as it relates to their interest area.

Results
The main beneficiaries of the changes are the children. When the children feel that they are valued and that their family is valued and understood, the family effort that goes into being involved in, or talking about learning, doubles.

Communication doors were opened and a wide range of different ways for families and teachers to connect, were introduced. When the Sudanese children saw their mums in the school learning and being welcomed, all that could be seen were great big grins. One little girl said really proudly “I know what she is saying, it is the same as me.” And with the students so excited and really engaged, the messages to come along to school were getting home.

With the cultural activities, different groups came along to help and the sense of fun and of sharing of food connected many without the barriers of words. The relationship between staff and families has developed in a much more relaxed and friendly way so that when there are issues, there is now a basis of trust and mutual respect upon which to begin the required conversations. The issues and negativity have decreased so that more time is now spent on teaching and learning, rather than putting out spot fires or correcting rumours. Families now see that they have a voice and that they now trust that they can work with the school to resolve any issues.