Promoting a climate of success

By Cathy Pianta, Principal of Benalla College.

BENALLA COLLEGE has been identified as experiencing significant social disadvantage. The DEECD Signposts project investigated how we have overcome this disadvantage, resulting in highly successful outcomes for our students. At the recent Signposts presentation at the International Congress for School Effectiveness and Improvement (ICSEI), I was proud to share several factors that I believe have contributed to this success.

Becoming data-wise is one of them. For example, my staff and I analysed participation and successful completion rates of students undertaking VET units. Acting on data has been vital. We went from 60 per cent to 80 per cent successful completion in just four years.

In addition, curriculum design needs to suit student needs. We reviewed the Year 9 and 10 curriculum to ensure that students accessed key aspects of learning. During this period successful completion of VCAL went from 58 per cent to 74 per cent and in 2009 stood at 100 per cent. All this has happened with us maintaining retention rates above the state median.

We were committed to turning pockets of success into the norm for all our students. We found that student results were high in some VCE subjects, yet not all. Moving from five to 23 VCE units with mean study scores above 30 took a significant effort on the part of school leaders, staff and students.

We met with students, staff and parents and ultimately established a set of school values. Everyone reminded us that: all learners are different and do learn differently; and that curriculum must be student-centred with high expectations of every learner that they can, and, will be successful.

In promoting a climate of success our teachers have established after-school study groups to which staff volunteer their services, along with lunchtime classes and activities to promote areas of student learning interest. Student absences are increasingly made up for in ‘catch-up classes’, and student and staff expectations have been raised regarding attendance, behaviour and learning habits.

My nine steps to success
- Be clear about my own values
- Analyse the data
- Be brave
- Be ethical
- Develop leaders within the organisation
- Be strategic and firm about resource allocation
- Have high standards and expect no less
- Recognise, reward and promote success
- Keep children at the centre of every decision
Teachers establish personal goals with clear targets in relation to their students’ learning achievements. We promote the achievements of staff and students through our local media, reminding ourselves and others that we are a highly successful school and expect no less.

Using resources strategically is critical, with high resourcing going to literacy and numeracy. It is not always easy, nor popular, to make changes to long-term staffing arrangements, yet ‘keeping the learner at the centre’ is an important rationale for this, meaning that the most appropriate staff are placed in positions where they can give the best opportunities to students. Supporting staff with professional development has been important.

**Benalla College showcased**

Benalla College was one of 17 schools cited in the recent report entitled ‘Signposts: Research Points to How Victorian Government Schools have Improved Student Performance’ and released in 2009. The findings of this research were presented to international educators at the annual ICSE I held in Kuala Lumpur in January.

The congress enabled delegates to interact with the 300 Malaysian delegates, and to learn more about the Malaysian education system. Deputy Prime Minister and Education Minister, Hon Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin, told delegates that Malaysia aims to create 100 high-performing schools by 2012.

Evaluation of school performance will be based on the overall achievement of schools, including student, teacher and leadership measures. Many schools run two shifts to accommodate the large numbers of students, and the ministry is building new schools to reduce congestion. Next year, a new curriculum will be implemented, intended to make better connections between subjects.