Baringa School

“Learning, Caring, Achieving”

Situated in Moe, 130 kilometres from Melbourne, Baringa School is a specialist school that caters for 120 students with mild intellectual disabilities from Prep to Year 12. Most students are boys, many come from single parent homes, and a significant number have a sibling and / or parent with an intellectual disability. Socio-economic factors add to the special provisions required of the school.

Baringa is a special school in more ways than one. Survey results from students, staff and parent are consistently high and demand for places is very strong. The Principal, Rosie Romano, believes the school’s many achievements are underpinned by teamwork and the school’s ‘can do’ culture which supports a collaborative and very trusting working environment. The Performance and Development Culture initiative played a key role in building that culture and the school was accredited in 2008. Rosie acknowledges that sustaining and improving the school’s P&D Culture is an ongoing priority. “We spend at least one pupil free day at the beginning of the year concentrating on the kind of team culture we are developing and maintaining here. It’s essential to what we do because teams sustain the work”, Rosie says. “Without this kind of working and learning environment, we wouldn’t be as effective for our students.”

Staff members share Rosie’s commitment to the Baringa students and the goal of achieving excellence in special education. Each student has an individual learning plan, and many extra measures are implemented to cater for students’ diverse intellectual, physical, communication, behavioural and social needs. The school’s team-oriented culture has been instrumental in supporting staff to differentiate teaching approaches to meet those needs, and, as is the case in all specialist schools, Education Support Staff have an integral role.

Baringa approached the P&D Culture accreditation process in a measured and strategic way. “When the P&DC Initiative was first introduced, we decided as a leadership team, not to jump straight into applying for accreditation,” Rosie recalls. “We took time to analyse the framework and spent a number of staff meetings pulling apart each element and identifying whether and how each of the components was evident in our school. Through this process, staff saw that many of our practices were validated and already
embedded in our culture. On an individual and team level, it promoted professional
discussions about teaching practice around these questions: Where are we? What do we
need to focus on? What do I/we need to do to improve my/our teaching practice? This
process enabled us to identify gaps, and to determine a process of moving forward.”

At the school level, Baringa staff decided early on to align the process of developing a
P&D Culture with the school’s strategic planning processes. Preparation of the Annual
Implementation Plan provided a means of looking critically at the school’s planning and
accountability practices and identifying improvement areas that could be addressed by
establishing a P&D Culture. ‘We wanted to do our work more effectively - not have more
work to do!’

Baringa has set about creating its own professional learning support mechanisms, to
assist staff to work effectively in this particular learning environment and contribute to
school improvement strategies. Rosie and Jenny O’Donnell, the assistant principal,
provide details about how a different learning and teaching culture was developed
alongside altered teacher and student relationships. “Over time we’ve incorporated
structures to support the development of excellence in teaching practice. Teachers and
Education Support staff work together closely and planning occurs as a group activity
within each of the three school sections (Primary, Secondary and VCAL). We promote
team teaching with experienced and graduate teachers working together, shared
planning time with teams of teachers from the same unit working alongside each other,
and classroom visits which have included staff meetings being hosted in a different
classroom each week with the host teacher talking about the focus of learning for their
group.” Currently video sessions with students are helping establish principles of
effective teaching practice.

Critical to the success of this approach is that teaching and non-teaching staff attend all
relevant meetings, and everyone works in classrooms to support students. In this way
the school’s culture breaks down any hierarchies between the various roles that staff
members undertake. A teacher at the school reflects, “As a P-12 school, this really
opened up an understanding of the priorities and focus of each section of the school.”

To reinforce the emphasis on continual improvement and professional learning, Rosie
has volunteered to be filmed while teaching. As a professional learning activity, she
enacts what she knows to be good practices and those which she is not so keen to see.
Her willingness to expose her own filmed practice to staff scrutiny and feedback provides
a non-threatening form of peer observation and feedback. Rosie is also able to guide her
staff in using protocols to guide the observation, reflection and feedback process.
Teachers at the school endorse the benefits of this collaborative approach. “We plan together, we teach together. Reflection is a large part of the planning – we decide what’s worked and what we’ll try next. We know what we’re looking for in the students’ work to assess them. We talk about it and make this explicit,” says one teacher. “You just wouldn’t survive or have the energy to do it all alone. It demands a team effort, and while we put a lot of time and emphasis on the staff culture, it would be so much more time-consuming and personally demanding if it wasn’t this way. You get out of it what you put into it.”

These activities have led to greater internal accountability and enthusiasm for teaching while also highlighting a need for coaching and more specific and targeted professional learning. The Instructional Rounds model of school improvement is being explored as a vehicle to achieve this aim.

For a specialist school, the effective induction of new staff is critical. Induction is ongoing, essential and involves every member of the staff. Even teachers with a special education qualification usually only have one year of specialised professional training, so induction at Baringa goes to the heart of the school’s mission. “There’s so much to learn and some of the welfare needs can be overwhelming,” Jenny says. “Staff have to be fully conversant with developmental learning levels, reading and writing, literacy and numeracy, assessment and pastoral care. We also have to make sure they are familiar with developing individual learning and behaviour plans. Student progress can be slow and it can go backwards, so it’s important that we know what to look for – we have to train people in that. It’s important that they’re comfortable and confident about what they are doing.”

So what processes have gained impetus from the school’s P&DC engagement? Staff believe an evaluation of what is taught and why (the key beliefs about teaching and learning) and a greater emphasis on accountability across the school have led to Individual Education Plans for students being more targeted, and their goals more rigorous. The development of curriculum teams and unit or section meetings with a specific focus on teaching and learning practices has facilitated a close examination of specific, explicit teaching practices to achieve better learning outcomes. Innovative curriculum initiatives are applauded. As a consequence, staff members have noticed increased opportunities for student leadership and the student ‘voice’ to be heard in the school. Transition programs have improved and there is far more emphasis on authentic differentiated curricular to address individual learning and developmental needs. Teacher
leadership is also an expectation and an imperative, with every member of staff contributing to the learning of peers.

Baringa staff are convinced that it is with the support of a strong P&D Culture that student learning has benefited. The school’s popularity as a destination for educators investigating best practice attests to its willingness to share its approach and learn from others. Rosie is adamant that there is always room for improvement and things to learn so that efforts are more efficient. “We’ve got the bones of the P&DC there – it’s just a matter of continually tweaking it. We’ve learnt a lot from within but have also studied what happens outside our school. We want to know that we’re continually doing the best we can.”