Sample Application – Element 4 – Brentwood SC

Element 4. Quality professional development to meet individual development needs and school priorities

Description

In 2001 a new Charter was developed at Brentwood. The vision articulated in this Charter was that of a vibrant learning community – a community where all members are learning both individually and together. The concept of a learning community as part of the vision was influenced by the work of Senge (1996) and Sergiovanni (2000). This precipitated the inclusion of ‘professional learning’ into the language of teachers at Brentwood. Also in 2001 Neville Johnson was engaged to introduce teachers to the concept of professional learning teams, PLTs. Teachers were invited to form teams to work together to address pedagogical challenges. Neville's workshop encouraged teachers to integrate their practice into the work of PLTs and provided teachers with action research tools. Four years later professional learning teams are now embedded into the professional learning culture at Brentwood. (Appendix 7) An evaluation of PLTs has been undertaken each year to inform the College leadership on how best to meet the needs of PLTs and how best to structure meeting times. In 2002 PEEL, Project for Enhancing Effective Learning, was introduced as a professional learning team. In 2003 an inaugural PLT Expo was held to celebrate the work of teams and the Head of Curriculum edited a booklet outlining the work of each team. Both are now annual events at Brentwood. All teachers receive a printed copy of the PLT booklet. In 2004 all PLTs were required to nominate a convenor – this strategy that has proven to be successful in sustaining the work of the team. PLT convenors meet regularly with the Head of Curriculum to discuss their progress and challenges. Andy Hargreaves’ (2003) concept of schools as professional learning communities has also been influential in the thinking of the leadership team. The Principal and Head of Curriculum attended a full day workshop with him in 2003 sponsored by ACEL and followed this up with professional reading and discussions with key members of the leadership team.

Priority 1 – Thinking and Learning has guided whole staff and team professional learning since 2001. In 2002 Julia Atkin was engaged to introduce staff to the Herrmann Brain Dominance Instrument, firstly as a framework for understanding one’s own thinking and learning and subsequently as a framework for better understanding how students learn. ‘True Colours’, as this model is sometimes referred, has become part of the culture at Brentwood both for teachers and students. Each year every new member of staff undertakes the HBDI and this model is now become a reference point for most in-house professional learning. Teachers have learnt to recognise student thinking styles and many have adapted their teaching practice to better engage students in their learning. The work of Yoram Harpez (2003) has also been informative, particularly the use of fertile questions to engage learners. While there has been an increased focus on developing teachers’ understanding of how students learn and how to teach to students how to learn the question – how do we know students are learning and to what
standard – continues to be a challenge. Increasing attention on standards and accountability has been pursued with the parallel use of student performance data, particularly with teams of teachers, as described in Element 2.

The budget for Professional Development has been significantly subsidised each year over the past four years. This has facilitated greater access to quality professional development and quality team learning. Attendance at national and international conferences such as NavCon and the Thinking Conference has been encouraged. Teachers now attend conferences and workshops in small teams and are thus better able to reflect on their learning and share their learning with colleagues. So-called in-house professional development is provided each Wednesday afternoon for teachers by teachers with expertise in particular areas. (Appendix 8) Four twilight sessions are offered each year, one per term, and teachers are required to sign up to at least two sessions; many sign up for more. These sessions are also presented by Brentwood staff and focus on the goals and priorities of the Charter. All internally coordinated professional development is evaluated. (Appendix 9)

The Professional Development program for the year is determined by the Principal, the Professional Development Manager and the Head of Curriculum who are all cognisant of the feedback received from teacher professional development plans, evaluations, college priorities and system priorities. Developing pedagogical knowledge and skill is a high priority of the professional development program, so too is building leadership capacity. With 35% of teachers at the beginning of their careers the importance of developing leadership capacity and succession planning has been a concomitant focus for professional development planning. Last year a shadowing project for aspirant leaders was trialled. This project was initiated during term four to provide opportunities for less experienced teachers to shadow a teacher in a leadership position. The trial was enormously successful with 16 beginning teachers volunteering to shadow a teacher leader – there was no time or special allowance available. The corollary of this project has been an increasing number of teachers applying for leadership positions within the College.

Evaluation

The aim of Charter Priority One – Thinking and Learning is to develop enhanced teaching practices that focus on: the development of high order cognitive skills such as analysis, synthesis, evaluation, critical thinking and problem solving; metacognition; elearning and learning how to learn. This has been a priority since 2001. The aim of this priority has been the focus for teacher professional learning, and the work of professional learning teams, at Brentwood for the past four years. The PDCQ indicates the following percentages of teachers agree or strongly agree with each of the subsequent statements about the professional learning opportunities offered by Brentwood: ‘increased knowledge of strategies for teaching content’ – 91.8%; ‘increased understanding of differences among students and how to cater for them’ – 90.5%; ‘increased understanding about linking assessment to the teaching and learning cycle’ – 83.8%; making clearer links between teaching goals and classroom activities’ – 86.5%; using more effective teaching and learning strategies appropriate to students’ – 90.6%. Teachers at Brentwood agree or strongly agree that: ‘my students are learning more purposely – 77.1% and ‘my students are more actively engaged in learning activities’ – 73%. A key outcome of the professional
learning opportunities for teachers at Brentwood is that 75.5% either agree or strongly agree that their confidence as a teacher has increased.

The following examples of data published in the 2004 School Level Report provide evidence that the professional learning opportunities available to teachers at Brentwood over the past four years has lead to improved student outcomes. VCE performance has improved – in 2000 the study score mean for all studies was 29.9, had risen to 32.3 by 2003 and was 31.5 in 2004. The Like School Group mean study score for all studies in 2004 was 30.5. Student absence data also demonstrates improvement – in 2000 all year levels were above the state 25th percentile for average number of days absent per student and below the 25th percentile for all year levels by 2004. The Parent Opinion Survey data collated in the 2004 School Level Report also demonstrates improvement since 2001: quality of teaching in 2000 was below 25th percentile for the state and by 2004 was above 75th percentile; academic rigour in 2001 was at the 25th percentile and by 2004 was at the 70th percentile.

The professional development program at Brentwood as described in previous sections is consistent with the Seven Principles of Highly Effective Professional Learning (OSE, 2005) as identified by the Office of School Education. It is – focussed on improving student outcomes; is embedded in teacher practice specifically through the implementation of professional learning teams which involve collaboration, reflection and feedback (Element 3); based primarily on the research of Julia Atkin (1993 & 1996) (Element 3); increasingly uses data driven evidence (Element 2); is ongoing, supported and fully integrated into the culture of the school (Element 3); and is regarded as an individual and collective responsibility (Element 3 and 4).

On reflection, and based on the evidence presented, the suite of strategies implemented at Brentwood over the past four years have been successful. The outcomes previously identified certainly support the increased financial commitment to teacher professional learning. The ‘professional growth’ variable of the most recent Staff Opinion Survey was ranked at 89%, compared to all secondary colleges, demonstrating a strong professional learning culture at Brentwood. Evidence from the PDCQ suggests that assessment and student feedback should be given a higher profile in future professional learning – both were included in the program for last month’s Curriculum Day which focussed on the VELS. Feedback from the PDCQ will be an important aspect of the future conversations about how to strengthen and sustain the professional learning culture at Brentwood. The accreditation process will provide a strong independent evidence base to further inform self-evaluation and the continuous improvement culture at the College.