BARINGA SCHOOL – HOW WE BUILD AND DEFINE OUR CULTURE-

A range of activities we have used over time

Special Schools are unique educational facilities providing a wide range of learning options for students with a range of disabilities and additional needs. Our staff work extremely hard, with very complex young people. Our work requires excellent teaching practices, a degree of special expertise, persistence, flexibility, patience, dedication and above all team work. Each year we devote at least one of our pupil free days to “defining our culture” -Who are we, what is our reason d’etre? What makes us different to the school down the road? What are our key beliefs about teaching and learning at our school? We have done this through activities which focus on sharing meaningful and personal beliefs in order to build a culture of trust, respect and commitment to team. These have included activities such the following:

WHY AM I HERE? (First day activity involving all staff)

All staff- teachers, ESOs, and administration staff were given a piece of paper and asked to write why they came to work at Baringa and then asked to share these with the whole group. Various themes emerged.....needed the money, trying to buy a house, kids at uni, wanted to make a difference and so on. Each staff member was then asked to write why they have stayed, screw it up in a ball and throw it across the room. Everyone then needed to find a ball of paper, unwrap it and read it to the group. Anonymously this revealed very deep feelings about working with children with special needs, a sense of values, a sense of belonging to a strong team with common goals. Samples included

- Feeling valued
- Saw a different approach to teaching and behaviour management that was innovative and better than what I had seen in mainstream
- Making a difference
- Being able to structure programs to suit student needs
- Enjoy the flexibility of programming and working as a team
- Excellent support and friendship of colleagues and leaders
- The fostering of creativity and innovation
- Opportunity to grow both personally and professionally
- The challenge of overcoming barriers to learning
- Sharing of knowledge and expertise
- Great team spirit
- Being able to rely on others to help when things are tough
- Even though it can be extremely stressful, the good times outweigh the bad
- Providing students with the most positive experiences they will ever have
- Rewards over time of seeing students grow in skills, confidence and maturity
KEY BELIEFS ABOUT TEACHING AND LEARNING AT BARINGA (Strengthening our common vision, philosophy)

Another first day activity involved staff working in groups to review and refine our key beliefs about teaching and learning for students at THIS school. The following questions were posed and then group responses shared and collated

- What are the key beliefs about teaching and learning at Baringa?
- What is most important for them to learn?
- What do we want our students to – Be like? Be able to do?
- What are we trying to achieve with our teaching?
- What is our purpose – our reason for being here?

Results of collated responses indicated that

- Our teaching needs to be intentionally and purposeful in order to develop individuals who are confident, independent, resilient and interdependent both now and in the future.
- We must facilitate independence in all aspects of learning through expertise and flexibility.
- We believe that achievement is dependent on relationships we build with students.
- At Baringa we give consideration to the unique needs of each student, through
  1. intentional teaching
  2. building positive relationships (trust, communication, respect)
  3. a sense of belonging
  4. recognition of achievements

  so that the students leave Baringa with a sense of pride and self worth.

The group work and the discussion is what is important in this exercise.
OUR HISTORY IN SPECIAL EDUCATION: WHO ARE OUR TRIBAL ELDERS?

This activity was designed to develop a respect for each other and our “tribal elders”. All Staff were asked to make a circle and without speaking order themselves in length of service at Baringa from longest to shortest time. Once in the circle the principal used a roving microphone to ask the following questions:

- Why did you come to Baringa?
- Why Special education?
- Why are you here?
- How long have you been at the school?
- What keeps you here?
- What are the biggest changes you have seen in your time here?
- What do you remember about the early days? (can have a bit of a collective brainstorm here with different people adding thoughts)
- Have you seen any things here which you think we not right or shouldn’t have happened?
- What is better now?
- What do you enjoy MOST about your work?
- What do you find difficult? How do you cope with that?
- What do you think you can learn from these other people?
- Where else have you worked? What was that like?
- What were the differences between that work and your work here?
- What is the biggest or most important thing you have learned here?
- You are one of the oldest people in the room and yet you have only been here a short time- what is your story?
- Where were you before Baringa?
- How was that?
- How do you feel now?
- What is the best thing about your work?

This activity kept going for around 90 minutes- staff were standing the whole time and enthralled. People shared very personal stories –such as a mature age teacher who discovered she had cancer in her 40s and decided to do teacher training as it was something she had always wanted to do, another graduate teacher who shared that she had decided she would finish her teaching degree but had no intention of teaching as she hadn’t liked what she had seen in her teaching rounds but after a placement at Baringa saw that there were other ways of teaching and wanted to work here, an ES officer who retired from the Power industry and who had never felt so valued in a work place. The result of sharing such stories is the message that at this school you can talk about anything, that there is a supportive culture, that you are valued for who you are as a person and not just an employee, that people have great strengths.
**MY EDUCATIONAL HISTORY- WHO AM I? : ACTIVITY TO BUILD TEAM, TRUST, RESPECT & COMMITMENT TO SHARED PHILOSOPHY AND VISION**

This activity is designed to provide others in our school a glimpse into your personal educational background and beliefs. What sort of learner are you? What has shaped your beliefs about teaching and learning as well as a short introduction to you as a person. Who are you, what do you like to do?

You have time this morning to write a short succinct précis of yourself. In doing so you may include any information you are willing to share ....

Some ideas

- Where you attended school
- What you liked or were good at
- What learning style you have
- What you hated or found difficult about school
- Key events – special people/ teachers
- Special talents or significant events in your learning
- What do enjoy as an adult
- Something about yourself or your family

A couple of samples from an AP and an SSO at another school have been provided but please don’t just copy- try to make yours as individual as you are!

Word limit is 250 words. You will have time to work by yourself or with a buddy to write your own “history”. The server has a template for you to use to type in your “good copy”. (Ann Marie to provide details) You will then need to have your photo taken and insert it on to the top of your word document. Lots of staff can help you do this but it MUST be done for the display. You need to learn to do this yourself so don’t just ask someone to do it for you-ask them to show you how to do it!!!!!!

When everyone has completed their own individual “history”- we then need to print our “good copy” and take to our unit meeting where we will in our teams develop a display on our unit beliefs about teaching and learning. This needs to include everyone’s individual picture/ history as well as your teams key beliefs which may include

- What we believe about the learners in our section of the school
- The focus of our learning
- Major goals/ priorities for learning
- Statement about the age/ developmental level of the learners
- School Values?

The display needs to be in a prominent position at the entry of your building/ rooms. You can be as creative and artistic as you desire!

At 2.30- we will visit each other’s displays. Have fun!
MYSTERY STAFF MEETING

The last staff meeting of each term is set aside to celebrate our achievements and a way that the leadership team thanks staff for their efforts throughout the term. We call this meeting our Mystery staff meeting as it is secretly determined by the principal and assistant principal and is not revealed until the afternoon. Staff never know what to expect, other than everyone participates (including office staff) that it will be a later finish and usually lots of fun! An example of a recent mystery staff meeting is outlined:

THE AMAZING RACE 2

All staff including ES staff, administration/office staff were placed into mixed teams (determined by principal and assistant principals to ensure mix of Early Years, Middle Years and VCAL, as well as ES and support staff- 4 or 5 members per team) The principal had taken photographs of items around the town and these were placed in an envelope with the instructions below printed on the front of the envelope.

The intention of this activity was to promote team work, fun, creativity and ability to use digital cameras and associated software.

INSTRUCTIONS:

- Locate the item in the photograph. (different photo for each group) Take a team photo showing the item in exactly the position it is in the photo. Bonus points if your entire team is in the photo. (this was a photograph of a bollard –there are lots of these in the local park so took some finding)

- Where is this trolley from? Funniest team photo using the trolley wins the points! (Each team had a photo of one shopping trolley from a possible 6 different supermarkets and shopping venues- eg Kmart, Coles, Aldi etc. They had to be observant about the name on the trolley which was not prominent- no points awarded for incorrect trolley)

- Locate the item in the photograph. (different photo for each group) Take a team photo showing the item in exactly the position it is in the photo. Bonus points if your entire team is in the photo.(this was a photograph of a piece of playground equipment in the local Access for all Abilities playground)

- Team dress up theme. Each member of your team needs to dress up in costume and with props along the lines of one of the following themes. If another team chooses the same theme as you- both teams cancel out- No points awarded! Choose from: Gardening, Fitness, Beauty, Sleepwear, Cooking, Craft, Hobbies or your own idea..... Most imaginative use of costumes, locations, scenery and props wins the points (Funniest photos here involved staff dressed as chefs in local cafes, an almost nude male model with pink feather boa posing for artists in the art room, and staff in underwear (over their clothing) in the window of the local opportunity shop!!!)

Come back to school by 4.00pm and with your team- put together a power point of your photographs ready to show at 4.15.
Staff then assembled in the staff room and each team presented their PowerPoint. Principal and Assistant Principals awarded points out of 10 for each photograph and points were tallied to identify winning team. Photos were extremely creative and very funny, so there was lots of laughter throughout the scoring process.

Other Mystery Staff Meetings have included

- Staff Trivia- in teams, answer questions relating to other staff members. Team with the most points win
- Cappuccino and cake and tennis at the local tennis courts,
- An Italian theme evening- Make your own pizza in a wood fired pizza oven at the principals home
- Games challenges- Pictionary, Charades, Scatgeories, Cranium- mixed teams
- Karaoke and Wii challenges
- Scavenger Hunt in teams