Skipton Primary School
Case Study Topic – Empowering people in a Small School

Who we are.........

- Small Regional Primary School
- Principal – Karen Kirby
- 113 students
- High EMA, LSG 7 school profile
- 9 teachers & 2 SSO’s (includes Marc teacher)
- Mix of students from Skipton and local farming community

Where we started.......  

Six years ago Skipton PS had a Key Learning Area and year level based structure. Teachers taught their class groups in a degree of isolation and there were entrenched staff and community expectations about grade groupings and patterns of student progression through grade levels at the school.

Staff chose to work together in a more collaborative way to help research and develop teaching and learning practices, which could be used across grade levels. The school decided at the end of 2003 that it would move toward a team teaching model, which was an early catalyst for change in the school. This involved moving to two learning units, Early Years (prep to 2) and 3-6 Unit. Specialist programs ceased as such and teachers were incorporated into the units.

Some work with Dr. Neville Johnston within the Innovations and Excellence Cluster led to the school adopting an action research approach to improvement through projects. Staff took a different kind of responsibility for their teaching when they were working together, and contrary to the community concern about lowered accountability, there was much more internal accountability, feedback, discussion and reflection occurring.

The school wanted to develop a ‘sense of belonging’ for all students and families that would empower people and enhance community cohesion. Maximising learning for students and teachers is the school’s priority. The school’s Performance and Development Culture is based on this belief through a culture of teacher’s working in ‘true’ Professional Learning Teams.
### What were the steps?

The first steps involved moving staff and grades out of their traditional or prescribed locations and working on an action research model of professional learning with other cluster schools.

**Building on Action Research**

Building on the action research work two school units were developed. The P-2 group and the 3-6 groups were established and these teams of teachers were given decision making power over the teaching and learning strategies and the curriculum planning for their groups of students.

**Timetabling**

The next step was timetabling. The central timetable was abandoned and blocks for literacy, numeracy and integrated studies were planned and scheduled. The ‘crowded curriculum’ was not an issue as diverse content could be woven into the integrated studies component of the program.

These changes lead to a new assessment and planning strategy in the school. For example in the Early Years Unit each teacher has a day of assessment each week and this collection of data informs the teaching focus for the following week. Data now drives what happens in the classrooms and teams have moved toward using a ‘critical friend’ for their action research projects.

The teams are supported with a $5000 Professional Development funding allocation for each unit. Program funding is now unit based rather than KLA based, which allows greater amounts of money for unit needs resulting in increased resource flexibility. Professional Development has been reconceptualised as opportunities that occur naturally within the workplace as well as outside on special occasions. Professional Development has taken on a team focus and is linked to each unit’s research project.
What has been achieved?

Karen Kirby, the Principal at Skipton says ‘Performance and Development Culture underpins everything, the rest just flows on.’ She saw it as the Principal’s role to facilitate a P&D Culture to empower staff. In her view working on a Performance & Development Culture has promoted a sense of ‘trust’ at Skipton.

Empowering people has lead to greater staff reflection and a collaborative way of working. Staff at the school say they would never go back, they work with their own allocated budgets, have decision making power within their units and undertake more of their Professional Development as a unit or team.

Students have become aware of their own strengths and weaknesses as learners and are now setting their own learning goals and thinking about their own directions. Improved staff and parent opinion survey responses and improved student engagement are the obvious achievements. Student achievement and attitudes to school data is excellent.

Where to for Skipton?

The work on Performance and Development Culture has helped the Principal and staff at Skipton to crystallise where they are and where they want to go. The process has been a real celebration of how the school works, given the school a sense of joy, and created a sense that ‘anything is possible’. The community is using ‘Futures Thinking’ to project how the school should look in 10 years so that the school’s facilities can complement the way the teams want to work.

The Principal says they have only just touched on the feedback area. She says it can be taken so much further and that it will help staff to be open to ideas that will improve teaching and learning. She says, that for the next accreditation process ‘level 5 would be so deeply entrenched we would need to be pushed to Level 10’.