Project Title: Peer-to-Peer Observation Program

Team Leaders: Principal, Assistant Principals, Leading Teacher Staff Development.

Abstract:
The main focus with our internal professional learning at Portland Secondary College in 2009 has been Peer to Peer Observations. This has involved full participation across the College from Principal Class Officers through to Beginning and Graduate teachers. It was set up as a strategic follow-up to the PoLT process; feedback from our student Attitude to School and Parent Opinion Surveys. It has involved Curriculum Team leaders and Expert teachers being allocated five or six staff to be mentored through a peer observation process. Teachers were viewed in the classroom using proforma/protocols as they worked through a new teaching and learning strategy that linked to our school wide foci in 2009. We have had a very positive response from staff in the initial phase during semester one, with significant acknowledgement of the value of working collaboratively.

What is the focus? Where did this originate?

Our primary focus was to see that teaching and learning initiatives worked through over a number of years were being put into practice where it counts, in the classroom. The College has a rich history of examining strategies that are relevant to good teaching practice including the Leading Schools’ Fund (LSF) and the Project for the Enhancement of Effective Learning (PEEL). These initiatives have been explored through focus groups and professional learning teams and began, in some cases (such as PEEL), prior to 2004; in those groups staff worked on key teaching and learning strategies in cross-faculty groups and a variety of Teaching Professional Leave action research projects. The question still remained however, “To what extent are these innovative teaching practices being put into practice in the classroom?” We needed to see that there was strong transfer from internal action research to the classroom and it being then embedded in to teaching practice. Principal Class Officers attended a regional briefing that bought up the idea of “walk throughs”; this involved senior staff spending short periods of time in classrooms to examine innovative practice. From here we adapted this process and came up with a Peer-to-Peer Observation program that aligned with the Seven Principles of Highly Effective Professional Learning. We guided staff to concentrate their observations on one of three foci: Boy’s Education, Student/Staff Relationships, and ICT in the Classroom. These foci were established after examining our student responses in the Attitudes to School survey and examining other data such as academic award differences (based on gender) and the introduction into the College of a number of ICT resources. We also used data that was available from all of our teaching staff undertaking the PoLT process in 2007/8. To ensure staff felt ownership of the observation process we encouraged them to use their own data from PoLT before fully committing to a strategy to be observed.

Why was this project important?

This project was crucial in ensuring that the significant time put into professional learning was being put into practice on a day-to-day basis in the classroom. In reference to the Seven Principles of Highly Effective Professional Learning, we needed to see that our professional learning was embedded in teacher practice. It also became a major cornerstone of our Entry Point into the e5 Instructional Model with our second semester observations based around increasing engagement. The success of this project was of major importance in seeing that our innovative research was being put into practice and that our school culture of working collaboratively across faculties was further embedded. The project is vital in allowing the osmosis of good practice under strategically developed foci to become the norm at Portland Secondary College.

What was done/produced?
The discussions between mentors and those being observed have seen improvements in the particular strategy being trialled. The pre- and post-discussions which were mandated as part of the observation created significant professional discussion that, in a less formal sense, has expanded the sharing of ideas amongst the staff. We have also observed greater awareness amongst staff of the benefits of team teaching and for differentiation within the classroom. From this, we have seen a movement begin within the staff to explore options for models of curriculum
structures that will allow greater access to team teaching and differentiation; the peer-to-peer observations have assisted in creating this groundswell. The appointment of a Secondary Teachers’ Assistant has enabled some administrative tasks to be completed by this Education Support staff member, therefore providing critical time for teachers to undertake their observations (refer to the “PSC Secondary Teacher Assistant Report, 2009”).

**What was the project’s impact? How can this be measured?**

As the professional learning project is still in progress its full impact is difficult to measure. However, semester one was the half way mark and some evidence has emerged that indicates that the time spent on peer-to-peer observations have been worthwhile. Certainly the number of staff that have become engaged in the program has shown that there is an appreciation of the benefits of peer observation. Completion of semester one observations ran at 95% of staff with our Local Advisory Group (Consultative Committee) endorsing the continuation of the program into semester two. The requirement of having to display a strategy to a peer, we believe, is leveraging greater innovative practice in classrooms. We are seeing collaboration on suggested strategies, for example, an English teacher (who is being observed by a Psychology teacher), using a hands-on active learning strategy to increase boys’ engagement and being inclusive of the exploration of a challenging English text. This innovation would not have occurred without the collaboration of these teachers and which was strategically developed through the planning and implementation of this program. Classroom management issues have decreased with some of the staff through involvement in the peer-to-peer observation program. We have seen post observation discussions create some excellent ideas in managing student behaviour, while attempting to use new ICT programs we saw firsthand the staff member involved move the focus more to the student rather than continuing to have the focus primarily on the teacher. The process in the second semester has required staff to look at observable indicators of the adoption of an identified strategy. Already we are seeing this demonstrate some positive changes. One observation measured the reduced time spent answering basic questions as a result of teaching students how to use each other as a resource using co-operative learning techniques (instead of teacher-centred instruction). An off shoot of this was the increased student engagement noted, and the amount of extra teaching time able to be devoted to more elaborate tasks.

**What worked well? What didn’t work well?**

One positive impact has been the increased professional dialogue between staff, and greater implementation of innovative teaching and learning strategies. We found our College professional learning more closely aligned with the *Seven Principles of Highly Effective Professional Learning* by viewing embedded practice and increasing collaboration and reflection. Anecdotal comments from students indicate that they were also interested in the process and of seeing “teachers as learners”. We have encountered challenges with regards to time to implement this program; even though scheduled meeting time was put aside; critical times during the semester such as having two formal reporting to parents/carers programs, did see the program slip back in the priority list. In hindsight we should have added more structure to the meeting schedule, especially in regards to the post observation meeting. We allowed these meetings to take place at the convenience of the mentor and mentee.

**In the future:**

Moving forward, we need to further examine the embedding of improved pedagogy in the College. To take this further we need to support students and staff with a curriculum structure that best supports modern pedagogy. We are aiming at developing a structure that will allow team teaching on a regular basis in Years 7 to 9 and increasing the amount of differentiation in Literacy and Numeracy. We will be examining a meeting structure that will allow planning to occur with some trialling of specific strategies to enhance this. Our Teaching and Learning Coaching Initiative will continue (with external funding) with a focus on Numeracy. During 2010 we will also aim to undertake some peer observation that will also have strong links to trialling and implementing a new curriculum structure.

**References:**


- Professional Learning Assistance Team (PLAT), Maths Association of Victoria.
- DEECD, “The Principles of Learning and Teaching P-12 Unpacked”,
- “Portland Secondary College, 8798, Annual Implementation Plan 2009”

Attachments:
- Coach Observations Instructions, Portland Secondary College 2009. (Page 37)
- Peer Observation Instructions, Portland Secondary College 2009. (Page 39)
- Collegial Coaching Proforma, Portland Secondary College 2009. (Pages 41 - 42)